

Paul Ricœur: the Concept of Narrative Identity, the Trace of Autobiography

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Paul Ricœur: the Concept of Narrative Identity, the Trace of Autobiography

I did begin [my autobiography] but the resolve melted away and disappeared in a week and I threw my beginning away. Since then, about every three or four years I have made other beginnings and thrown them away. — Mark Twain¹

The publication of Paul Ricœur's *La mémoire, l'histoire, et l'oubli* in 2000 prompted *Le Monde* to declare him to be 'one of France's great contemporary philosophers'.² Ricœur is best known for his largely hermeneutic treatment of the interrelationship of time, narrative and human identity that lead him to construct an ethical notion of narrative identity that privileges agency.³ This key concept of narrative identity, with its emphasis on the configuration of an identity that persists over time, seems apposite to the theory and practice of autobiography. Indeed, and for understandable reasons, a number of literary critics have either applied Ricœur's work to autobiography and autobiographical fictions or incorporated his theory of narrative identity in their survey of autobiographical theory.⁴ That Ricœur's notion of narrative identity is being applied to autobiography is not surprising, what is surprising is that autobiography only appears on the margins of Ricœur's work. Given that his concept of identity would appear to have its generic home within autobiography, Ricœur's near silence invites inquiry. This article sets out to give an account of narrative identity and argues that Ricœur's work is driven as much by the concern that processes of signification can undo the subject as it is by the desire to formulate a theory of identity. In effect, autobiography, far from affirming narrative identity, challenges the presuppositions that underpin Ricœur's phenomenological-hermeneutic approach to identity and time.

Ricœur's concept of narrative identity was first formulated in volume three of *Time and Narrative*. Put simply, narrative identity is a response to the question of how an identity can bespeak both change and permanence. Through a theory of narrative Ricœur seeks to respond to the question *who?* and to the issues of change and permanence. He begins by dividing identity into two categories *idem* and *ipse*. *Idem* refers to a notion of identity based on Sameness

2 Paragraph

whereas *ipse*, described as Selfhood, can incorporate change within a recognizable entity. In *Time and Narrative*, *ipse* is analogous to narrative identity and involves the telling and reading of a life-story, whether factual or fictional, such that the figure of identity that emerges offers a new insight into the self.

Narrative, Ricœur argues in *Time and Narrative*, mediates the aporia of change and permanence through a process of 'emplotment' that organizes the contingencies of existence into a coherent whole. This narrative structure is subdivided into two forms: history and fiction. In making a case for narrative history Ricœur surveys and critically examines the ideas and methodological formulations of a range of historians such as Paul Veyne, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault and, in particular, Ferdinand Braudel. History, concludes Ricœur, is a referential discourse that pertains to the 'what was' of the past. Indeed, the events of history acquire meaning only through narrative, and though Ricœur rejects the possibility of historiography as accurately re-presenting the 'what was' of the past, he argues in favour of history as a mediating amalgam of trace and figurative language that brings us the meaning of the past. In other words history, as text, draws upon figures of literature, such as metaphor, metonymy and irony, in order to communicate the sense of an absent world that has left its mark in the form of concrete traces, the archive and testimony.

On the question of narrative fiction, Ricœur argues that it too is concerned with mediating a cosmological (that is the scientific) and a phenomenological (that is the personal) experience of time. In *Time and Narrative* fiction is synonymous with the novel and in his, somewhat flat, readings of Proust, Mann, and Woolf, Ricœur argues that novelistic fictions can shape the past in ways that are unconstrained by the archives and thus give expression to the 'what might have been' of the past. This quasi-past of fiction, he writes, facilitates a re-description of the past that is mediated by the imaginative and moral insights of others and opens up new ways of understanding the past.

