

# What propels narratives forward? Narrative as Janus

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In Ann Beattie's short story entitled "Janus," the protagonist, Andrea, is a real estate agent who has a mysterious relationship with an enigmatic white bowl. The bowl is both an *object d'art* and a lucky charm that she totes around with her as part of her home staging strategies before the sale. The bowl, which is "not at all ostentatious," (454) has, however, "real presence" (453)—it is "both subtle and noticeable a paradox of a bowl" (453). By creating an unobtrusive point of interest, the bowl is supposed to make the house look more presentable, inviting, and homey. Andrea resorts to it as part of her repertoire of "tricks used to convince a buyer that the house is quite special" (453). It is used along with a pet toy, a flower arrangement on the kitchen counter, and a "drop of scent vaporizing from a light bulb" (453). But, at the same time, it is more significant to her than those other home-staging props. To begin with, Andrea believes that the bowl brings her luck since "bids were often put in on houses where she had displayed the bowl" (454). Also, as the story develops, the reader becomes aware that there is something irregular about Andrea's strange attachment to the bowl. For example, she becomes obsessed about forgetting it at a client's house or breaking it. She also gets up at night to check that it is still there, or lies sleepless, observing it. Her behaviour makes no sense until the very conclusion of the story, when it is casually mentioned, almost as an afterthought, that the bowl was a present from Andrea's lover. The lover wanted her to leave her husband for him, but as Andrea couldn't make up her mind, he said to her that "she was always too slow to know what she really loved" (456). "'Why be two-faced,' he asked her" before leaving (456). The word "two-faced" is the only Janus reference in the story. The Roman god Janus is the God of beginnings, endings, gateways, passages, and transitions. He is depicted as having two faces—each facing away from the other: one looking into the future, another into the past. The expression "Janus-faced" may refer to duplicity or deception—hence the lover's invocation of the idea of two-facedness in reference to Andrea's indecision, her desire to keep both her lover and her husband. But there is also another reference to the idea of time's directionality, which Janus symbolizes. One head's orientation towards the past is alluded to in the lover's comment, "she was always too slow to know what she really loved," implying that our insights often are of a retrospective nature, ambushing us when it is too late to fix things. It is only

after it is too late—only after the lover leaves Andrea—that she realizes what he has meant for her. And in this sense, we can interpret the bowl as a symbolic receptacle of her suppressed regret. But apart from this thematic connection, there is yet another idea connected to Janus: a metanarrative one. Janus symbolizes the narrativity of narratives. When the readers learn at the very last moment that the bowl has a special history, they are urged to go back to the beginning of the story and re-think and re-assign accents and meanings.

This retroactive action on the part of the reader—the shuttling back and forth between the past and the future—is built into the very process of reading a narrative, which is a literary form that possesses an intrinsic doubleness because the story that is narrated (in the past, usually) has already happened: it is a canny, not a naïve genre. In addition, it is a dialogical genre involving the narrator and the narratee. According to David Herman, storytellers and interpreters collaborate on “the process of co-creating narrative worlds, or ‘storyworlds’” (15). He and other narratologists suggest that the reader has an active role in the way a story is “performed,” which involves continual, “real time,” scanning and re-interpretation. The readers project their expectations of possible endings towards the future since the effect of the plot depends to a large extent on our familiarity with the typology of possible plots. Roland Barthes names this phenomenon “*déjà-lu*,” or “already-read,” talking about the very possibility of recognizable cultural codes in the context of intertextuality: “Whoever reads the text amasses certain data under some generic titles for actions” (19) that are absorbed as cultural codes. The reader vis-a-vis the text “is not an innocent subject that is anterior to texts.... The I that approaches the text is itself already a plurality of other texts” (10). But as we scan forwards in an expectant attitude toward a projected closure, we also scan backwards, trying to bridge textual gaps and reconcile competing interpretation, as has been pointed out by Meir Sternberg.

