

FROM MARY LOUISE PRATT, TOWARD A SPEECH ACT
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Natural Narrative

What Is "Ordinary Language" Really Like?

Let us only listen to common
 people's speech!
 What a lot of automatically
 occurring slips of the tongue
 there are, of barbarisms,
 solecisms, of anacoluthons!

VLADÍMIR SKALIČKA, "The
 Need for a Linguistics
 of 'La parole' "

Il se fait plus de figures en
 un jour de Halles qu'en un
 mois d'Académie.
 French Proverb

In the previous chapter, I tried to show that structural poetics for the most part never tested their assumptions about ordinary language at all and that those who do try to account for poetic phenomena in extraliterary data draw from that data conclusions (like the latency/patency distinction) that support the assumptions of their predecessors but that the data themselves do not bear out. I propose to turn now to the work of a linguist who has approached

the aesthetics of nonliterary discourse from outside poetics and whose results provide a vital corrective to the views of "ordinary language" arising from structural poetics. I refer to the eminent American sociolinguist William Labov, whose work on the oral narrative of personal experience may well be the only body of data-based research dealing with aesthetically structured discourse which is not, by anybody's definition, literature.

Much of Labov's research over the past ten years has been devoted to documenting dialect variations in American English and above all to exploring the ways in which those divisions reflect and reinforce a speaker's place in the class hierarchy of the larger speech community. He has concentrated especially on those dialects of American English considered by most Americans to be not only nonstandard but also substandard. In his first book, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (1966), Labov showed that phonological variation in the speech of New Yorkers could not be systematically specified independently of the social pressures acting on the speakers in the given speech situation. This was an important realization for linguistics since it provided support for building information about social context into the grammar.

Labov's interest in oral narrative stems mainly from a study of Black English Vernacular (BEV), "that relatively uniform dialect spoken by the majority of black youth in most parts of the United States today, especially in the inner city areas" (Labov, 1972:xiii). The project, which resulted in the volume of essays titled *Language in the Inner City* (1972), was originally undertaken to find out whether dialect differences had anything to do with the consistent reading problems of inner city black children. It was conducted in Harlem. As he analyzed the phonological and grammatical differences between BEV and Standard English, Labov made an important observation:

The major reading problems did not stem from structural interference in any simple sense. . . . The major causes of reading fail-

ure are political and cultural conflicts in the classroom, and dialect differences are important because they are symbols of this conflict. We must then understand the way in which the vernacular culture uses language and how verbal skills develop in this culture. (Labov, 1972:xiv)

BEV speakers had trouble reading not because they lacked verbal skills (the contrary proved to be the case) but because the verbal skills they had were of no use in school. All this seems a far cry from aesthetics, and it is true that Labov's interest in "verbal art" rose from his research quite indirectly. I quote here Labov's own description of this development. The passage is long but worthwhile as an introduction to my own discussion to follow:

In the course of our studies of vernacular language, we have developed a number of devices to overcome the constraints of the face-to-face interview and obtain large bodies of tape-recorded casual speech. The most effective of these techniques produce *narratives of personal experience*, in which the speaker becomes deeply involved in rehearsing or even reliving events of his past. The "Danger of Death" question is the prototype and still the most generally used: at a certain point in the conversation, the interviewer asks, "Were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed, where you said to yourself—'This is it'?" In the section of our interview schedule that deals with fights, we ask "Were you ever in a fight with a guy bigger than you?" When the subject says "Yes" we pause and then ask simply, "What happened?" The narratives that we have obtained by such methods form a large body of data on comparative verbal skills, ranging across age levels, classes and ethnic groups. Because they occur in response to a specific stimulus in the interview situation, they are not free of the interactive effect of the outside observer. The form they take is in fact typical of discourse directed to someone outside of the immediate peer group of the speaker. But because the experience and emotions involved here form an important part of the speaker's biography, he seems to undergo a partial reliving of that experience, and he is no longer

free to monitor his own speech as he normally does in face-to-face interviews. (1972:354–55)

Labov was fascinated by the high degree of verbal virtuosity displayed by many of his informants in these narratives and by the high value placed on that virtuosity by the vernacular speech communities. This interest and the fact that, despite cultural differences, the narratives had great structural similarities led him to attempt a structural description of the oral narrative of personal experience as a speech act. The results of his study are found in two papers, "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience" (1967), written in collaboration with Joshua Waletzky, and "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax," in *Language in the Inner City*. (Unless otherwise specified, all subsequent references are to the latter article.) Before presenting Labov's analysis of these narratives, let me offer two contrasting examples, both taken from Labov's data. The first is a story told by a middle-aged white male speaker from Martha's Vineyard:

(1)

I never believed a whole lot in licking. I was never—
with my children, and I never—when it was with my animals,
dogs; I never licked a dog, I never had to. A dog knew
what I meant; when I hollered at a dog, he knew the—what
5 I meant. I could—I had dogs that could do everything
but talk. And by gorry, sir, I never licked 'em.

I never come nearer bootin' a dog in my life. I
had a dog—he was a wonderful retriever, but as I say he
could do everything but talk. I could waif him that way,
10 I could waif him on, I could waif him anywhere. If I
shot a crippled duck he went after it; he didn't see it
in the water, he'd always turn around look at me, and I'd
waif him over there, if the duck was there, or if it was
on the other side of where we're on, I could waif him
15 straight ahead, and he'd turn and he'd go. If he didn't
see me, he'd turn around, he'd look at me, and I'd keep
a-waifin' him on. And he'd finally catch sight of him,

and the minute he did, you know, he would beeline and get that duck.

- 20 I was gunnin' one night with that dog—we had to use live decoys in those days—a fellow named Jack Bumpus was with me; I was over at a place called Deep Bottom, darker than pitch. And—uh—heard a quackin' off shore. And I said to Jack, "keep quiet. There's one comin' in."
- 25 And uh—finally Jack said to me, "I think I see 'im." I said, "Give 'im a gun. Give 'im a gun. Try it."