The overlap between the 'what was' of history and the 'what might have been' of fictions forms the basis of Ricœur's notion of narrative identity. Fiction offers alternative versions of the self and facilitates the reader to draw conclusions and to make decisions based on insights provided by narratives. Narrative identity is realized in three successive moments. The first, what Ricœur calls prefiguration, is the individual's experience of being-in-the-world that is semantically construed but without clear form or figure. The second moment is that of configuration where the contingencies of experience are

selected, shaped and ordered within the plot of narrative and the third moment occurs in the noetic act of reading where the self comes to a greater understanding of human experience over time through the mediation of narrative. This final act results in a transformative understanding of one's self in the world. In short, 'the fragile offshoot issuing from the union of history and fiction is the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific identity that we can call their narrative identity' (TN, iii, 246). And, as Ricœur writes in the final paragraph of *Time and Narrative*, it is the search by individuals, and by the communities to which they belong, that forms the 'core' of his investigation into the aporetics of temporality and the poetics of narrative (TN, iii, 274).

From the point of view of autobiography, what is striking about *Time and Narrative* is that Ricœur provides two examples of narrative identity, one of which suggests that the self can be the source of its own insight by organizing his or her past experiences into a coherent narrative. The first is that of a Jewish identity based on the reception of Biblical texts. He cites *Exodus* and the story of David in the *Book of Kings* as examples of foundational events that were inscribed by the Jews and became part of a repertoire of narratives that give form to their specific sense of themselves. The second is based on Freud's clinical work with individuals whose cure involves making narrative sense of the fragments of memory and stories that disorder their sense of identity. Here, Ricœur notes that the subject comes to self-knowledge through the construction of a 'coherent and acceptable story' about himself (TN, iii, 247). Ricœur's argument is that narrative identity can account for change within the general configuration of a life (a borrowing from Wilhelm Dilthey's *Zusammenhang des Lebens*) and that the subject can be both the writer and reader of his own life.

This example of narrative identity brings the practice of autobiography to mind. However, of the seven references to autobiography in *Time and Narrative* the only ones to have a bearing on the concept of narrative identity are two references that undermine it. Ricœur notes that:

as the literary analysis of autobiography confirms, the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told. (TN, iii, 246)

He returns to autobiography a few pages later admitting that a 'systematic investigation of autobiography and self-portraiture would

4 Paragraph

no doubt verify this instability in principle of narrative identity' (TN, iii, 249). If narrative identity is inherently unstable then autobiography provides the exemplary articulation of that instability. However, Ricœur does not take up the challenge of autobiography. Instead, he circumscribes narrative identity within a broader theory of ethical action and Levinas's analysis of promise-keeping (TN, iii, 249).

Although Ricœur sidesteps autobiography in a bid to salvage narrative identity, a number of critics have embraced narrative identity in an effort to understand autobiography. Understandably so, as narrative identity with its interplay of trope and trace, with its transactions between the freedoms of the productive imagination and the constraint of the archive, and with its facilitation of an understanding of self through narrative, seems particularly germane to both the genre and theory of autobiography. Indeed, in many respects this concept of identity would appear to have its generic home within autobiography, which for Ricœur is a retrospective narrative form in which the narrator is identified with the author and gives an account of his or her life. Janet Varner Gunn, for example, cites Ricœur's work as a point of reference in her examination of autobiography entitled *Autobiography: toward a poetics of experience*.⁵ Similarly, Michael Sheringham in his authoritative survey of French autobiography refers to Ricœur's concept of narrative identity as one 'which brings autobiography into the foreground as the perfect embodiment of narrative's *entrecroisement* of history and fiction'.⁶ Sheringham's incorporation of narrative identity into his survey of autobiographical theory and practice is entirely convincing. All the more surprising therefore is Ricœur's lack of engagement with autobiography despite his lengthy treatment of both historiography and the novel (or at least the European novel up to and including the novels of Thomas Mann, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf). It doesn't seem unreasonable to question this silence.

I want to propose two possible readings. The first takes the approach of an apologist and looks to Ricœur's commentaries on his own work as a means of understanding his summary treatment of autobiography. The second, which forms a tentative conclusion, suggests that autobiography offers a challenge to Ricœur's work that not only undermines his concept of narrative identity but foregrounds the limitations of his use of texts in the service of a philosophical approach that presupposes the precedence of being over language and privileges the whole over the part.

