My bedroom is the huge white hexagon in the front left corner of the hotel. It has no clear outside or inside or any architectural regularity. Long white pipes form part of its ceiling. Two of its sides, which two is always changing, are open.

My bedroom's function is also unclear. Its only furniture is two barber's chairs and a toilet. It's a gathering place for men.

Hotel men dressed in white and black come in and want to hurt me. They cut away parts of me. I call for the hotel head. He explains that my bedroom used to be the men's toilet. I understand. My cunt used to be a men's toilet.

I walk out in a leopard coat. 36

The passage appears to begin with a singular event, coated with description. But how often do the 'hotel men dressed in white and black' come in? Does the conflation between 'my bedroom' and 'my cunt' retrospectively turn this event into an iterative one, ironically turning the 'explanation' of the hotel head into an indictment of gender relations? This iterative effect is thereby loaded with meaning. The final sentence is totally unclear in terms of frequency.

In the preceding sections I have discussed the temporal organization of the events of a story. This organization pertains to the structural effect of the events – seen as processes – in the majority of narrative texts. In the following sections aspects will be discussed which pertain to objects: actors and places.

5: From Actors to Characters

In the next chapter I will use the term *actor* for the category I am about to present here. I will do so because I wish to mark the level of abstraction of the fabula, where I will include the various acting entities in the broadest possible term. The term covers a larger area than a more specific term could do. In other words, a dog, a machine, could act as an actor. In this section, I shall employ the term *character* for the anthropomorphic figures the narrator tells us about. By this, I mean the actor provided with distinctive characteristics which together create the effect of a character. In the course of this section, the difference between the general, abstract term *actor* and the more specific term *character* will gradually become clearer. To begin with, more often than not a character resembles a human being and an actor need not necessarily do so. What that resemblance means in narratological terms, and what its limitations

Mieke Ball. *Narratology: Introduction to theTheory of Narrative.* 2nd Edition. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.

are, will be discussed later. For the moment, let us assume that a character is the effect that occurs when an actor is endowed with distinctive human characteristics. In this view, an actor is a structural position, while a character is a complex semantic unit. But as readers, we 'see' characters, only reducible to actors in a process of abstraction.

On the level of the story, characters differ from each other. In that sense they are individual. On the basis of the characteristics they have been allotted, they each function in a different way with respect to the reader. The latter gets to know them more or less than other characters, finds them more or less appealing, identifies more or less easily with them. The aim of this section is not to determine (define) the characters (who are they?), but to characterize them (what are they and how do we find out?).

Problems

Characters resemble people. Literature is written by, for, and about people. That remains a truism, so banal that we often tend to forget it, and so problematic that we as often repress it with the same ease. On the other hand, the people with whom literature is concerned are not real people. They are fabricated creatures made up from fantasy, imitation, memory: paper people, without flesh and blood. That no satisfying, coherent theory of character is available is probably precisely because of this human aspect. The character is not a human being, but it resembles one. It has no real psyche, personality, ideology, or competence to act, but it does possess characteristics which make psychological and ideological descriptions possible. Character is intuitively the most crucial category of narrative, and also most subject to projection and fallacies.

The first problem that arises when we attempt to account for the character-effect is that of drawing a clear dividing line between human person and character. The resemblance between the two is too great for that: we even go so far as to identify with the character, to cry, to laugh, and to search for or with it. This is a major attraction of narrative. But it also leads us into asking questions that are not only frankly impertinent ('How many children had Lady Macbeth?') but that reduce the narrative to flat realism. This is a risk, for example, when we identify so much with characters in *Beloved* that we absolutely insist on the natural status of Beloved or, for the very same reason – the need for clarity – her supernatural status. Attempts to understand characters' behaviour often inspire psychological criticism where such criticism is clearly not in

order. Attempting to explain events in biblical narratives that seemed incongruous to the modern reader, for example, biblical critics tended to qualify actors who fall into a trap as 'dumb' characters, or transgressive actors such as Eve as wicked characters. This is a major ideological pitfall.

It is not out of a misplaced formalism, but rather with a view to solving this first problem, that we must restrict our investigation to only those facts that are presented to us in the actual words of the text. But this is only an initial delimitation, which is difficult to make more specific and which, in any case, does not solve all our problems. Within the material of the story – the entire mass of information presented to us by the narrating agent – borderlines are also difficult to draw. When we come across a detailed portrait of a character that has already been mentioned, we are justified in saying that that information – that portrait – 'belongs to' the character, it 'creates' the character, maps it out, builds it up. But relying on the analogy between character and human being, readers tend to attach so much importance to coherence that this material is easily reduced to a psychological 'portrait' that has more bearing on the reader's own desire than on the interchange between story and fabula. It is crucial to take enough distance from this anthropomorphism, for instance, to understand that Proust's Albertine is a 'paper person' in the true sense. She is an object of the protagonist's obsession, does what he thinks she does, and when he no longer needs her to make his point about the relation between jealousy, love, and knowledge, she dies in an unlikely accident. Once we accept that she has no psychological depth of her own, we not only grasp the specifically Proustian construction of character – which is crucial for an appreciation of the work – but also the aesthetic thrust of the narrative. In contrast, a realistic reading of this character as a 'real girl' will only frustrate us, make her irritating and antipathetic, and Marcel a selfish monster (this has actually been alleged against Proust in all seriousness).