- So he shot, and this duck went for the shore with his wings a-goin' like that for the shore. Went up on the shore. Well this dog never lost a crippled duck on shore,
- 30 he'd take a track just the same as a hound would take a rabbit track. And I sent him over. I said, "Go ahead."

- So he went over there. And—gone a while and come back and he didn't have the duck. And that was unusual—I said, "You git back there and get that duck!" And he
- 35 went back there; and he stayed a little while longer, longer than he did the first time, and he come back and he didn't have the duck.

- And I never come nearer shootin' a dog. By gorry, I come pretty near. "You git back there and get that
- 40 duck!" And that dog went back there, and he didn't come back. And he didn't come back. By gorry, we went over there—I walked over there, and here he was; one of my tame ducks that I had tethered out there had got the strap off her leg, and had gone out there, and when
- 45 this fellah shot he hadn't hit the duck. The duck came to the shore, he hadn't hit the duck; but the duck was scared and come for the shore. My dog was over there, and he had his paw right on top of that duck, holdin' him down just as tight as could be, and—
- 50 by gorry, boy, I patted that dog, I'll tell you if I had ever walloped that dog I'd have felt some bad. He knew more 'n I did; the dog knew more than I did. He knew that was that tame duck; he wasn't gonna pick him up in his mouth and bring him, you know. He was just
- 55 holdin' him right down on the ground.

(Labov, 1967:14-15)

The second is a fight story told by a black adolescent male from Harlem referred to as Larry:

(2)

- An' then, three weeks ago I had a fight with this other dude outside. He got mad 'cause I wouldn't give him a cigarette Ain't that a bitch? (Oh yeah?)
- Yeah, you know, I was sittin' on the corner an' shit, smokin' my cigarette, you know. I was high, an' shit. He walked over to me:
- "Can I have a cigarette?"
- He was a little taller than me, but not that much. I said: "I ain't got no more, man."
- 10 'Cause, you know, all I had was one left. An' I ain't gon' give up my last cigarette unless I got some more. So I said: "I don't have no more, man."
- So he, you know, dug on the pack, 'cause the pack was in my pocket. So he said:
- 15 "Eh, man, I can't get a cigarette, man? I mean—I mean we supposed to be brothers, an' shit."
- So I say:
- "Yeah, well, you know, man, all I got is one, you dig it?"
- An' I won't give up my las' one to nobody. So you know, the
- 20 dude, he looks at me, an' he—I 'on' know—he jus' thought he gon' rough that motherfucker up. He said:
- "I can't get a cigarette."
- I said:
- "Tha's what I said, my man."
- 25 You know, so he said:
- "What you supposed to be *bad* an' shit?"
- So I said:
- "Look here, my man, I don't think I'm bad, you understand? But I mean, you know, if I had it, you could git it. I like
- 30 to see you with it, you dig it? But the sad part about it, you got to do without it. That's all, my man."
- So the dude, he 'on' to pushin' me, man.
- (Oh, he pushed you?)
- An' why he do that? *Everytime somebody fuck with me, why*

- 35 they do it? I put that cigarette down, an' boy let me tell you. I
beat the shit outa that motherfucker. I tried to *kill* 'im—over
one cigarette! I tried to *kill* 'im. Square business! After I got
through stompin' him in the face, man, you know, all of a
sudden I went crazy! I jus' went crazy. An' I jus' wouldn't stop
40 hittin' the motherfucker. Dig, it, I couldn't stop hittin'
'im, man, till the teacher pulled me off o' him. An' guess
what? After all that I gave the dude the cigarette, after
all that. Ain't that a bitch?
(How come you gave 'im the cigarette?)
45 I 'on' know. I jus' gave it to him. An' he smoked it, too!
(Labov, 1972:356-58)

Labov's (1972) analysis of these "natural narratives," as they are commonly called, will seem self-evident to literary critics, and it is for precisely this reason that I want to outline it here. Labov defines narrative as:

one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred. . . . Within this conception of narrative, we can define a *minimal narrative* as a sequence of two clauses which are *temporally ordered*: that is, a change in their order will result in a change in the temporal sequence of the original semantic interpretation. (p. 360)

Narrative clauses are clauses with a simple preterite verb or, in some styles, a verb in the simple present. Here is an adult "danger of death" narrative which consists of four such ordered clauses: (This and all further examples in this chapter are taken from Labov's data.)

- (3) Well, this person had a little too much to drink and he attacked me and the friend came in and she stopped it.

Narratives like (3), which consist only of narrative clauses, are not

very interesting, nor are they very common. A fully developed natural narrative, according to Labov, is made up of the following sections:

1. abstract
2. orientation
3. complicating action
4. evaluation
5. result or resolution
6. coda

"A complete narrative," he concludes, "begins with an orientation, proceeds to the complicating action, is suspended at the focus of evaluation before the resolution, concludes with the resolution, and returns the listener to the present time with the coda" (p. 369). I shall summarize briefly Labov's description of the six sections:

Complicating action and *resolution* are, of course, the core of the narrative. The former begins with the first narrative clause in the speech act; the latter usually ends with the last such clause.

The *abstract* is a short (usually one or two sentence) summary of the story that narrators generally provide before recounting the story proper. The abstract "encapsulates the point of the story." In narrative (1) above, the single sentence "I never come nearer bootin' a dog in my life" has this function; in narrative (2), lines 1-2 are the abstract.

The *orientation* serves to "identify in some way the time, place, persons, and their activity or situation" and occurs immediately before the first narrative clause, as a rule. The orientation often includes "an elaborate portrait of the main character" as in (1), whose narrator describes at length the prowess of his retriever before going on to the situation orientation (11. 20-22). In (2), some information is already available in the abstract, and the orientation section (11. 4-5) gives a more detailed picture of the situation. Syntactically, orientations often contain many past progressive verbs "sketch-

ing the kind of thing that was going on before the first event of the narrative occurred or during the entire episode."

