Reading People, Reading Plots
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Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative

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for Katie and Michael,
two characters who wonderfully complicate
the progression of my life
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Preface

A myth of origin and evolution: In the beginning, I set out to write a book about character in narrative. It seemed to me that from Henry James through E. M. Forster and Walter J. Harvey down to most recent narratologists, the study of character had always gotten too mixed up with discussions of plot or action (the what-is-character-but-the-determination-of-incident? - what-is-incident-but-the-illustration-of-character? syndrome). I intended to isolate the element, analyze its nature, and report my findings to a breathlessly waiting critical world. As the title of this book indicates, however, I too have ended by mixing up the study of character with the study of plot—what is here called progression. I have ended this way, of course, because the events of the middle of my story pushed me in this direction. The more I tried to isolate the species, the more I became convinced that the task was impossible: the only way to capture the species' dazzling variety was to link it to the chief influence on that variety—the larger context of the whole narrative created by the progression.

Once I adopted a double focus on character and progression, the study also became implicated in many other kinds of questions about the interpretation of narrative—questions about thematizing, audience, cultural codes, narrative structure, and resistant reading. Since virtually all these questions applied to every narrative I would treat, and since my conviction about the variety of character required me to treat numerous narratives, I could not reach the end of my story until I found some means to balance the investigation of the various questions against the demands of treating the numerous narratives. I found my way to a (re)solution through a strategy for managing the progression of my own argument.

The introduction seeks to acquaint the reader with the main principles of my rhetorical approach to narrative and to explain the various terms that I employ to discuss character and progression. The
chapters in the main body of this study then take on a double task: each investigates a question about the relation between character and progression in a specific narrative, and each explores the connections among that question, my proposed answer, and a broader theoretical issue in the interpretation of narrative. Thus, for example, Chapter 1 looks at character and progression in *1984* and *Pride and Prejudice* in connection with an orthodox neo-Aristotelean attack on thematic interpretations, while Chapter 6 examines those elements of *A Farewell to Arms* in connection with the feminist critique of the novel presented by Judith Fetterley. There are two features of this organizational schema that have especially important consequences for the progression of the whole argument. (1) Some concepts, e.g., those about the multiple audiences of narrative, that are employed early on without much comment get examined at some length in later chapters. (2) The later chapters not only build on the work of the early chapters but they also continually recontextualize the conclusions of those early chapters.

As a result, the later explorations frequently have implications for the earlier ones. For example, after the theoretical discussion of progression in Chapter 4, there is a lot more to say about the progression of *Pride and Prejudice* than I say in Chapter 1; similarly, after the discussion of evaluating character in Chapter 6, there is a lot more to say about every narrative I examine. In order not to overtax the patience of my reader, however, I typically press on with the forward movement of the argument rather than repeatedly circling back to supplement discussions that purport to have closure if not completeness. In other words, although many of the argumentative strands of the earlier chapters are picked up in the later ones, numerous retrospective implications of the later ones are left as implications. Still, the recontextualizing effect of that forward progression is designed to reinforce one of the implicit claims of the whole study: the rhetorical transactions offered by sophisticated narratives have a complexity that many of our existing interpretive practices fail to recognize.

This last claim is closely related to a feature of the argument that is very much in evidence from the outset: this study employs a lot of terms and distinctions—some original with me, some not—as it goes about its work. I am not yet in Gérard Genette’s league as a coiner of appropriately high-sounding, scientific, and expensive terms—a “mimetic function” or a “local instability” cannot even afford the entry fee to compete in the same league as a “homodiegetic narrator” or a “heterodiegetic analepsis”—but I am aware that at times my more humble inventory may itself seem overstocked. The apparent grounds for prosecution, however, are also the grounds of my defense: when I try to shave the terminological beastie with a razor bor-
rowed from Ockham, I find it to be more clean and smooth than shaggy and rough. The defense rests, in other words, on the claim that analytical entities are not multiplied beyond necessity but are produced by the task of doing justice to the complex rhetorical transactions offered by skilfully told narratives.

I have called this narrative of origin and evolution a myth partly because it omits so much of the lived version of the story. It leaves out the indispensable help of numerous students at the Ohio State University who helped me work out my ideas about character and progression, especially Jane Zinman, Steve Jensen, Amy Goodwin, and Steve Busonik; it fails to acknowledge the provocation and good advice of colleagues at Ohio State and elsewhere who read all or parts of the manuscript at different points, especially Ralph Rader, Walter Davis, David Riede, David Richter, and Peter Rabinowitz. My simplified narrative does not account for the important influence of my friend, Jamie Barlowe Kayes, who listened and constructively responded to my harangues about most of what I say here and who in turn instructively harangued me about Fowles. The myth shamelessly neglects the pervasive influence on my thinking exerted by my colleague, James Battersby, who responded to numerous versions of my ideas with wisdom, generosity, and an active pencil, and who has engaged me in a decade-long conversation about literature, interpretation, and critical argument from which I have profited immensely. To all of these people, I want to express my gratitude for making the story of this project too complicated to narrate. The greatest omission in the myth is the role of Betty Menaghan, my partner in love and logistics, who directly and indirectly shared—and felt—all the progressions and regressions of the writing (and the waiting). To her, I am grateful beyond words—even beyond narrative.