Moreover, everyone knows that a story contains other information which, though connected less directly with a certain character, contributes as much to the image of that character that is offered to the reader. What a figure does is as important as what he or she thinks, feels, remembers, or looks like. It is not easy to determine which material can be usefully included in the description of a character.

Another problem is the division of characters into the kinds of categories literary criticism is so fond of. Forster's classical distinction between round and flat characters, which has been employed for more than

seventy years, was based on psychological criteria. Round characters are like 'complex' persons, who undergo a change in the course of the story, and remain capable of surprising the reader. Flat characters are stable, stereotypical characters that exhibit/contain nothing surprising. Even if such classifications were to be moulded into manageable distinctions, they would still only be applicable to a limited corpus: that of the psychological narrative. Entire genres, such as fairy tales, detective fiction, and popular fiction, but also a modernist novel like Proust's and postmodern novels that mock precisely such categories, thus remain excluded from observation because all their characters are 'flat.' Indeed, Proust's Albertine is explicitly presented as flat – a flatness which, precisely, constitutes the complexity of this figure, if not her 'density.' Albertine is first noticed by Marcel, and 'chosen' to be his love object, on the basis of an image of her at a distance, on the beach. In *The Prisoner*, Albertine, who has lost her former, fixed quality of beach photo, consists only of a series of snapshots:

> ... a person, scattered in space and time, *is* no longer a woman but a series of events on which we can throw *no light*, a series of insoluble problems 99–100; emphasis added

The shift from the typically modernist preoccupation with epistemological uncertainty ('no light') to the ontological doubt that results when one radically thinks through what epistemological doubt entails ('*is* no longer a woman') announces postmodernism, and the phrase 'scattered in time and space' (disséminé) with its Derridian overtones articulates that shift. That 'woman' as 'other' falls prey to a true lunacy of the snapshot is, of course, no coincidence. This dissolution in visual, flat seriality is only aggravated as Marcel tries to counter it and 'fix' Albertine by means of 'light' thrown on her, and on paper. Thus she ends up *becoming* (ontology) the sheet on which the images (epistemology) of jealousy are going to be fixed:

> For I possessed in my memory only a series of Albertines, separate from one another, incomplete, a collection of profiles or snapshots, and so my jealousy was restricted to a discontinuous expression, at once fugitive and fixed ... 145–6

With the word 'mémoire' keeping the issue also on the level of epistemology, ontological 'fugitivity' is presented here as a perversion of

memory. The final words here, 'à la fois fugitive et fixée,' define quite precisely the nature of the series of snapshots, and explain the specific use of this poetic in the novel. The importance of eroticism is crucial: the object of this fugitive fixing is the love object of whom the focalizing narrator is unable to fix the sexual orientation. Obviously, Albertine's 'flatness' can in no way be considered a lack of 'density.'

A distinction among categories of character is possible on the basis of the actantial model which will be presented in the next chapter, but that model is concerned with the relations between the elements of the fabula, and not with the way in which these are 'fleshed out' in the story. Again, this would not enable us to define the specific vision of each character which the reader receives. Instead, in this section I will be concerned with establishing a framework for the characterization of specific narrative characters, as a way in which to explain at least partly the character-effect. A summary of the kinds of information the readers have at their disposal in order to construct an image of a character, and a summary of the information they actually use while doing so, should make this possible.

The so-called extra-textual situation creates yet another problem: the influence of reality on the story, in so far as reality plays a part in it. Even if we do not wish to study the relations between text and context as a separate object of analysis, we cannot ignore the fact that direct or indirect knowledge of the context of certain characters contributes significantly to their meaning. The character President Eisenhower in Coover's *The Public Burning* is not the factual president of the United States, Eisenhower as we know him from historical evidence. But the impression we receive of that character depends, to a very great extent, on the confrontation between our own image of Eisenhower and the image that the story offers, which in its turn is determined by another context. The influence of data from reality is all the more difficult to determine since the personal situation, knowledge, background, historical moment, and so on of the reader are involved here.