The *coda's* general function is to "close off the sequence of complicating actions and indicate that none of the events that followed were important to the narrative." In addition to this mechanical function, "a good coda . . . leaves the listener with a feeling of satisfaction and completeness that matters have been rounded off and accounted for." Labov notes a number of forms codas can take. Sometimes they consist of a single sentence like "And that was that"; sometimes they "bring the narrator and the listener back to the point at which they entered the narrative," as does this coda, which closes out a story in which the teller was saved from drowning:

- (4) And you know, that man who picked me out of the water?
He's a detective in Union City, and I see him every now
and again.

and this coda to a fight story:

- (5) Ever since then I haven't seen the guy 'cause I quit. I quit,
you know. No more problems.

In narrative (1) above, the narrative proper ends at "just as tight as could be" (1. 49) and the coda, starting with a pause and the phrase "by gorry," echoes the abstract ("If I had ever walloped. . .") and provides an additional explication and recapitulation of the story's climax. In narrative (2), the fight story ends with the teacher's intervention, and the coda, beginning with "Guess what?" (1. 41), contains additional information about the ultimate effects of the events, as in (5) above. The narrator of (2), like that of (1), echoes the abstract in the coda, here by repeating the line "Ain't that a bitch?"

Evaluation is considered by Labov to be "perhaps the most important element in addition to the basic narrative clause." By evaluation, Labov means "the means used by the narrator to indicate the

point of the narrative, its *raison d'être*: why it was told and what the narrator was getting at." He elaborates:

There are many ways to tell the same story, to make very different points, or to make no point at all. Pointless stories are met (in English) with the withering rejoinder, "So what?" Every good narrator is continually warding off this question; when his narrative is over, it should be unthinkable for a bystander to say, "So what?" Instead, the appropriate remark would be "He did?" or similar means of registering the reportable character of the events of the narrative. (p. 366)

To identify the evaluative portion of a narrative, it is necessary to know why this narrative—or any narrative—is felt to be tellable; in other words, why the events of the narrative are reportable. Most of the narratives cited here concern matters that are always reportable: danger of death or of physical injury. These matters occupy a high place on an unspoken permanent agenda. . . . The narrators of most of these stories were under social pressure to show that the events involved were truly dangerous and unusual, or that someone else really broke the normal rules in an outrageous and reportable way. Evaluative devices say to us: this was terrifying, dangerous, weird, wild, crazy; or amusing, hilarious and wonderful; more generally, that it was strange, uncommon, or unusual—that is, worth reporting. (p. 371)

The evaluation of a natural narrative is usually concentrated in one section immediately preceding the resolution. However, as Labov notes, evaluative devices are generally strung throughout the entire narrative, forming what he calls "a secondary structure." Labov's discussion of evaluation is long, and I shall only partially summarize here his preliminary typology of the evaluative devices used by his informants. Again, the examples are Labov's.

A. *Evaluative commentary*

The narrator interrupts the progress of the narrative with a state-

ment reaffirming the tellability of the story or assessing the situation. Such commentary may be

1. *External*: The narrator himself asserts the point of the story as in statements like "it was quite an experience" or "it was the strangest feeling" and so on.

2. *Internal*: The evaluative statements are embedded in the story. The narrator may

a. present the statement as having occurred to him at the time in the story, e.g., "I just closed my eyes, I said, 'O my God, Here it is!'"

b. present the evaluation as statements addressed by himself to another character. Larry's evaluation, addressed (in rhymed couplets, no less) to his adversary (11. 28-31) is an example of this type.

c. attribute evaluative remarks to a witness or neutral observer in the story as in this example, referring to a knife wound: "And the doctor says, 'Just about this much more' he says, 'and you'd a been dead!'"

(a) to (c), you will notice, involve progressively deeper embedding of the evaluation in the story. As Labov notes, the more deeply embedded the evaluation, the more effective it is.

B. *Sentence-internal evaluation devices*

1. *Intensifiers*: These are devices superimposed or added onto the basic narrative syntax without affecting the unmarked (simple past) form of the narrative verb phrase. Examples:

a. gestures.

b. expressive phonology such as lengthened vowels ("a loooong time").

c. repetition; there are many examples in (1) and (2).

d. ritual interjections like "Well, sir," "By gorry," and so on.

2. *Comparators*: These are devices which involve the use of some verb phrase construction other than the simple past of the narrative clause. They include negatives, futures, modals, questions, commands, comparatives, and others.

The category called *Comparators* merits some explanation. Labov observed that complex auxiliary constructions tended to be concentrated in the evaluation sections of natural narratives, and he concluded upon analysis that most, if not all, verb constructions that depart from the simple past tense in natural narrative can be shown to be performing an evaluative role. The Comparators do so by referring to hypothetical events that are then compared to the observed events. Comparators, in other words, "draw upon a cognitive background considerably richer than the set of events which were observed." Negatives, for example, talk about what didn't happen but could have; futures allude to what could happen but hasn't yet; modals refer to hypothetical events; questions and commands are attempts to produce future events and function often as disguised threats in narratives, implying future consequences (see, for example, narrative (2) above). Generally speaking "a comparator moves away from the line of narrative events to consider unrealized possibilities and compare them with events that did occur." Labov uses the following evaluation taken from a schoolboy's narrative of a fight with "the baddest girl in the neighborhood" to exemplify the evaluative role played by complex auxiliary structures:

- (6) So I says to myself, "There's *gonna* be times my mother won't give me money, because we're a poor family and I *can't* take this every time she *don't* give me any money." So I say, "Well, I just *gotta* fight this girl. She *gonna* hafta whup me. I hope she *don't* whup me (emphasis mine)."

The passage contains four negatives, four futures, and three modals, all involving speculation about hypothetical events or situations

which are compared to the present state of affairs. In the resolution of the story which follows, the simple narrative syntax is restored:

- (7) I hit the girl, powww! I put something on it, I win the fight.

Larry's fight narrative above (11.7-12 and elsewhere) is similarly organized. The grammatical comparative of course always performs an evaluative function, as do similes and metaphors. Interestingly, such overt comparisons are found mainly in the syntax of older, more highly skilled narrators like that of (1) (see for example, 11.7, 30, 52).