Sternberg’s so-called *functionalist* model, which resembles most closely the reader response model, is attuned to the doubleness of narratives mentioned above. Sternberg, who says claims that “narrative is a construct of our minds” (“Reconceptualizing Narratology” 48), mentions three master strategies of reading or three reading interests: suspense, surprise, and curiosity. The moment of surprise, which I will put aside in this article, is a pregnant moment of misrecognition followed by recognition. I will concentrate instead on the forward or proleptic movement of suspense and the backward or retrospective movement of curiosity. According to Sternberg, “Suspense derives from a lack of desired information concerning the outcome of a conflict that is to take place in the narrative future, a lack that involves a clash of hope and fear, whereas curiosity is produced by a lack of information that relates to the narrative past, a time when struggles have already been resolved, and as such, it often involves an interest in

the information for its own sake" (*Expositional Modes* 65). Both curiosity and suspense are active states of mind. Sternberg points out that "suspense [emphasis in original] arises from rival scenarios about the future" ("Narrativity Makes a Difference" 117) and thus involves projecting ahead various plot possibilities and gradually ruling them out. Curiosity also involves the revision of various possibilities, in this case, the past-oriented inference of gapped antecedents, answering questions such as "what is this character's secret?" or "what was his motivation in doing so and so?" Another thing that must be added here is that Sternberg's insight about the retrospective orientation of narrative interests dovetails nicely with the views of other narratologists, among them Gerald Prince, who observed that teleological thinking is applicable to narratives. For example, instead of saying that John and Mary got married and then got divorced, we could say that John and Mary got married in order to get a divorce (so that a story could be developed around their situation).

In the Janus story by Beattie, the reader's trajectory of suspense is a symmetrical reflection of the protagonist's sense of anxiety. The importance of the bowl appears to grow: the more prosperous she becomes as a real estate agent, the more she begins to invest the bowl with supernatural powers, attributing to it the success of her career, as if it were a magic object. As Andrea's obsession with the bowl becomes more intense and her actions regarding its placement and removal more secretive and ritualistic, she begins to dread that the bowl would break and wonder "what her life would be without the bowl." It is interesting that the reader's reading of this story parallels the protagonist's reading of her own story. Both the reader and the focalized consciousness (which, in this case, coincides with the narrating perspective) are oriented towards the ending and are conscious of the looming moment of the inevitable resolution. It is with growing dread that Andrea is anticipating the final calamity—the bowl's destruction or disappearance—and the reader is also awaiting the ending, but in the mood of suspense, rather than anxiety. Will Andrea's bowl break or be lost? And if so, how? Under what circumstances? But instead of culminating in an event, the narrative resolves itself by divulging the key piece of information about the history of the bowl: now the reader knows about the lover. At this point, the reader's focus shifts to the past in an attitude of curiosity that pursues information for information's sake. Re-read through the lens of new knowledge, some details acquire different, additional layers of meaning. For example, when the protagonist says that losing the bowl would be like losing a lover, we know that she is not just speaking abstractly but with a real lover in mind, and that her feeling of foreboding towards the eventual loss of the bowl is sparked off by the earlier loss of the lover. Thus the retrospective movement of curiosity, which, according to Sternberg, consists in going back and manipulating the past by bridging the gaps in the story, supplements the future-oriented movement of suspense. The two narrative orientations work in concert, creating a

convoluted, oscillatory, see-saw motion, which takes us on an aesthetic and interpretative journey.

As already mentioned, one interesting and important point that Sternberg makes is that narration is not a structure (or not just a structure) but a construct of our minds: it is a phenomenon located in the realm of consciousness. A narration is what we do, what unfolds in our minds, what we perform on an imaginary scene of representation (as I would re-frame it in Gansian terms), and not just an object of study vis-à-vis the human subject. Sternberg's main argument is with academics working in the field of structural analysis who seek structural explanations to narrative's dynamic and temporal characteristics, such as cataloguing different types of plot or charting chronologies of various subplots. Sternberg's functionalist model, as I have already said, is not dissimilar to the reader response approach. The main difference, as I understand it, is that he tries to keep the language more objective and free from psychological connotations. Thus, the three narrative interests is something that is inherent in narrative itself rather than reflective of the reader's subjective and psychological state of mind. I would like to suggest that the tension between the structural and functionalist approaches to narratology can perhaps be seen as a literary analogy of a similar conflict in musicology—the chasm between the structural analysis of Heinrich Schenker, which lays emphasis on form and hierarchy, and the phenomenological analysis of Leonard Meyer, which is interested in the dynamics of perception, expectation, and emotions. The first approach has greater explanatory power, insofar as it allows us to see the structure at a glance, while the second approach, in paying attention to tension and release, is capable of accounting for the temporal experience of narrative, which is, after all, a temporal genre. But could we have a theory that does both, combining the strengths of both approaches?