Finally, the description of a character is always strongly coloured by the ideology of the critics, who are often unaware of their own ideological hang-ups. Consequently, what is presented as a description is an implicit value judgment. And here the realistic tendency promoted by the anthropomorphism of characters can play nasty tricks. Characters are attacked or defended as if they were people that the critics like or dislike. Moreover, author and character are viewed as one and the same. Existentialist criticism tended to do this. Emotions flared at the publication of Nabokov's *Lolita*. Humbert's mentality was all wrong; the man

was an immoral hypocrite, and quotations from the text could prove this. If, however, we examine all the utterances of the character-bound narrator, then, to say the least, a much more problematic picture emerges. And even if this narrator is an immoral hypocrite, this does not then mean that the entire novel is immoral, or was ever meant to be. A good deal more needs to be considered to back up the claim of immorality, always limited to the context in which the particular morality is generally accepted.

These problems should be neither denied nor ignored. Rather, they should be clearly formulated and categorized. Ideological discussions and value judgments should not be censured, but should be conducted rationally and with insight into the many issues involved. Only then can they be discussed, and this can only benefit the analysis. The model below may help to make this procedure a little bit easier.

Predictability

On the basis of bits of information, the character becomes more or less predictable. These data determine him or her, mostly so inconspicuously that the reader processes the information without giving it a thought. To begin with, there is information that is 'always-already' involved, that relates to the extra-textual situation, in so far as the reader is acquainted with it. As a matter of fact, the only moments that one realizes that some information is not 'in' the text are precisely, when one fails to make a connection by lack of information. I shall treat that section of 'reality' or 'the outside world' to which the information about the person refers as a frame of reference. Few readers will fail to sense the brief moment of laughter when reading, in Karen Harper's mystery novel *Black Orchid* (1996), '"What's the name of that gray-haired boy who's president right now?" Hattie asked.' We really don't need the next sentence, '"Bill Clinton, Grandma", Jordan told her' (68). Readers share the frame of reference in which it is not only elementary knowledge who runs the United States, but also that Clinton's gray hair is like a pointer that identifies him. This frame is never entirely the same for each reader, or for reader and writer. By frame of reference I here mean information that may with some confidence be called communal. For most American readers, Coover's Eisenhower fits into a frame of reference of that kind. But so does the connection between 'snow' and 'cold weather' if not 'northern countries.'

Historical characters are often brought to life in novels. Napoleon we even meet quite regularly. Legendary characters, like King Arthur or

Santa Claus, also fit into a frame of reference. Historical characters are not more strongly determined than legendary ones. On the contrary, legendary characters are expected to exhibit a certain stereotypical behaviour and set attributes; if the story were to depart too far from these set characteristics, they would no longer be recognizable. If presented in opposition to the referential characteristics, however, such 'deviant' characters can be a powerful trigger of surprise, suspense, or humour. Santa Claus loves children; his whole status as a legendary character is based on that. A Santa Claus who sets out to murder people is blatantly a fiction, or as the case may be, a fake. This possibility is used in Francis Ford Coppola's film *The Godfather*, based on Mario Puzo's 1969 novel. The film begins with a peaceful Santa Claus scene in a shopping area, shattered by a murder. This scene set the tone for numerous imitations, so as to form a network of intertextual relations if not an altogether new discourse. It is taken up in the television series 'Picket Fences,' which borrows this fiction, as an acknowledgment of the way *The Godfather* made it a popular tradition. This effect was just recently brought about yet again, in a case of heterogeneous discourses à la Bakhtin (see chapter 1, section 5). The 1997 film *Turbulence* by Robert Butler makes this discursive mix the continuous line of the story. In this film at least three discourses are mixed: Christmas, with its ideology of peace and gift-giving; sophisticated, modern air transportation, including the fear of flying; and the terror stories of serial killers. Throughout this extremely terrifying film, Christmas decorations remind the viewer of this interdiscursive clash. The differences among these are not glossed over but, on the contrary, foregrounded in character presentation. When Carl, an African-American flight attendant wearing a Santa Claus hat (Gordy Owens) is confronted by the killer, the clash enhances the artificiality of both. 'Christmas' becomes a shifter where meanings change gear.

Where historical characters are concerned, the possibilities are somewhat greater. Because we are more confident about the identity of such a character, an unfamiliar side can be shown and will be accepted more easily: a tyrant during a fit of weakness; a saint in doubt or in temptation; a party-going revolutionary. But here too the possibilities are limited because of the frame of reference. A mature Napoleon presented as a poor wretch would create a very odd effect: he would no longer be Napoleon. In yet another way, mythic and allegorical characters fit a pattern of expectation, established in the basis of our frame of reference. The goddess of justice cannot make unfair decisions without destroying her identity as a character. Only for those who know that this character is

usually blind will a wide-eyed goddess of justice be a problem. All these characters, which we could label referential characters because of their obvious slots in a frame of reference, act according to the pattern that we are familiar with from other sources. Or not. In both cases, the image we receive of them is determined to a large extent by the confrontation between, on the one hand, our previous knowledge and the expectations it produces, and on the other, the realization of the character in the narrative. Opting for a referential character implies, in this respect, opting for such confrontation. The ensuing determination, and the extent to which it is realized, is therefore an interesting object for study.