One of the most striking aspects of Labov's model, as I suggested earlier, is its self-evidence. I think it is self-evident for two reasons. First, the oral narrative of personal experience is a speech act exceedingly familiar to us all, regardless of what dialect we speak. We all spend enormous amounts of conversational time exchanging anecdotes, though these may only occasionally involve fights or danger of death. Most speakers of English have a distinctive speech style for this type of narration with special intonation and in many cases special grammatical constructions not used in other contexts.¹ We are all perfectly aware of the "unspoken agenda" by which we assess an experience's tellability. We know that anecdotes, like novels, are expected to have endings. We know that for an anecdote

1. For example, adverbial constructions like "down we fell" or "over it went" are apparently exclusively narrative. In many languages, including North American English, speakers often switch to the present tense for narration or alternate between present and simple past, as in "so yesterday he comes into my office and I told him he was fired." Many North American English dialects use irregular first person forms like "I says," "I comes," "I runs" exclusively for narration. Needless to say, these phenomena are much in need of study, but their very existence strongly supports the hypothesis that, independent of any literary considerations, narration must be identified as a speech act in its own right.

to be successful, we must introduce it into the conversation in an appropriate way, provide our audience with the necessary background information, keep the point of the story in view at all times, and so on. And as with any speech situation, literary or otherwise, we form firm judgments all the time about how "good" an anecdote was and how well it was brought off by its teller; in fact, we are expected to express this judgment as soon as an anecdote ends. We recognize narrative expertise when we hear it, and when narrative speech acts fail, we can almost always say why: the experience was trivial, the teller longwinded, or we "missed the point." Should anyone be in doubt about any of these points, I would urge him to spend an hour some day listening to real "everyday language," watching for narratives and for people's responses to them.

The second reason Labov's analysis seems so obvious is that his subdivision of the narrative into six main components corresponds very closely indeed to the kind of organization we are traditionally taught to observe in narrative literature. Every high school student knows that novels and plays have an introduction, a gradual rising action, a climax followed by a swift dénouement and resolution with the option of an epilogue at the end. That novels and natural narratives both have a structurally similar "narrative core" is not so surprising, since both are attempts to render experience. But their similarities go beyond the minimal narrativity of causal and chronological sequence on which recent structural analysis has focused its attention.

Like natural narratives, novels² as a rule have an orientation sec-

2. Here and throughout, I use the term "novel" as a convenient short form for literary narrative in general, that is, for the class of literary utterances which include novels, novellas, short stories, and narrative poems. Obviously, the structural similarities I am pointing out between natural narratives and novels do not hold for all novels, especially today. Nevertheless, as I point out in chapters five and six, the label "novel" always entitles us to bring to bear on a novel many of the same expectations we bring to bear on natural narratives.

tion which precedes their first narrative clause and serves to identify the time, place, and opening situation. Here is an example, the opening passage of Henry Miller's *Plexus* (1963):

In her tight-fitting Persian dress, with turban to match, she looked ravishing. Spring had come and she had donned a pair of long gloves and a beautiful taupe fur slung carelessly about her full, columnar neck. We had chosen Brooklyn Heights in which to search for an apartment, thinking to get as far away as possible from everyone we knew, particularly from Kronski and Arthur Raymond. Ulric was the only one to whom we intended giving our new address. It was to be a genuine "*vita nuova*" for us, free of intrusions from the outside world.

The day we set out to look for our little love nest we were radiantly happy. Each time we came to a vestibule and pushed the doorbell I put my arms around her and kissed her again and again. Her dress fitted like a sheath. She never looked more tempting. Occasionally the door opened on us before we had a chance to unlock. Sometimes we were requested to produce the wedding ring or else the marriage license.

Towards evening we encountered a broad-minded, warm-hearted Southern woman who seemed to take to us immediately.

I trust most readers find nothing particularly unusual about this passage as a way of beginning a novel. Except for the fact that its style is that of written discourse, it also has a great deal in common with the way natural narratives begin. Miller's novel opens with two paragraphs of orientation; a new paragraph is used to introduce the book's first narrative clause ("we encountered"). The first paragraph of orientation gives us the place (Brooklyn Heights), the season (spring), the activity underway (looking for an apartment), and the significance of that activity to the participants (the *vita nuova*). It also gives a portrait of the main character. The second paragraph narrows the time scope to a single day and describes in general terms the activities immediately preceding the first complicating action. Though this orientation does not furnish the ravish-

ing woman's name or any explicit information about the narrator or any of the other people mentioned, it allows (and intends) us to deduce that the narrator is a man who is in love with the ravishing woman; his use of the phrase *vita nuova* tells us he is probably a man with a humanistic education.

As this passage suggests, it is common in novels for the orientation to be set apart by a paragraph or a space in the text, or even to be made an independent textual unit such as a prologue, an opening chapter, or a preface. Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878), for example, opens with an orientation chapter titled "A Face on Which Time Makes but Little Impression" and devoted exclusively to a description of the landscape of Egdon Heath on "a Saturday afternoon in November." The human characters and complicating action do not arrive until the second chapter, aptly titled "Humanity Appears Upon the Scene, Hand in Hand with Trouble."

Because their length is less limited than in natural narratives, the orientations of novels can vary widely in length and scope. The orientation of George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1861), for example, is extremely complex. It begins with a very general description:

In the days when the spinning-wheels hummed busily in the farmhouses—and even great ladies, clothed in silk and thread-lace had their toy spinning-wheels of polished oak—there might be seen in districts far away among the lanes, or deep in the bosom of the hills, certain pallid undersized men, who, by the side of the brawny country-folk, looked like the remnants of a disinherited race.

Only gradually does the orientation focus in on a specific setting (the village of Raveloe), time ("the early days of this century"), and main character (Silas Marner). The portrait of Marner himself fills several pages and includes a flashback, itself a complete narrative, used to explain how Marner came to Raveloe. The second

chapter of the novel devotes several pages to the description of Raveloe and Marner's life there, and finally, nearly twenty pages into the book, the narrative proper begins: "About this time an incident happened which seemed to open a possibility of some fellowship with his neighbours."