It seems to me that the next stepping stone is Peter Brooks's "narrative desire." Brooks's contention is that we cannot fully understand narrative without taking cognizance of the engine of desire that drives it. The notion of desire is functionally similar to Sternberg's suspense. In fact, in describing suspense, Sternberg uses the language of desire, as in the quote above, when he talks about suspense as "a clash of hope and fear" (*Expositional Modes* 65)—the terms of personal investment—as opposed to the indifferent interest of curiosity, which is seeking information for information's sake. Even though we desire satisfaction when in the mood of suspense, the phenomenon of desire cannot be reduced to expectation and resolution. Brooks connects desire to the notion of energy (a more explanatory model, as I will show), borrowing from Freud's psychoanalysis and writing that "since psychoanalysis presents a dynamic model of psychic processes, it offers the hope of a model pertinent to the dynamics of texts" (36) Freud's intuition about the way the human psyche works is couched in terms reminiscent of thermodynamic

theory. We can, for the moment, put aside the question of primacy, that is to say, of whether thermodynamic theory can be seen as a metaphor for the operations of the psyche or whether science itself used phenomenological insights as a metaphor in order to create its operational abstractions. Instead, we can, by acknowledging analogies, extract productive and useful similarities. Thus, to reiterate the title question of this paper: what drives a narrative forward? As per Brooks, it is driven forward and onward by the force of narrative desire. "Desire as Eros," writes Brooks, "appears ... central to our experience of reading narrative" (37), and in fact, "Desire is always there at the start of a narrative, often in the state of initial arousal, often having reached a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertaken, change begun" (37-38).

But in comparing desire to a drive or force, we do not yet place it in the domain of thermodynamics. What completes the thermodynamic analogy is Freud's economy of drives. Drives may either exist in the balance of homeostasis or the state of dissipation. The homeostatic model is that of a perpetual motion machine, which works without a loss of energy when it is transferred from one state to another. Its thermodynamic profile is that of eternal circulation of energy according to the principle of declining from equilibrium and then recharging and returning to the zero point. In limited contexts, it is possible to conceptualize narrative desire in terms of the homeostatic model, for example as the Freytag pyramid of dramatic structure, where the swell of rising action to the point of the climax has to be counteracted by the subsiding effect of the falling action. Once the energy has been restored, the process of rise and fall can start anew. But as both Freud and Brooks suggest, there can be no recuperation of expended energy: something is inevitably lost. What in Freud is the death drive (originally, the nirvana principle), which is an urge on the part of organic life to return to the inorganic state (that is to say, the state of complete relaxation and release, of zero tension), is interpreted by Brooks within the domain of narrativity through the ideas of consummation and consumption, which defines the paradox of the narrative plot.

On the one hand, we want the narrated events to restore their balance and the storyline to reach its conclusion (consummation). But on the other hand, we don't want the narrative reach its end, because when it comes to the end, we will have consumed the narrative we are reading, thus extinguishing our reading existence, metaphorically speaking. "If the motor of narrative is desire," says Brooks, "totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning *lie at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire for the end" (52). The ambiguity of narrative desire amounts to a tugging in two directions, insofar as we both desire and resist the ending. Brooks's explanation of this doubleness on a deeper level is the doubleness of language itself, its "dialogic dynamic": "The narrative act discovers, and makes use of, the intersubjective

nature of language itself, medium for the exchange of narrative understanding" (60). He illuminates this perspective with the *One-thousand-and-one Nights* frame narrative, that of Shahrazad and the Sultan. The two characters' desires are at cross-purposes: while the Sultan wants to come to the end of the story, Shahrazad wants to prolong the story-telling moment because she knows that she will be killed when the story is over. In this very apt illustration, the former comes to embody the desire of consummation, while the latter personifies the resistance to being consumed.