There is another reason for such studies. The expectations aroused by the mere mention of a hystorical or mythical character are also traps for the reader. We tend to notice only what we alreay know, unless the deviation from the expectation is strongly enhanced. An amusing case is Sophocles' King Oedipus. Owing to the success of Freud's psychoanalysis, we all 'know' Oedipus. He's the guy with the Oedipus complex, of course. He killed his father and desired his mother. Well, that is precisely not the case. Oedipus the character does not have an Oedipus complex, for two opposed reasons. First, because he did nothing of the sort; he did not know the old man he killed was his father, and so his act of killing did not make him a parricide. Neither did he know that the queen was his mother. Today we would say: these people were only his biological parents; his actual parents were the kind shepherd and his wife who raised him. But if this argument fails to convince, the opposite one will: he has no Oedipus complex because he acted upon his desires, whereas an Oedipus complex emerges, precisely, out of the repression of that desire. And if neither of these reasons are convincing, that is because the question – does Sophocles' Oedipus have an Oedipus complex? – is one of those 'How many children had Lady Macbeth' questions. Characters don't have an unconscious, only people do. Psychoanalytic criticism does not, or should not, consist of diagnosing characters but of understanding how texts affectively address the reader on a level that comes close to unconscious preoccupations. In general, returning to the ancient texts about the mythical characters that have fed our culture's clichés and prejudices is exciting and valuable. Let me give one example.

* * *

The myth of Narcissus is traditionally attached to narcissism, a psychoanalytic concept that has taken on ordinary meaning, more often than not used in a moralizing way. A narcissistic person over-indulges in self-

love and self-interest. Narcissus, as the myth has it, died because he did not recognize himself; nor did he perceive the mirror for what it was: a boundary between reality and fiction. The erotic effect of the image worked on him, but not the formative one. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, when his mother, the river Liriopa, consulted the seer Tiresias and asked whether her son would live to old age, the answer was: 'If he does not know himself' ('Si se non nouerit,' 346). Self-knowledge, which supposedly entails wisdom if spiritual, kills when 'carnal,' erotic; or so it seems.

Yet, later on, the opposite seems to be the case. The *denial* of carnal knowledge is presented by Ovid as Narcissus' fatal failure: 'he falls in love with an image without body' ('spem sine corpore amat,' 417). Imputing bodily existence to what is only a visual image – or, as the case may be, water – he condemns himself ('corpus putat esse quod unda est,' 417). This story of 'death and the image' is about the denial of the true, natural body.

Prefiguring his imminent demise, Ovid's Narcissus enacts the soon-to-occur rigor mortis:

> He remains immobile, his face impassive, like a statue sculpted in marble of Paros. (Adstupet ipse sibi uultuque inmotus eodem haeret, ut e Pario formatum marmore signum.) 418–19

'Ut signum' he becomes like a sign – an iconic sign of a sign – as an enactment of radical constructivism: a character is a construction, not a person.

As opposed to common lore, Narcissus is not wrong in admiring himself: 'He admires everything that makes him admirable' ('cunctaque mirator quibus est mirabilis ipse,' 424). His tragedy is not brought about by excessive self-love so much as by naïve realism: 'what you are seeking does not exist' ('quod petit est nusquam,' 433). He does, in the end, recognize that he loves himself, and, destroyed by the sense of tragic hopelessness that he has inflicted so often upon others, he begins his slow descent into death.

Rather than blaming him – or the narcissism named after the mythical figure – for moral shortcoming or formative failure, I propose to take Ovid's Narcissus as an allegory of the reader who conflates character and person.

* * *

Referential characters are more strongly determined than other characters. But, in fact, every character is more or less predictable, from the very first time it is presented onwards. Every mention of the identity of the character contains information that limits other possibilities. Reference to a character by means of a personal pronoun alone limits its gender. And, in general, this then sets off a whole series of limitations. A *he* cannot find himself unintentionally pregnant. A *she* cannot, in general, become either a Catholic priest or a rapist. These limitations are also related to the actantial position which the character holds (see chapter 3). In so far as they are traditionally determined, these limitations are subject to change. One of the earliest inspirations of feminist literary studies was the insight that, in much traditional literature, women can only function as protagonists in certain fabulas, in which the goal pursued is a characteristic of the character itself (happiness, wisdom) and not a concrete object that would necessitate a long journey or a physically taxing ordeal. Thus, the topics treated in chapter 3, section 3, and the specifications of the characters discussed here are very closely and mutually related.