In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), by contrast, the orientation begins much closer to the story:

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner (Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early) the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that further out-door exercise was now out of the question.

I was glad of it: I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse, and humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed.

The first narrative clause in this novel occurs in the fourth paragraph (" 'What does Bessie say I have done?' *I asked*" [emphasis mine].) The orientation of *Jane Eyre* is not only shorter than that of *Silas Marner* but also, like the orientation of *Plexus*, it is a good deal less complete. Apart from what this orientation tells us directly, we are able to deduce that the "I" of the passage is a child, who is apparently staying with a family not his or her own and who is very unhappy about it. Nevertheless, a good deal of information is lacking. In logical terms, the speaker of this passage has presupposed that he shares a good deal more information with his hearer than he actually does. This is a common mistake made by natural narrators. In novels, however, we do not perceive it as a mistake. Adult readers are fully accustomed to dealing with this sort of beginning. In fact, we even have a special term for them, the *in medias res* opening. Notice though, that the fact that we have a special term for literary

narratives which begin without complete or explicit orientation suggests that we perceive such narratives to be *marked* with respect to fully oriented narrative.³ We do not have a special term for narrative beginnings like that of *Silas Marner*. Intuition bears out such a claim. Readers of *Plexus* and *Jane Eyre* take it that the author has intentionally avoided a complete and explicit orientation section. The fact that we respond this way further suggests that complete and explicit orientation is the unmarked or expected case for novels as well as for natural narratives.

The fact that a novel begins *in medias res* does not mean that it is not oriented at all with respect to the reader. It means only that some or all of the orientative information is interwoven with the narrative information or is implied rather than asserted. Consider the opening of Albert Camus's novel *The Fall* (1956):

May I, *monsieur*, offer my services without running the risk of intruding? I fear you may not be able to make yourself understood by the worthy ape who presides over the fate of this establishment. In fact, he speaks nothing but Dutch. Unless you authorize me to plead your case, he will not guess that you want gin.

In spite of the complete absence of an orientation section, the reader of this novel knows by the third sentence that one and probably both of the characters are adult males, that they have no prior acquaintance, that the setting is a bar, probably in a Dutch-speaking country, in which case one or both of the characters is a foreigner. Moreover, the reader knows Camus intends him to draw these in-

3. The distinction between the "marked" and "unmarked" case of a phenomenon is used in linguistic analysis to distinguish between the standard or expected member of a paradigm and the nonstandard or noncanonic case: "It is frequently the case that of two units in contrast . . . one will be positive or *marked* the other being neutral or *unmarked*. . . . When this situation holds, it is usually the case that the unmarked form is more general in sense or has a wider distribution than the marked form." (Lyons, 1969:79). For example, in English nouns, the plural is *marked* by *s*, the singular being the *unmarked* case.

ferences. In other words, the fact that his text has no orientation section does not mean that Camus did not intend to orient his narrative. Though he intends to momentarily disorient his reader, he has carefully provided him with enough information to orient the goings-on by deduction. And lest the reader find the disorientation too uncomfortable, Camus obligingly corroborates some of the deductions a few lines later, when he has the still unidentified speaker tell his still unidentified interlocutor that "his [the bartender's] business consists in entertaining sailors of all nationalities in this Amsterdam bar, which for that matter he named—no one knows why—*Mexico City*."

Similarly, readers of *Plexus* and *Jane Eyre* legitimately assume that in one way or another Miller and Brontë will provide them in short order with the further information they need. As I shall be discussing in the next few chapters, there are very specific reasons why this assumption is a safe one in a literary context and a much less safe one in a spontaneous speech context and why, in consequence, authors of literary works are much freer than natural narrators to make use of delayed or inexplicit orientation. The point to be made here is that both natural and literary narrators are considered to be under the same obligation to orient their narrative and that in the unmarked case, the orientation takes the same form in both types.

A novel's coda may consist of the single word "Fin" or some typographical symbol such as three asterisks, which, like Labov's sentence, "And that was that," merely signals the end of the narrative and the end of the speech act. Novels of course do not need such a verbal or typographical indication, since the end of the text visibly and palpably signals the end of the story (unless other volumes follow, in which case this fact must be made clear at the end of the text). Frequently, however, novels have elaborate codas that, like those of natural narratives, explain, recapitulate, and evaluate the story's outcome, inform us of the ultimate consequences of the

story, provide supplemental narrative information, extend the story into the future so as to "bring the narrator and the listener back to the point at which they entered the narrative," and generally "leave the listener with a feeling of satisfaction and completeness that matters have been rounded off and accounted for" (Labov, 1972: 365). *Jane Eyre* provides us with an example typical of many mid-nineteenth-century novels. In the second to last chapter of the book, Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester are at last reunited, and the chapter's final sentence, "We entered the wood and wended homeward," signals the resolution of the plot. The final chapter of the book is an elaborate coda, beginning with the sentence, "Reader, I married him." Since neither the wedding itself nor the events leading up to it are described, the reader understands that this sentence is intended to provide supplemental information about the ultimate effects of the resolution, like the lines "An' guess what? After all that I gave the dude the cigarette" in the coda of narrative (2) above. *Jane Eyre* then goes on to tell us how her union with Mr. Rochester was evaluated by the story's other main characters, information designed to leave us as happy with the outcome as Jane herself is. Then we read:

My tale draws to its close: one word respecting my experience of married life, and one brief glance at the fortunes of those whose names have most frequently recurred in this narrative, and I have done.

I have now been married ten years.

As the verb aspect indicates ("have been married," not "had been" or "was"), the narrator is now speaking from the point of view of her own present time, having brought the reader "back to the point at which they entered the narrative" as do the natural narrative codas quoted in (4) and (5) above. From this time perspective, Jane Eyre sketches the ultimate fates of the main characters. Finally, to leave her readers with the strongest possible "feeling of satisfaction

that matters have been rounded off and accounted for," she ends the book on a decidedly conclusive note by quoting St. John River's words:

"My master," he says, "has forewarned me. Daily he announces more distinctly,—'Surely I come quickly!' and hourly I more eagerly respond,—'Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!'"