The ambivalence of narrative desire encompasses both a psychological awareness of contradiction, of simultaneous attraction and repulsion, as well as the phenomenological systole-diastole experience of effort and resistance. This complexity captures something essential about the essence of energy as it manifests itself in real-life situations, subject to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which says that it is impossible to do any kind of work without loss. I propose that we can apply the idea of a dissipative thermodynamic system as a helpful metaphor when thinking about narrativity. Narrative desire is dissipative in the sense that it dissipates its store of energy in an irreversible process that is measured by the abstract quantity called entropy. The more energy is dissipated, the higher the rise in entropy. Because the loss of energy is irreversible, the rise in entropy is associated with the arrow of time. To take some concrete examples, we can imagine the burning of a match or a dissolution of salt in water—both are processes that cannot be re-launched in the opposite direction. Entropy, however, is also associated with the notion of information in information theory as a measure of disorder or uncertainty. While the underlying physical principle, on which the connection between the energetic notion of entropy and informational entropy is based, is not yet fully understood, the commonsensical connection between the loss of energy and the loss of information could be intuited from the following classic example of mixing two quantities of the same gas at two different temperatures, cold and hot. As the resulting mixture becomes lukewarm, the original distinction between the hot and the cold spot is lost. What does this imply? Since the act of registering a difference between something and something else amounts to gleaning some information, we can say that differentiation can encode a bit of information. But now that the difference is erased, we can see the fact of erasure as loss of information.

If we were then to apply these energist terms to narrative desire, we would say that what is lost is the narrative in the act of its consumption. Just as we cannot un-carbonize a burned match, we cannot unread a book. As the clock is ticking, and we are engrossed in our reading, advancing further and further through the story, we can see more and more of the text being consumed. But the opposite process, which is taking place at the same time, is also true: the story gradually enters our

consciousness, and the total amount of information at our disposal is growing and growing. As we consume the narrative, we learn more and more, become more and more savvy, and are incapable of blotting out what we have just found out unless we suffer from some cognitive disorder. From the perspective of consciousness or information, our knowledge keeps increasing in size and complexity, and the entropy measuring information keeps decreasing (keeping with the definition that connects high entropy to disorder). One way this increase could be interpreted, I would like to claim, is as the opposite stream of time (insofar as the arrow of time is inextricably linked to the growth of entropy). Entropy on the decrease means the same thing as time flowing in the opposite direction.

I thus present a claim that a full understanding of narrativity means understanding it as a process or performance that has two currents of time going in different directions, from the past to the future, and from the future to the past. The movement from the past toward the future occurs within the energist paradigm, in the world of activity, work, consumption, effort and resistance, and leads to loss—the loss of innocence, which accompanies the reading experience, and the attrition of future possibilities, as we eliminate rival scenarios in our suspenseful projection of a resolution. The opposite direction of time takes place in the realm of knowledge, consciousness, or information. It is the direction of gain. What is gained is experience, wisdom, hindsight, and the accrual of the database of memory.

The idea of the two opposing streams of time receives a playful treatment in the 1966 Soviet science fiction novel *Monday Begins on Saturday* by Arkadi and Boris Strugatski—a cult Soviet-era book that satirizes scientific research and university politics. The story is set in a fictional research institute of magic and spell-craft. Alexander, the protagonist, together with his friends and colleagues is trying to solve the mystery of the Institute Director, called Janus, who exists in two persons, Janus-A and Janus-U. Janus-A is the administrator. He is cold, business-like, and youngish-looking. Janus-U, the scientist, is warm, friendly, and seems somewhat older than his counterpart. While Janus-A is bland and completely normal, Janus-U is known for certain oddities in his behavior. He always asks people he meets whether they met yesterday and, if so, what they talked about. He has an uncanny ability to foresee the future, and he always disappears at midnight into his room, and when he comes out, he never remembers what took place earlier. While the protagonist of the novel is new to the world of magic, his friends are experienced magicians and are not easily stumped by the supernatural. However, even for them, there is a limit to what they can accept. Some basic laws of nature should not be broken, such as the law of cause and effect. What prompts their investigation is a string of strange occurrences. One day, one of the characters finds a green feather in the laboratory furnace. The next day, he finds a dead green parrot in the Petri dish. Later, Janus-U walks into the lab, finds the parrot, and cremates it in the furnace. The day after,