When a character is indicated with 'I' these sexual restrictions do not (yet) apply, but in that case other restrictions are possible. The character, the I, is not presented from a spatial distance, which, in turn, involves all sorts of other limitations. When the character is allotted its own name, this determines not only its sex/gender (as a rule) but also its social status, geographical origin, sometimes even more. Names can also be motivated, can have a bearing upon some of the character's characteristics. To this category belong not only names such as Tom Thumb and Snow White. Agatha Christie's Poirot has a pear-shaped head. Miss Marple is not only a woman, but is also unmarried, and that state implies a number of stereotypical qualities conventionally connected with elderly unmarried ladies: inquisitiveness, a great deal of spare time, reliability, innocence, naïvety, qualities necessary for the development of the fabulas. In fact, because of the inseparable link between the title Miss and the name Marple – reason also to consider the 'Miss' a proper name – this character is also highly referential.

A portrait, the description of the exterior character, further limits the possibilities. If a character is old, it does different things than if it were young. If it is attractive, it lives differently from the way it would live if it were unattractive, or so the reader tends to assume. Profession, too, greatly determines the frame in which the events take place or from which they receive their meaning. A thatcher falls from a roof (*L'assommoir*, Zola); sooner or later a miner will be trapped in a shaft that has col-

lapsed (*Germinal*, Zola; *Sans famille*, Malot) if he doesn't die of some kind of lung disease; a soldier dies at the front or is sent to faraway countries (*A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway). None of these determining factors is in fact determining at all. The fact that profession, sex, external factors, or quirks of personality are mentioned creates an expectation. The story may fulfil it, but may just as easily frustrate it.

Genre plays a part in a character's predictability. A detective must, in principle, find the murderer. This genre-bound expectation is sometimes broken; for instance, in *The Locked Room* by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöo, where the character is arrested for another crime and the mysteries are never entirely solved. The alterations to which a genre is subject are influenced by the interplay between the evocation, satisfaction, and frustration of expectations. The stronger the determination, the greater the shift away from tension generated by questions concerning the outcome and towards the tension generated by the question whether the character will realize its own determination and/or break away from it. A character's predictability is closely related to the reader's frame of reference in which it seems to 'fit.' But the effect of this predictability also depends on the reader's attitude with respect to literature and the book he or she is reading. Is s/he strongly inclined to 'fill in' or will s/he let him- or herself be led by the story? Does s/he read quickly or does s/he interrupt the reading often to stop and think about it? What I am here suggesting as information about a character's predictability can only provide clues to its potential determination. It is interesting to analyse the way in which possible determination emerges in the story. In many ways, we afterwards conclude that a certain detail about a character was related to an event, or to a whole series of events. Establishing connections, coherence, in this way is not the same as signalling predictability beforehand. Predictability makes it easy to find coherence, it contributes to the formation of a unified image of one character out of an abundance of information. But it is not the only way in which that image is formed. We can distinguish various relations between bits of information, on the basis of which an image of a character is also formed.

Predictability is not necessarily in tension with suspense. It can be deployed to produce suspense. Early on in the film *Turbulence*, the serial killer Ryan Weaver (Ray Liotta) is called the Teddy Bear Killer. His M.O. (modus operandi of serial killers) is to give a teddy bear to the women right before killing them. When he enters the home of his girlfriend and gives her a teddy bear, the expectation that he will kill her is raised,

then quickly dismissed as the police enter the house to capture him. Later, when the unpiloted Boeing 747 is approaching the area of Los Angeles, the killer, who has already wreaked deadly havoc in the plane, gives the heroine Terry Halloran (Lauren Holly) a teddy bear. We know, then, that the moment of ultimate danger and confrontation is approaching. It is only Terry's status as heroine – and her competence in dealing with the monstrous killer – that can save her. Indeed, this repetition is an effective rhetorical tool to produce suspense, rather than diminishing it.

Construction of Contents

When a character appears for the first time, we do not yet know very much about it. The qualities that are implied in that first presentation are not all 'grasped' by the reader. In the course of the narrative the relevant characteristics are repeated so often – in a different form, however – that they emerge more and more clearly. Repetition is thus an important principle of the construction of the image of a character. Only when our attention has been focused on it a few times do we begin to regard, for instance, Frits van Egters' tendency (in Reve's *The Evenings*) to notice baldness in others as typical of this character. And only then do we realize that this characteristic recurs constantly throughout the rest of the narrative.

In addition to repetition, the piling up of data also fulfils a function in the construction of an image. The accumulation of characteristics causes odd facts to coalesce, complement each other, and then form a whole: the image of a character. In *The Evenings* we notice not only Frits' preoccupation with baldness, but his obsession with other signs of decay as well, autumn, illness, old age, death, time. And these facts together convey a clear picture of the character, in the areas where unconnected data might have been striking but would not have been particularly meaningful.

In the third place, relations with others also help to build the image of a character. The character's relation to itself in an earlier phase also belongs to this category. These relations tend to be processed into similarities and contrasts. A semantic model to describe these categories is only a reflection of cultural cognitive habits, and one will be presented, along with a sceptical note, in the next subsection.