Taking the approach of the apologist it is clear that ever since the 1930s Paul Ricœur has been interested in the relationship between

the human subject and meaning. His first sole authored book, on Gabriel Marcel and Karl Jaspers, makes clear a position that Ricœur has held ever since. What he admires in both these philosophers is their argument that the presumed sovereign and self-transparent ego cannot be the source of meaning. Both Jaspers and Marcel see the ego, the *moi*, as something to be transcended in order to attain self-knowledge. For Jaspers such an act involved overcoming the necessary constraints of the body and the predisposition of character, for Marcel it was through an active engagement with the other.⁷ Both these positions are reformulated and revisited throughout Ricœur's subsequent work. Similarly, his attraction to a descriptive form of Husserlian phenomenology in the late 1930s was motivated by an idea of intentionality that defined the conscious self by the objects of its perception more than by the structure of its perception.⁸ However, Ricœur felt that Husserl's approach to phenomenology led to a form of idealism by other means.⁹ In response Ricœur turned to hermeneutics and to what he called the detour of the sign. This hermeneutic graft was critical to Ricœur's work and led to his insistence that the self could only come to a fuller understanding of itself through the noetic act of interpreting the noematic through language, more specifically through symbols, metaphors and narrative. Such an act involves both an appropriation of the text's sense and meaning and a decentring of the ego faced with the strangeness of the text. He notes, for example in *The Rule of Metaphor*, that the self-mastering ego must exchange itself for a figure of a self that emerges from a reading of the text.¹⁰ This suspicion of the ego is made explicit in a debate between Jean-Marc Ferry and Ricœur that followed from the latter's presentation of his 1988 paper 'Narrative Identity'. In a response to Jean-Marc Ferry, Ricœur replies that he is suspicious of Fichte's notion of *autoreflexion*, that he always fears the short circuit of a self communicating with itself to the neglect of the other. Ricœur goes on to argue that philosophical reflection should involve a process of thought that is mediated and tested through the archives of history and artefacts of culture such as the novel.¹¹ Indeed, it is in this paper on narrative identity that Ricœur restates his position that narrative identity facilitates self-knowledge. However, he describes this form of insight, confirmed by the 'epistemology of autobiography', as an 'intuitive apprehension' which, as a consequence, requires a further examination of what is at stake — in other words intuitions need to be tested by philosophical enquiry.¹² Ricœur, ever true to the post-Kantian school of French philosophy, seeks to go beyond the intuitions

6 Paragraph

of the ego. Indeed, his notion of narrative identity is indebted less to the freestyle of artistic imagination than to the productive imagination of Kant. Thus narrative identity is very much an ordered figure, or schema, mid-way between formal categories and the immediacy of intuition. Given these philosophical positions it would seem that autobiographies are too close to blind intuition, too narcissistic, and self-regarding to such an extent that Ricœur remarks in his 1991 article on narrative identity (again called 'Narrative Identity') that we have learned infinitely more about the human being through third-person narratives than through autobiography.¹³

Ricœur's reluctance to explore autobiography can be justified by his philosophical position on the subject and meaning. And yet when one examines Ricœur's references to autobiography what emerges is not simply a disapproval of the ego but an acknowledgement that autobiography unsettles narrative identity. What I want to argue is that Ricœur's formulation of narrative identity is not only cursory in its consideration of autobiography but that autobiography reveals the limits of Ricœur's hermeneutic approach to texts. Indeed, what we can extrapolate from Ricœur's position is that autobiographical insights are meaningful but closer to commonplace *doxa* than to the higher good that comes from philosophical inquiry. And for me this is the rub. For though Ricœur argues in favour of a mediation of self-understanding through texts, he subordinates the destabilizing potential of language to the principles of Aristotelian poetics, in particular the importance of composition and plot which result in the subordination of chance events to a teleological structure. Ricœur seeks to stabilize signification and save the identity of the subject by appealing to a greater good beyond narrative identity, namely a coherent notion of self-identity that ethically responds to the call of the other.