the same green parrot hobbles into the room, flies up awkwardly, alights on the Petri dish, and dies. And finally, on the third day, the same parrot flies into the room, looking quite healthy and vigorous, and starts talking about futuristic topics, where he mentions upcoming future events concerning the people who are witnessing the scene, including future deaths. This time, as well, Janus-U walks into the room and behaves matter-of-factly, as if he expects everyone to be familiar with the parrot. After Janus leaves, a long discussion ensues between the scientists, and the solution to the riddle, proposed by the protagonist, is that Janus-U and his bird have discovered the secret of *counter-motion*—the movement back in time. The reason Janus and the parrot are not walking, flying, and talking in a funny back-to-front way is because their counter-motion is discrete, not continuous: when the clock strikes midnight, they transit forty-eight hours back in time. As Janus-U is sliding backward, Janus-A is moving forward in time, co-existing in parallel and not crossing the paths with his counter-moving copy. When the characters finally solve the mystery of one Janus in two copies, they begin to feel sorry for the U copy, because his consciousness exists in the state of perpetual belatedness: he can never enjoy the fruit of his scientific labor; neither can he correct the mistakes of the others and influence their behavior, the (sometimes disastrous) results of which he has seen in his own past.

Besides being an interesting and clever twist, the story of two Januses looking in opposite directions possesses a metanarrative significance. The administrative Janus, who moves forward into the future together with the protagonists, represents the efficacy and power of the narrative engine, which drives narrative desire toward closure. The scientific Janus, who moves from the future into the past, represents, on the other hand, the reversed direction of narrative knowledge, which flips the natural causal order on its head and views the future outcome as the final cause of current circumstances, a sad and ultimately pessimistic outlook, albeit contorted by Janus-U himself in his parting words to Alexander: “try to understand. . .that a single future does not exist for everyone. They are many, and each one of your actions creates one of them” (214). (Janus’s area of research, incidentally, is alternative universes).

Now I will finally connect my argument to the derivation of narrative in Generative Anthropology. Both Sternberg’s important insights about the forward and backward directions of narrative interests, as well as Brooks’s valuable description of narrative desire in energist terms do not provide a fully satisfactory explanatory derivation of these narrative features. We need to go further or “dig deeper” toward the origin of language in order to understand narrative’s Janus-like structure. The doubleness of narrative strikes me as central not only to its aesthetic effect but also to the meaning of meaning. It captures the originary doubleness that springs into existence with the origin of the sign, the double consciousness that designates the

central object while retaining the prelinguistic memory of its appetitive value. The doubleness of the sign is expressed in the idea of oscillation, which I find very poignant and richly explanatory of various paradoxical symbolic configurations. The oscillation between sign and referent is expressive of the ambivalent relationship of the sign-emitter to the object of mimetic desire: one moment it is a real object waiting to be consumed, another, it is a prohibited sacred object. As Eric Gans explains in *Signs of Paradox*, “the subject attempting to forget the sign’s reminder of triangular mediation in order to possess the thing in itself is continually thrown back upon this mediation when the thing-in-itself vanishes before his eyes. The object can be appropriated imaginarily only through the sign; this is the origin of the specifically human imagination” (140). The element of the originary hypothesis that I want to emphasize is the idea that the embryonic projective-retrospective narrative movement is born with the sign. The sign already contains within itself the two minimal temporal potentialities, the forward one, which is described in energist and active terms, and the backward, passive one that carries information. The future orientation is inherent in the gesture of appropriation that is generated by the triangular mimetic configuration. It is the attraction that pulls the participants on the scene of representation forward, toward the appetitive object that is just on the verge of becoming an interdicted object. The past orientation is manifested through deterrence that the original mimetic crisis creates when “in violation of the dominance hierarchy, all hands reach out for the object; but at the same time each is deterred from appropriating by the sight of all the others reaching in the same direction. The ‘fearful symmetry’ of the situation makes it impossible for any one participant to defy the others and pursue the gesture to its conclusion” (Gans, *Originary Thinking* 8). What is the source of this fearful symmetry if not some vestige of retroactive wisdom, some information carried from the future and “implanted” into the minds of the participants of the originary scene regarding the way such conflictual situations usually resolve themselves, the knowledge that translates into the repelling force of fear and awe that the sacred center inspires in sign users?