Finally, characters may change. The changes or transformations which a character undergoes sometimes alter the entire configuration of character as it looked during the analysis of mutual relations. Once a

character's most important characteristics have been selected, it is easier to trace transformations and to describe them clearly.

Repetition, accumulation, relations to other characters, and transformations are four different principles which work together to construct the image of a character. Their effect can only be described, however, when the outline of the character has been roughly filled in. This is a constant element in narratological analysis: a dialectic back-and-forth between speculation and verification. Only if the latter activity, the analysis proper, is performed with an open mind regarding both the tentative outline and the model used does the text get a chance to 'talk back,' to complicate or even counter what we had assumed, or tend to wish to see confirmed.

Filling In the Outline

How do we decide which we consider provisionally to be a character's relevant characteristics and which are of secondary importance? One method is the selection of relevant semantic axes. Semantic axes are pairs of contrary meanings. This is a typical structuralist principle with which I have become more uncomfortable lately. I have decided to keep it here, first because there is so little available for character analysis, and second, perhaps more importantly, because it does reflect the way most people, hence, most readers, tend to 'do' semantic categorization. Therefore, it seemed better to present both the model and the critique of it, so that it can be used both to map and to undermine.

Characteristics like 'large' and 'small' could be a relevant semantic axis; or rich-poor, or man-woman, kind-unkind, reactionary-progressive. The selection of the relevant semantic axes involves focusing, out of all the characteristics mentioned – usually an unmanageably large number – only on those axes that determine the image of the largest possible number of characters, positively or negatively. Of the axes which involve only a few or even one character, only those are analysed which are 'strong' (striking or exceptional) or which are related to an important event. Such a selection involves the ideological position of the analyst and also points at ideological stands represented in the story, and can therefore be a powerful tool for critique. Once a selection has been made of the relevant semantic axes, it can function as a means of mapping out the similarities and oppositions between the characters. With the help of this information we can determine the qualifications with which a character is endowed (but by whom? by the story or by

the reader? remains an urgent question, to be continued with 'why?'). Some qualifications belong to a social or a family role. In that case, determination comes into play. A character is, for instance, a farmer and a father. Both roles strongly determine what qualifications he receives. In a case like this, no one will be surprised if the character – in a traditional story – is strong, hard-working, and strict. The opposite of strong is (let's say for the moment) weak; of hard-working, lazy; of strict, flexible. The other pole of each of these axes is filled by a character with an equally clear role. It will hardly surprise anyone if the farmer is contrasted with his weak, effeminate, artistic son. In accordance with prejudice, the young man will be lazy. The qualification 'flexible' is hardly applicable to the son; he does not occupy the kind of position of power that allows him the choice between strictness and leniency. This pole will be filled – how could it be otherwise? – by his mother. Should we now attempt to collect the various qualifications we have isolated for all these characters, we would end up with a diagram of the following kind, which for the sake of clarity, has been sketchily outlined.

character qualification / role	strength	diligence	flexibility
farmer/father	+	+	−
student/son	−	−	ϕ
mother	ϕ	ϕ	+

Here + = positive pole
− = negative pole
ϕ = unmarked

This results in a picture of a set of characters, strongly determined by social and family roles. The father is not only qualified as strong; he is also the most strongly qualified character. Two of the three qualifications mark him as positive; all three apply to him. The mother plays a less prominent part in accordance with her social position. She is marked by one quality alone, though a positive one. The young man is marked twice, both times negatively. The mutual relations between the

characters are immediately visible. In this way, more complexly structured sets of characters may also be mapped out.

But binary opposition itself, as a structure of thought, is problematic. Establishing semantic axes of this kind subjects its object – say, a particular semantic field – to three successive logical moves that each aggravate the damage: reduction, of an infinitely rich but also chaotic field, to two centres; the articulation of those centres into polar opposites; and the hierarchization of these two into a positive and a negative term.

But here, logic catches up with this structure of thought. For the logic of opposition has it that negativity is by definition vague, if not void. It cannot be defined, hence, not articulated, and as a result it remains unmanageable; indeed, wild. Historiographer Hayden White (1978) has exposed this logic in his analysis of the early modern fantasy of the 'wild man,' the inhabitants of wild nature outside of the control of the city. More specifically, he called the logic of negativity underlying this fantasy, using a term from logic, 'ostentatious self-definition by negation.' White writes:

> They [the concepts] are treated neither as provisional designators, that is, hypotheses for directing further inquiry into specific areas of human experience, nor as fictions with limited heuristic utility for generating possible ways of conceiving the human world. They are, rather, complexes of symbols, the referents of which shift and change in response to the changing patterns of human behavior which they are meant to sustain. 154

White's negative formulation on how concepts based on binary opposition are *not* treated provides a good piece of advice regarding the scepticism necessary to work with this model without endorsing its drawbacks.