As we have seen, Ricœur's notion of narrative identity changes over time. When Ricœur first formulates the notion of narrative identity in volume three of *Time and Narrative* (1985) he notes its instability which autobiography exemplifies. In his 1988 article on narrative identity Ricœur circumscribes the 'intuitions' of autobiography within the broader goal of personal identity. By the early nineties Ricœur returns to the aporia of identity in *Oneself as Another* and in his second article entitled 'Narrative identity'.¹⁴ He acknowledges texts in which the identity of the 'I' can be systematically deconstructed by the text itself.¹⁵ It is in these two texts that Ricœur elaborates his concept of narrative identity in greatest detail. This time he includes *idem*, or identity based on sameness, into the notion

of narrative identity arguing that folktales epitomise the unchanging character of the human whereas modernist novels, such as Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*Man without qualities*), are taken as the radical paradigm of *ipse*. Recontextualized as a mediating stage between a theory of action and an ethical response to the other, narrative identity in *Oneself as Another* allows the reader to explore the dialectics of character and selfhood over time and through a range of moral responses. However, the example of narrative identity in *Oneself as Another* is not that of the Freudian 'working-through' (*Durcharbeitung*) but that of the chief protagonist of folktales and realist novels. It is this form of narrative identity that invites the reader to identify or otherwise with a choice of action and thus provides the reader with a provisional or virtual narrative identity. This shift from Freudian talkcure to the third person hero is significant in that it emphasizes that the self comes to insight through the mediation of the fictional other rather than through the autobiographical self.

What is more, it is either novels in the first person singular or autobiographical projects, such as that of Michel Leiris, that undermine Ricœur's attempt to formulate a notion of narrative identity. Ricœur argues that the unravelling of narrative identity is related to the disintegration of narrative form:

The erosion of paradigms (. . .) strikes both the figuration of the character and the configuration of the plot. Thus in the case of Robert Musil, the decomposition of the narrative form paralleling the loss of identity of the character breaks out of the confines of the narrative and draws the literary work into the sphere of the essay. Nor is it by chance that so many contemporary autobiographies, that of Michel Leiris for example, deliberately move away from the narrative form and move into the literary genre with the least configuration — the essay. (*OA*, 149)

Given this disintegration of a recognizable genre and an identifiable character, Ricœur's response, in order to stabilize his concept of identity, is to transfer his argument from narrative to the field of ethical action. In other words when texts undermine identity to such a point that the structure of the 'I' is put in question then the text's usefulness has been exhausted and the subject must seek definition elsewhere. On two occasions in his 1991 article on narrative identity he warns the reader about the dangers inherent in the process of identifying with narrative identities and so moves to subordinate text to action. The ego, he writes, can over-identify with the hero or can become undone by the disintegration of the narrative 'I'. Nevertheless,

8 Paragraph

the 'I' remains even if it is only to ask the question 'Who am I?'. And the answer to the question lies in one's response to the other.

Thus, Ricœur defers the defining moments of personal identity to the world of ethical action. It is the world of praxis, he argues, that finally stabilizes meaning. What is striking is that the definition of identity that ensues involves not only an action but a promise. By holding to one's promise to the other one ties speech to action and defines selfhood:

The properly ethical justification of the promise suffices of itself, a justification which can be derived from the obligation to safeguard the institution of language and to respond to the trust that the other places in my faithfulness. (*OA*, 125)

By holding to one's word both language and the subject resist change over time. This version of narrative identity resonates with Ricœur's concern to define the self through its response to the other and to deal with the changes wrought by time through a continuous act of affirming selfhood by the ethical choices one makes. In fulfilling a promise one stabilizes language by translating word into deed. The thrust, therefore, of Ricœur's argument is that time betrays the reference of language but that the individual can counter time's effect, on language and by extension selfhood, through the fulfilment of a promise. But the argument could be formulated differently. In moving from text to action Ricœur circumvents the thorny issue of a subject constituted by language. For the attempt to fix any life in words, however provisionally, is inevitably beset by the metonymic, supplemental, structure of language and once inscribed or recounted each life story is subject to further interpretations. It is a process without an end-stop. Ricœur comes closest to addressing this problem in *Time and Narrative* when he acknowledges that life is a tissue of stories. However, rather than pursuing the imbrication of life and the differential logic of texts, Ricœur turns to ethics. Ultimately, moral action defines personal identity and subsumes narrative identity within the greater cause of ethical order.