From these minimal temporal potentialities, the originary narrative is born as the temporalization of the sign. “The sign,” as Gans puts it in the article “Originary Narrative,” “tells the story’ of its own emergence,” at the same time as “originary narrative tells the story of the sign’s constitution and deconstitution, of its constitution as separate from its original object and of the worldly consequence of this separation at the moment of deconstitution for the resented object itself.” The essence of this story is the “generation of transcendence from immanence.” What this implies is the origin of meaning: “The deferral of appropriation gives the object meaning, and this meaning in turn ‘gives meaning’ to the original gesture, which sought the assimilation of the object and, with it, the abolition of its meaningful identity. What is meaningful is what resists assimilation and causes it to be

deferred. The sign is the ‘story’ of this resistance.”

I would now like to take these ideas of separation and resistance to assimilation and look at them through the lens of images and ideas from the realm of thermodynamics and consider them in the context of the inexorable rise of entropy, which marks the passage of time. The origin of language is, at the same time, the origin of differentiation. As Gans has shown, it is not accurate to speak of what we could call “representational spaces.” Symbolic representation is not merely spatial, but is scenic, which is another way of saying that it creates a differentiated space, the space that is not homogeneous, neither smooth, nor equally structured, stretched, and distributed in all directions. It is differentiated in the sense that it consists of two parts that have different attributes, the center and the periphery, with the center having a privileged position over the periphery and acting as a point of attraction. Differentiated space is intimately connected to the energetic model of narrative. The differentiation between a point-like central space and a large periphery creates force and acceleration. The privileged central space exerts a gravitational pull on the peripheral players through the gradient of desire. Mimetic desire acts as a glue that orients peripheral players towards the shared object of attention in a triangular configuration. Cognitive scientists and linguists would call it *joint attention*, but the concept of joint attention, while compatible with the GA understanding of language, is too static and grows out of the model of language as communication, which is oblivious to its anthropological underpinnings. The triangular configuration in GA is neither static, nor does it exist in the state of equilibrium. The force of mimetic desire is momentum-building: it quickens the movement of desire along its narrowing path towards the bottlenecking apex. This is where, I believe, the force of linguistic performativity is born.

Another analogy I would like to offer is from the field of statistical mechanics, where an alternative explanation of the growth of entropy is articulated. While in thermodynamics, the rise in entropy is a purely empirical law that does not have any deeper explanation, in statistical mechanics, it receives a simple statistical interpretation: entropy is the measure of unpredictability or missing information. As the system evolves, it develops in more stable and predictable ways towards configurations that are more likely. What this usually means is that these are macrostates (like temperature) which consist of a large number of microstates (such as descriptions of individual molecules). The reason these configurations are more likely is that each microstate might not be of interest to us, but the larger the number of microstates that make up the macrostate, the greater the likelihood that this macrostate will occur, and the less information the fact of its occurrence will carry. It might help to imagine a marching band that performs in a certain formation. When all the members keep their correct spots in this formation, the audience experiences this arrangement as order. But let us imagine that a band

comes to a stop. After a while, individual members become tired of standing in the same place and start dispersing gradually. The arrangement now looks disordered. If we knew all the individual band members, each arrangement that declined from the prescribed one would still be unique: “now John is standing here, and Pete there, and now John is over there, and Pete is over here.” But in a general case, the audience does not know the participants and does not care who is standing where. Because there are infinitely many more disorderly ways in which band members may be standing, compared to the only one that interests us, when the musicians are all lined up in neat rows, we lump them together as indifferent states of undifferentiated hordes. The system thus evolves from individuation to non-individuation, from focusing to defocusing.