Once we analyse which characters appear marked by a certain semantic axis, we can set up, by using such a diagram as this, a hierarchy of strongly and weakly marked characters. If a number of characters are marked by the same axes with the same values (positive or negative), they can be regarded as synonymous characters: characters with the same content. Inconspicuous duplications of characters can thus be exposed. One will not, however, want to restrict oneself to such an oversimplistic two-way division of axes. It can be useful to determine whether differences of degree and modality are evident within each qualification. Degree can transform a polar scale into a sliding scale:

very strong, reasonably strong, not strong enough, somewhat weak, a weakling. Modality can result in nuance: certainly, probably, perhaps, probably not. Especially if synonymous characters have been discovered, these can mean a valuable refinement of the descriptive model.

To examine the contents of the character further, we can examine the connections existing between the various characteristics. Are, for instance, certain sexes constantly combined with a certain ideological position? In many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novels, a clear connection can be discerned between the male sex and a military ideology. There is, however, not systematically a connection in the same corpus between the female sex and a pacifist attitude, although sometimes there is (e.g. Corneille's play *Horace*). If not, in female characters the axis militarism-pacifism is not marked. The question arises, in relation to this, whether the fact that a certain character or group of characters (for instance, all the persons of one role) is not marked by a certain axis has any significance. It need not, in my view, be meaningful, but neither need it be meaningless. If in a seventeenth-century novel the women do not take a clear stand either for or against war, this can certainly be regarded as significant: it indicates something about their (lack of) social position. The very binary opposition that is such an ideological trap also helps us to notice ideological positions.

A character exhibits not only similarities to and differences from other characters. Often, there is a connection or a discrepancy between the character, its situation, and its environment. Finally, the description which has been obtained of a character can be contrasted with an analysis of the functions it performs in a series of events, as presented in chapter 3. What kinds of actions does a character perform, and what role does it play in the fabula? This confrontation can yield information about the construction of the story with respect to the fabula. Because of a certain event, alterations may take place in the build-up of a character, and internal relations between the various characters change. Conversely, alterations in the make-up of a character may influence events and determine the outcome of the fabula.

Sources of Information

The next question concerning the story which arises is the following: how do we come by our information about a character? Characteristics are either mentioned explicitly by the character itself, or we deduce them from what the character does. Actually, we refer to a qualification

when the information is given directly by a character. There are various ways this happens. If a character talks about itself and to itself, it is practising self-analysis. We cannot be sure that it is judging itself correctly, and literature shows many such cases: unreliable, deceitful, immature, incompetent, mentally disturbed self-analysts. The genres which are particularly well suited to this manner of qualification are obviously the autobiographical ones: diary, confession, autobiographical novel. In 'The Tell-Tale Heart,' Edgar Allan Poe allows his character to explain why he is not insane, although he has murdered someone, and these confessions clearly demonstrate, because of their negation, the existence of his insanity. A character can talk about itself to others. It usually receives an answer, so that the qualification becomes plural in such a case, deriving from various sources. If one character says something about another character, this may or may not lead to a confrontation. The character under discussion may or may not be present. If it is, it can react, confirming or denying what has been said. If it is not, it may or may not already know what people think of it. A third possibility for explicit qualification lies with a third party outside the fabula: the narrator makes statements about the character. This agent, too, may be a reliable or an unreliable judge. The party, for instance, which presents Dombey in Dickens' *Dombey and Son* as an entirely decent man is unreliable. Sometimes this presentation involves very obvious irony.

When a character is presented by means of her actions, we deduce from these certain implicit qualifications. Such an implicit, indirect qualification may be labelled a qualification by function. The reader's frame of reference becomes a crucial element in picking up such qualifications. A deserter is, say, qualified as a pacifist or a coward. A revolutionary who participates in a wild party qualifies as an epicurean or a hypocrite. Moreover, one character can do something to another that qualifies the latter, or that seduces him into qualifying himself. A detective who unmasks a murderer qualifies that character as a murderer. In that case, the qualification is explicit. But before the final arrest takes place the detective can lure his or her victim into a trap, so that the latter qualifies himself as a murderer. She can also, without words, push a gun to his chest, produce a piece of evidence and directly qualify him as a murderer.

If we now involve the various frequency possibilities as well, further differentiation becomes possible. Every qualification is always durative, so that the frequency possibilities are restricted to two. The implicit

qualification through action can be split up into potential actions (plans) and realized ones.

Summarizing: the difference between the first and the second category of information sources is that the first leads to explicit qualification and the second to implicit qualification. Explicit qualifications shed more light than implicit ones, but that light need not be reliable. Implicit, indirect qualifications can be interpreted differently by different readers, as in the case of the deserter. But implicit qualifications may also provide a means of uncovering lies and revealing secrets.