And that, for Jane Eyre, is that.

The coda of Herman Melville's story "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853) is likewise explicitly set off from the narrative resolution:

"His dinner is ready. Won't he dine today, either? Or does he live without dining?"

"Lives without dining," said I, and closed the eyes.

"Eh!—He's asleep, ain't he?"

"With kings and counsellors," murmured I.

There would seem little need for proceeding further in this history. Imagination will readily supply the meagre recital of poor Bartleby's interment. But ere parting with the reader, let me say, that if this little narrative has sufficiently interested him, to awaken curiosity as to who Bartleby was, and what manner of life he led prior to the present narrator's making his acquaintance, I can only reply, that in such curiosity I fully share—but am wholly unable to gratify it. Yet here I hardly know whether I should divulge one little item of rumour, which came upon my ear a few months after the scrivener's decease.

In this passage, the narrator and a food vendor have just found Bartleby dead, and their dialogue resolves the plot. "Murmured I" is the last narrative clause. The narrator signals the beginning of the coda by leaving a space in the text and taking up a stance outside the story, as Jane Eyre did with the sentence "Reader, I married him." He announces specifically that further narrative detail is unnecessary (something all codas imply anyway) and then offers some additional information (the "little item of rumour") intended to

further our understanding and appreciation of the story. The rumor in question is that Bartleby was once a clerk in a Dead Letter Office. The peculiar relation of such a job to Bartleby's personality gives the narrator the opportunity for further evaluative musings. Finally, to round off the text, he appends a conclusive evaluative statement, "Ah, Bartleby! Ah humanity!" which is reminiscent both of Jane Eyre's finale and of the final "Ain't that a bitch" which concludes narrative (2) above.

As these examples indicate, novelistic codas, like orientations, are often set apart as a textual unit. And as in the codas of natural narratives, they frequently involve a change in temporal perspective (compare Jane Eyre's "I have now been married for ten years" with the coda in (5) above, "Ever since then I haven't seen the guy") and a rhetorical finale. The lengthy coda that makes up the final chapter of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is similarly introduced by a change in temporal perspective, "After two years I remember the rest of that day," and ends with one of literature's most famous summing up: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." The final chapter of *Plexus*, also a coda, has these same features.

Just as novel readers are accustomed to dealing with *in medias res* beginnings, so they easily take in stride novels that have no coda and, in many cases, no plot resolution. We refer to such novels as "open-ended." But here again, the existence of a special term suggests a marked case, and intuition bears out the suggestion. We usually feel a novel without a coda has left us dangling, that the author has deliberately avoided leaving us with the "feeling of satisfaction" he assumes we expect. As with orientations, then, novels in the unmarked case have codas in the same way and for the same reasons as do natural narratives.

At first glance, the abstract of a natural narrative does not seem to have a literary correlate at all. We do not usually think of novels as beginning with a "short summary of the point of the story" just

prior to the orientation. But they do. The abstract of a novel is, minimally, its title, which is given a special page of its own just before the orientation and which is always taken by readers to be a relevant and important clue to what the author considers the main point or theme of his narrative. Titles also serve, of course, as devices for referring to works, and so do the abstracts of natural narratives. When we want to evoke an anecdote, we give an abstract of it. We say things like "tell him about the time you wouldn't give the guy a cigarette" or "what was the one you told about your cousin in Tokyo?" In natural narrative, the abstract often functions as an invitation to the hearer to commit himself to playing the role of narrative audience. Abstracts like "you know, the very same thing happened to me once in Mexico" are intended to provoke from the hearers a ritual statement like "You're kidding" or "Oh yeah? What happened?" that ratifies the speaker's request to tell his story. This "Oh yeah? What happened?" response was built into Labov's interviewing technique and appears quite clearly in the opening exchange of narrative (2) above. In the very same way, titles and subtitles in literary works are there to invite people to commit themselves to the audience role. Anyone who has scanned a shelf trying to decide what to read next knows how decisive this invitation is, as does anyone who has been misled by a title. Early novelists, perhaps less sure of their readership, often reiterate this invitation at intervals throughout the book; they divide their text into chapters and head each one up with an abstract of its own. For example, chapter two of Smollett's *Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) is introduced by a tantalizing summary which reads:

I grow up—am hated by my relations—sent to school—neglected by my grandfather—maltreated by my master—seasoned to adversity—I form cabals against the pedant—am debarred access to my grandfather—hunted by his heir—I demolish the Teeth of his Tutor.

The similarity between this now archaic novelistic device and Labov's oral abstracts is impossible to ignore.

Titles and subtitles clearly differ from oral abstracts in that they are definitive. But this difference has to do with the difference between spoken and written discourse, not with a difference in function. It is interesting to note that when a novel title is conventionally abbreviated, the abbreviation often seems to reflect a judgment about what is the central point of the story. Thus Prévost's *Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* has been shortened to *Manon Lescaut* and not *Le Chevalier des Grieux*; *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* became *Pamela*, while *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* became *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.

A novel's abstract can be much more elaborate than a mere title, however. Consider the opening passage of Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (subtitled "A Story of Wall Street"):

I am a rather elderly man. The nature of my avocations for the last thirty years has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written:—I mean the law-copyists or scriveners. I have known very many of them, professionally and privately, and if I pleased, could relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener the strangest I ever saw or heard of. While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, that is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report which will appear in the sequel.

Ere introducing the scrivener, as he first appeared to me, it is

fit I make some mention of myself, my *employés*, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings.