There is an interesting corollary to this. The Second Law of Thermodynamics (which describes a dissipation of energy) is only operational in situations when we are interested or not interested in specific configurations, that is to say in situations when the question of particles being differentiated vs. non-differentiated, distinguishable vs. indistinguishable, or interchangeable vs. non-interchangeable becomes an issue. The problem of particles having distinct identities is intimately related to the probabilistic model of reality—the view that incorporates uncertainty and randomness. And this makes sense. Objects can only be seen as individuals when they can be lost and found, expected or unexpected, in other words, when they cannot always be traced and followed but can disappear into the background. The paths of the objects of deterministic classical mechanics are always known; therefore the dichotomy between distinguishability and non-distinguishability is not applicable to the Newtonian universe.

I will now come to the most speculative part of my paper and suggest that mimetic desire is a glue that creates similar dynamics to the one that exists in a probabilistically described dissipative system. The focusing of attention on one central object is what makes it individual and individuated. A moment ago I had no interest in this object, but all of a sudden, I notice that someone else is paying attention to it. It is discerned from all other objects in the moment mimetic desires have converged on it. Focusing attention on an object in an attempt to consume it, mimetic desire differentiates it from other objects by giving it individuality. The object resists assimilation and pushes back, and in doing so, makes the appropriating gesture meaningful. This is how Gans’s idea that “what is meaningful is what resists assimilation” can be additionally interpreted. The detail that I want to add to the GA insight about deferral through resistance is that the narrative unfolding of the sign follows a “thermodynamic” logic: namely it pushes forward, toward the future as energy and turns back in time as information.

My final speculation attempts to respond in a very schematic way to the questions

of what is the meaning of the loss of entropy in the forward movement of narrative (what exactly is lost and why?) and why is it necessary to conceive of the retrospective narrative interest as an actual time reversal rather than in the more intuitive terms of a backward glance? I would like to suggest that what is lost is other undifferentiated possibilities resulting in choices not made, options not taken, rival scenarios ruled out, and alternative universes cut off. Instead, a particular future, locked into place by *this* particular scenario, is launched into existence by determining the preceding events teleologically and unleashing a chain of causes and effects back into the past. This supports the narratological intuition, expressed in different ways by different narratologists, that narratives are governed by the circular structure of predestination (i.e., the already mentioned “John and Mary got married in order to get a divorce”). I would like to call this narrative logic of unfolding “the providential structure.” The sentiment to which this logic gives rise becomes especially acute and resonant in narratives of vocation and confessional narratives. Every choice becomes providential insofar as it activates the workings of destiny: “I made a choice to become an artist because it was meant to be: I was born to become an artist.” Did my destiny rule my choice, or did my choice rule my destiny?

I will finish by mentioning some recent quantum experiments that are referred to as quantum eraser experiments. They seem to suggest that retrocausality and reverse time travel are not just ideas that belong in science fiction. What was postulated in the twentieth century as a thought experiment about entangled particles (entanglement in itself is an interesting idea that deserves some thought in the context of GA because when I desire something mimetically, I become entangled with my model) has been experimentally confirmed by, for example, an experiment at the University of Vienna in 2011, the results of which were published in 2012 (“A Non-Causal Quantum Eraser”). The conjecture that the experiment was set up to test was that entanglement can be produced *a posteriori*. To do so, one experimenter makes a decision as to whether to create an entanglement between two pairs of photons, and another pair of experimenters measure the particles to see whether they’re entangled or not (whether they behave as particles or as waves). The surprising thing is that the measurement is made *before* the decision is made—and it is always accurate! The result seems to suggest that particles “know” before the experimenter what he or she is going to decide. This experiment might be uncovering something interesting about the nature of consciousness—something about its agglutinant quality that can produce entanglement and, thus, triadic structures of thought, which, in turn, make possible the origin and evolution of symbolic thinking.

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