On the basis of this investigation into sources of information, a division can be set up, classifying the character according to the degree of emphasis with which it is qualified. The more ways in which the qualification is communicated, the oftener a character is qualified, the more emphasis it receives. In conjunction with the number of semantic axes by which it is marked, a classification of the character may be achieved which is somewhat more plausible and more subtle than the current one based on round and flat characters.

The Problem of the Hero

From the very beginning of the study of literature, it has been customary to refer to the hero of a story. Who is the hero? This question is often asked. Lots of problematic features have accrued to the term, so much so that it is better left alone. Sometimes attempts are made to define the term *hero*, but these have not resulted in anything particularly concrete. The reader's ability to identify the hero was put forward as a criterion. But this differs, in many cases, from reader to reader. Another criterion has been suggested: the amount of moral approbation that the hero receives from the reader. Again, this varies with each reader. Or does it? As with binary opposition, I am here tempted to explore the implications of such acts of reading rather than turning away from a term that in all its deceptiveness has enough allure to maintain itself. If we believe what a great number of rather smart people have written, the history of literature offers examples of a development of the hero that seem to fulfil this moral requirement.

Nineteenth-century heroes were characters who could survive in a hard and ruthless society, or who attempted to do so but failed. The existential hero is anti-bourgeois and politically committed. Questions concerning the identity of the hero are perhaps not relevant, but are raised so often that they warrant an attempt to formulate criteria by

which a decision may be taken. Attempts have been made to define the term more clearly by naming a number of criteria according to which either the hero could be rejected or the reader's intuitive choice could be explained. I shall mention these criteria briefly. Sometimes, the hero can also be equated, in many ways, with the actantial subject (see chapter 3).

But something much more banal may be going on, such as the appeal of a name in the title. If the title of the hero or his or her explicit denomination does not clinch a decision, we can see whether any one character distinguishes itself from the other characters in the following ways:

qualification: comprehensive information about appearance, psychology, motivation, past
distribution: the hero occurs often in the story; his or her presence is felt at important moments in the fabula
independence: the hero can occur alone or hold monologues
function: certain actions are those of the hero alone: s/he makes agreements, vanquishes opponents, unmasks traitors, etc.
relations: s/he maintains relations with the largest number of characters

But 'hero' implies more positive semantics than is warranted. At the very least there is a distinction to be made between the active, successful hero, the hero-victim, and the passive anti-hero (Tommy Wilhelm in Bellow's *Seize the Day*). The hero-victim will be confronted with opponents, but will not vanquish them. The anti-hero will hardly distinguish him- or herself by function, because s/he is passive. S/he will, however, meet all of the other four criteria.

The problem of the hero has ideological relevance, if only because of the connotations of the concept itself. It is obvious that heroines display different features from male heroes, black from white heroes, in the large majority of the narratives. The suspicion that the choice of a hero and of the features attributed to him or her betrays an ideological position is a reason not to ignore the problem but rather to study it.

6: From Place to Space

Together with character, few concepts deriving from the theory of narrative texts are as self-evident and have yet remained so vague as the concept of space. Only a few theoretical publications have been devoted to it. Here, 'space' is treated as a separate category only to enable specialized analysis. The concept of space is sandwiched between that of focalization, of which the representation of space constitutes in a way a specialized case, and that of place, a category of fabula elements. It is also, obviously, an important aspect of a section I add for this revised edition, on visuality and narrative, although space cannot be conflated with vision.

Place and Space

In chapter 3 I will discuss location or place as an element of the fabula. There the term refers to the topological position in which the actors are situated and the events take place. The contrasts between locations and the borderlines between them will be viewed there as predominant means of highlighting the significance of the fabula or even of determining it. In principle, places can be mapped out, in the same way that the topological position of a city or a river can be indicated on a map. The concept of place is related to the physical, mathematically measurable shape of spatial dimensions. Of course, in fiction, these places do not actually exist, as they do in reality. But our imaginative faculty dictates that they be included in the fabula.

The story is determined by the way in which the fabula is presented. Owing to this process, places are linked to certain points of perception. These places seen in relation to their perception are called space. That point of perception may be a character, which is situated in a space, observes it, and reacts to it. An anonymous point of perception can also dominate the presentation of certain places. This distinction can result in a typology of spatial presentation. The general question concerning the various points of perception, which lies at the root of every presentation, will be discussed later.

Spatial Aspects and Perception

In the story, where space is connected to the characters who 'live' it, the primary aspect of space is the way characters bring their senses to bear on space. There are three senses which are especially involved in the perceptual representation of space: sight, hearing, and touch. All three participate in the presentation of a space in the story. Shapes, colours, and sizes are perceived visually, always from a particular perspective. Sounds may contribute, though to a lesser degree, to the presentation of space. If a character hears a low buzz, it is still at a certain distance from