Oneself as Another makes manifest the weakness of Ricœur's presuppositions and methodologies. In the first place Ricœur's work is underpinned by the presupposition that language is at man's disposal in the pursuit of meaning. This might be so but Ricœur does not problematise the role of language, preferring instead to see it as a tool at the service of self-knowledge rather than as something that constitutes consciousness and is open to constant misreadings. Secondly, Ricœur's methodology, though informed by hermeneutics

and phenomenology, involves a constant effort to mediate between opposites, between change and constancy for example. Hence, Ricœur, when faced with an aporia, looks to find a new term or approach so as to get around the difficulty. As a result of this form of dialectics the problem of a narrative identity unravelled by narrative is displaced. An example of this can be found in *Time and Narrative* where no sooner does he acknowledge the instability of narrative identity than he introduces Levinas's idea of the other. This open conclusion to *Time and Narrative* ensures that Ricœur has to return to the question of narrative identity over the following years, each time modifying its formulation before fully integrating it within a notion of personal identity based on ethics. Indeed Ricœur's work on narrative identity provides a perfect illustration of change and displacement over time. The difficult issues raised by autobiography are signalled but never pursued, mediated but never probed. Autobiographical works address the fraught engagement between subject and writing and the illusion of drawing the contingencies of existence into a configuration that suggests stability over time. Moreover, where Ricœur has an authorial 'I' adjudicate between the overlapping of fact and fiction, contemporary writers, such as Nathalie Sarraute in *Enfance*, produce texts that exploit, and bring to the fore, the latent tensions that exist in the autobiographical project: the temptations of fictionalizing memories, the tensions between competing versions of the self, the uncertainty that erodes the identity of the 'I' that attempts to recover the past.¹⁶

Finally, it is interesting that Ricœur himself has given in to the lure of autobiographical writing. In his *Autobiographie intellectuelle* Ricœur offers an account of the factors and thinkers that influenced his intellectual development. In his introduction, Ricœur makes clear his understanding of autobiography and to my mind highlights the paradox that characterises his work. He writes:

An autobiography is the story of a life and like any other narrative is selective and biased. Moreover, an autobiography is in the precise sense of the term a literary work and as such is based on the gap, at times beneficial, at times harmful between the retrospective act of writing, of inscribing experience and the daily passing of time. Such a gap distinguishes autobiography from the diary. Finally, autobiography is defined by the identity and therefore the absence of distance between the protagonist of the narrative, that is oneself, and the narrator that says I and writes in the first person singular.¹⁷

Ricœur's final point concerning the relationship of identity between author, narrator and character was first formulated by Phillippe Lejeune

in *Le Pacte autobiographique* and is a commonplace of the argument that autobiography is a referential discourse. What Ricœur adds to the formula is the syllogistic turn that equates the identity of protagonist and narrator to an absence of *distance* between protagonist, narrator and author. This remark seems to contradict the previous point referring to the distance between the act of writing and the lived experience, in other words between the writing 'I' and the narrated 'I'. On the one hand Ricœur is obliged to recognize his old sparring partner time as a factor separating the autobiographical act from what is remembered. On the other hand his exclusion of distance between protagonist, narrator and authorial self could be read as an attempt to maintain a stable self over time. Ricœur's position attests to, and employs, an 'I' that is an authorizing signifier of a referentially verifiable self. And though he recognises the literary dimension of autobiography he nonetheless maintains the integrity of the relationship of identity between author, narrator and character.

It is ironic that what springs to mind here is the Barthesian line that the '“I” of the text is not the same as the “I” that writes the text and the “I” that writes is not the same “I” that is'.¹⁸ Though the early Roland Barthes reduces narrative time to an atemporal structure, it is Barthes's observation on the constantly changing subject that underlines the effect of time: there are temporal gaps between narrator and author and between the discursive 'I' and the 'I' that is remembered. In the end, and despite his suspicion of the ego, it is Ricœur who maintains the integrity of the autobiographical 'I' that contemporary autobiographical writing has so often, and so playfully, disputed.