The second paragraph of this passage (and of the story) explicitly announces the beginning of the orientation. The first paragraph is an extension of the abstract. Here, Melville's narrator tells us in more detail why his subject matter is worth our attention (scriveners are "interesting" and "singular," nothing has ever been written about them, and Bartleby is the "strangest" of them all) and why he is particularly and uniquely competent to deal with that subject matter (he has worked in "more than ordinary contact" with scriveners, he is an "original source" about Bartleby, there are no other sources, and so on). He also informs us of his competence to deal with his subject matter in writing. He tells us he could write the biographies of many scriveners and lets us know more generally that he is an educated man, presumably a lawyer, placed high enough to have *employés* and chambers, and a man who reads enough to know that scriveners are an unusual literary subject. Through these remarks, the narrator solidifies the newly made contract between himself and his reader and reassures his audience that they have not erred in giving him their attention. Such remarks are common in natural narratives, too. The stock phrase "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes" is often used by natural narrators in their abstracts to stress their own credibility and the worth of their upcoming story. Similarly, it is perfectly appropriate for a natural narrator to start off with a statement like "well, I've been in a lot of places and I've met a lot of people, but I never knew anybody like this guy in Algiers." Notice that such a remark could be used either as a way of requesting ratification to tell a story (i.e., of inviting the "oh yeah?") or as an extension of the abstract after permission has been granted. In the latter case, its job, as in the Melville passage, is to seal the narrator/audience contract, to reassure the audience the story will be worth their attention, and to build up suspense.

In novels whose speaker is claiming to reproduce a story someone else told him, his abstract almost invariably includes information about how he came by the story and what judgments he makes about its credibility. This is exactly what we do in conversation when we introduce an anecdote we have heard from somebody else and that we narrate in the third person. Third-person anecdotes are always prefaced by statements like "this friend of mine told me the funniest story at hockey practice last night" or "I just got a letter from my cousin. She's on a trip to Japan and wait till I tell you what happened to her in Tokyo." To this we may wish to add assessments of the story's veracity. We can say things like "Crawford said his dad told him something like that happened in the war. I don't know if I believe him, though—he always exaggerates" or "if it hadn't 'a been Bill who told me this, I wouldn't 'a believed it." In a common novelistic variant of this same procedure, the source of the second-hand narrative is not oral but written—manuscripts discovered in a dusty attic, packets of faded letters, and so on. Novels of this type usually open with a preface, fictional editor's note, or foreword explaining the source of the materials, the speaker's assessment of their veracity, and his reasons for making them public. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605), Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1927), and Cela's *Family of Pascual Duarte* (1942) are just a few examples of novels using such devices.

As for Labov's evaluation devices, there is scarcely any need to elaborate on their similarity with those used in literary narrative to control the reader's attitude and point of view. We are all familiar with author interruptions instructing us what judgments we should form (Labov's external evaluation), with the long passages of internal monologue as the hero pauses to reflect on his situation, with the dialogues assessing a state of affairs from several viewpoints, and with the pronouncements of authority figures on whose judgments we are invited to rely. As in Labov's data, it is in novelistic passages like these that we find the highest concentration of comparative

constructions, complex auxiliaries, metaphors, and so on. All the evaluative devices Labov described in natural narrative are there in literary narrative, and they perform the same function in both types. Here are a few examples, presented according to the same classification used earlier (pp. 47–48) to outline the evaluation devices of natural narrative:

A. Evaluative commentary

1. External Speaker comments directly on the events:

Was I very gleeful, settled, content, during the hours I passed in yonder bare, humble school-room this morning and afternoon? Not to deceive myself, I must reply—No; I felt desolate to a degree. I felt—yes, idiot that I am—I felt degraded. (*Jane Eyre*)
I look and I see this thing flying along and mention it to Dave who takes one brief look and says “Ah it’s only the top of a radio tower”—It reminds me of the time I took a mescaline pill and thought an airplane was a flying saucer (a strange story this, a man has to be crazy to write it anyway). (Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur*, 1962)

2. Internal

a. Comments presented as occurring to the speaker at the time:

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him. (*The Great Gatsby*)

b. Comments addressed by the speaker to another character: An example of this type occurs in the passage quoted above from “Bartleby the Scrivener.” The narrator’s remark, “With kings and

counsellors,” addressed to the food vendor, counts as an evaluative comment on Bartleby’s death.

c. Comments attributed to an outside observer or authority figure:

In the open yard before the Rainbow the party of guests were already assembled, though it was still nearly an hour before the appointed feast-time. But by this means they could not only enjoy the slow advent of their pleasure, they had also ample leisure to talk of Silas Marner’s strange history, and arrive by due degrees at the conclusion that he had brought a blessing on himself by acting like a father to a lone motherless child. (*Silas Marner*)

B. Sentence-internal evaluation

1. *Intensifiers* Type (a) is impossible in written discourse. The other three types are exemplified in this passage from *Big Sur*:

But you look up into the sky, bend way back, my God you’re standing directly under that aerial bridge with its thin white line running from rock to rock and witless cars racing across it like dreams! From rock to rock! All the way down the raging coast!

In addition to lexical intensifiers (“way back,” “directly under,” “all the way down”) this passage uses interjection (“my God”) repetition (“from rock to rock”) and expressive phonology, here signaled by the exclamation point.

2. *Comparators* Verb constructions juxtaposing one object or state of affairs with another:

a. Overt comparison:

A less truthful man than him might have been tempted into the subsequent creation of a vision in the form of resurgent memory;

a less sane man might have believed in such a creation; but Silas was both sane and honest. (*Silas Marner*)

b. Negatives, futures, modals:

This was true. But there was this of a kind of pride: he had never tried to enter the big house, even though he believed that if he had, Sutpen would have received him, permitted him. "But I ain't going to give no black nigger the chance to tell me I can't go nowhere," he said to himself. "I ain't even going to give Kernel the chance to have to cuss a nigger on my account." (William Faulkner, "Wash," 1934)

Here, the phrase "never tried" evokes a possible world in which Wash "does try," and the conditional construction which follows ("if he had," etc.) explores possibilities within this hypothetical world. The exploration continues in the character's own mind, in the future tense, where he rejects the possibility of his giving some other character the possibility of denying him the possibility of entering the big house. The entire passage serves to examine the complexity of Wash's situation in the society of the story. Similar devices are used in the *Gatsby* passage quoted above, where the narrator hypothetically reconstructs Gatsby's one-time view of the future (his "dream") and juxtaposes it to the true state of affairs ("he did not know," etc.).