Barthes's target, like Ricœur's, is the transcendental ego, and yet where Barthes's work recognizes the constantly deferred moment of self-coincidence, Ricœur seeks to locate it, however provisionally, within acts of reading and ethical responses to the other. And yet his constant recourse to mediation, his detours through cultural products, suggest that a stable form of identity is constantly deferred. Ricœur acknowledges this process of deferral but rather than analysing the process his work looks to an ontological horizon where being is better understood through acts. It is this horizon that allows him to subordinate the instability of narrative identity, and in particular the waywardness of many autobiographical texts, to a deferred understanding of the self. Indeed it seems clear that the narrative identities of autobiographies are, from Ricœur's perspective, but dim reflections of the ontological self, provisional expressions of the narcissistic subject that knows itself only through a mimetic mirror darkly. In short,

Ricœur's work offers an admirable ethics but a reluctant engagement with autobiographical texts that reveals the fragility, not simply of Ricœur's concept of narrative identity, but of his use of hermeneutics to understand the self through the mediation of texts.

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NOTES

- 1 This epigraph is one of three that Louis A. Renza uses to introduce his article 'The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography'. The article originally appeared in *New Literary History* 9 (1977), 1–26 and was reprinted in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, edited by J. Olney (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980), 268–295.
- 2 *Le Monde* 15 June 2000, 16.
- 3 Ricœur's published work on time and human culture begins with an edited collection *Les Cultures et le Temps* (Paris, Payot, 1975). Ricœur is perhaps best known for *Temps et récit* published in three volumes by Seuil in 1983, 1984 and 1985. The English translation, *Time and Narrative*, was translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1985 and 1988). Hereafter cited as *TN*.
- 4 See for example Dominique Combe, 'La référence dédoublé: Le sujet lyrique entre fiction et autobiographie', in Dominique Rabaté (ed.), *Figures du Sujet Lyrique* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 39–63. For an application of Combe's treatment of Ricœur's work on narrative identity to contemporary literature see Sylviane Coyault-Dublanchet, *La Province en héritage: Pierre Michon, Pierre Bergounioux, Richard Millet* (Geneva, Droz, 2002).
- 5 Janet Varner Gunn, *Autobiography: toward a poetics of experience* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).
- 6 Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993), 25.
- 7 Paul Ricœur, *Gabriel Marcel et Karl Jaspers* (Paris, Editions du Temps Présent, 1948), 21.
- 8 Paul Ricœur, *Réflexion faite: autobiographie intellectuelle* (Paris, Editions Esprit, 1995), 'Définie par l'intentionnalité, la conscience se révélait d'abord comme tournée vers le dehors, donc jetée hors de soi, mieux définie par les objets qu'elle vise que par la conscience de les viser.' 17.
- 9 Ricœur, 'Ce qui me préoccupe depuis trente ans', *Esprit*, 117–118 (1986), 227–243, 239.
- 10 Ricœur reiterates the point in *Réflexion faite: autobiographie intellectuelle*: 'Que l'appropriation n'implique pas le retour subreptice de la subjectivité

12 *Paragraph*

- souveraine, cela peut être attesté par la nécessité de se désapproprier de soi-même, nécessité imposée par la compréhension de soi devant le texte. Alors, disais-je dans le texte [*La Métaphore vive*] de 1975, 'j'échange le moi, maître de lui-même, contre le soi, disciple du texte', *Réflexion faite: autobiographie intellectuelle* (Paris, Éditions Esprit, 1995), 57.
- 11 Ricœur, 'Débat', *Esprit*, 7–8 (1988), 305–314, 308.
- 12 Ricœur, 'L'identité narrative', *Esprit* 7–8 (1988), 295–304, 295.
- 13 Ricœur, 'L'identité narrative', *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 95: 221 (1991), 35–47, 42.
- 14 Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, (Paris, Seuil, 1990). *Oneself as Another* translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1992). Hereafter cited as *OA*.
- 15 Ricœur, 'L'identité narrative', *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, vol. 95, 221 (1991) 35–47, 41.
- 16 Nathalie Sarraute, *Enfance* (Paris, Gallimard, Collection Folio, 1983).
- 17 Ricœur, *Réflexion faite: autobiographie intellectuelle* (Paris, Éditions Esprit, 1995), 11. My translation.
- 18 Roland Barthes, 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits' in *Poétique du récit*, (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, collections Points, 1977), 7–57, 40.