The Faulkner passage just quoted also gives us examples of external evaluation ("This was true" and so on), internal evaluation ("he said to himself"), intensifiers ("even"), and repetition ("received him, permitted him," "give the chance").

In sum, even this brief comparison is enough to show that literary and natural narrative are formally and functionally very much alike. Put another way, all the problems of coherence, chronology, causality, foregrounding, plausibility, selection of detail, tense, point of view, and emotional intensity exist for the natural narrator just as they do for the novelist, and they are confronted and solved (with

greater or lesser success) by speakers of the language every day. These are not rhetorical problems that literary narrators have had to solve by inventing a poetic language; they are problems whose solutions can readily be adapted from spoken to written discourse.⁴

Perhaps the best proof of this pudding is the frequency and ease with which the natural narrative speech situation is reproduced and imitated in narrative literary works. The natural narrative speech situation has provided a framework for innumerable literary works, from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380) through Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste* (1796), James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898), Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), and João Guimarães Rosa's *Devil to Pay in the Backlands* (1956). Conrad and Faulkner are two of the best-known modern writers to use the natural narrative framework. An even greater number of literary narratives contain natural narratives embedded in dialogue and functioning either as digressions, as in Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605) and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760), or as a way of bringing the reader up to date on events which have happened offstage, as in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847).

What is important about the fact that literary narratives can be analyzed in the same way as the short anecdotes scattered throughout our conversation? To begin with, it casts grave doubt on the Formalist and structuralist claims that the language of literature is formally and functionally distinctive. Narratives of personal experience belong to our most casual, ordinary, everyday, conversational, prosaic mode of speech. They are the smallest of small talk. Yet they conform scarcely at all to the views of extraliterary language implied by the poeticicians I have been quoting. In fact, they quite clearly

4. It is worth noting that the two syntactic features taken by Käte Hamburger in *The Logic of Literature* as unique to "epic fictional" discourse, namely verbs of mental process attributed to third persons and present tense adverbials with past tense verbs, also occur in natural narrative, at least in some common narrative styles.

contradict those views. They are entirely amenable to the kinds of analysis the poicians have devised for literary utterances, whereas their composition cannot be explained at all in terms of maximally efficient communication, dummy constructions, or single-layered construction. Even the versification criterion loses force, given the climactic use of rhymed couplets in Narrative (2) (11. 29–31).

If it weren't for the fact that his data are not literature, Labov's analysis could have provided valuable linguistic support for the Formalists' ideas about the aesthetic organization of narrative. Šklovskij's *fabula/sjužet* distinction is very similar to Labov's distinction between narrative core and the "secondary structure" of evaluation on which the effectiveness of the narrative depends. Labov's "intensifiers" and "comparators," which call attention to the subject matter by suspending the progress of the narrative, are all, in structuralist terminology, foregrounding devices. In "Art as Technique" (1917), Šklovskij provides us with a list of such devices when he speaks of "ordinary or negative parallelism, comparison, repetition, balanced structure, hyperbole, the commonly accepted rhetorical figures, and all those methods which emphasize the emotional effect of an expression" (pp. 8–9). It is impossible not to notice the extent to which this list overlaps with Labov's catalogue of evaluation devices. Ordinary and negative parallelism, comparison, and repetition are all specifically mentioned by Labov. Hyperbole is one type of what Labov calls intensifiers; balanced structure is another way of talking about parallelism and repetition. In the later terminology of Jakobson, all parallelisms, comparisons, and repetitions as well as many intensifiers would be described as manifestations of the projection principle. Labov's claim—that the more deeply an evaluation is embedded in the narrative the more successful it is—would be explained by Šklovskij in terms of greater or lesser motivation. In short, if aesthetic objects are, as Šklovskij says, objects created by means of techniques designed to "emphasize the emotional effect of an expression," then natural narratives are such objects, and it

no longer makes any sense to speak of an opposition between the laws of poetic and everyday languages.

Even the later, weakened version of the poetic language hypothesis offered by Mukařovský, Havránek and others cannot account for the oral data. In this version, recall, extraliterary utterances may possess a certain degree of poeticality, but the poetic function will always turn out to be subordinate to some other function; only in literature is the predominant function that of focusing on the message. But except for the fact that they are not literature, natural narratives clearly fall within the category of self-focused messages as described by the structuralists. They are not utterances whose chief function is to transmit information. Oftentimes, the "information" content is given in the abstract, but the story goes on anyway. To declare natural narratives formally and functionally opposed to or even distinct from their literary counterparts is to render them thoroughly inexplicable.

Unless we are foolish enough to claim that people organize their oral anecdotes around patterns they learn from reading literature, we are obliged to draw the more obvious conclusion that the formal similarities between natural narrative and literary narrative derive from the fact that at some level of analysis they are utterances of the same type. And, let me repeat, their identity goes beyond minimal narrativity. From the point of view of structural poetics, this claim implies a redefinition of the relation between literary and nonliterary uses of language. It means that most of the features which poicians believed constituted the "literariness" of novels are not "literary" at all. They occur in novels not because they are novels (i.e., literature) but because they are members of some other more general category of speech acts. In other words, the "poeticality" or aesthetic organization of novels cannot be directly identified with or derived from their "literariness" and cannot, therefore, be used to define them as literature. The same can be said, I believe, of all the devices and features that for the structuralist poicians made up the "poetic

language" underlying poetic utterances.⁵ I will elaborate on this claim shortly, but before leaving Labov behind, I would like to call attention to another point on which his work offers an important corrective to structural poetic analysis.

If, as Labov's data indicate, aesthetic organization does not arise directly from an utterance's being literature, where does it come from? Or, to put it another way, if we cannot use our knowledge that a text is literature to motivate our claims about its poeticality, how are we to motivate such claims? This is obviously a question that did not concern Labov, since he was not dealing with literature at all, but his answer to it is implicit in his methodology. Reconsider narrative (3) quoted above and repeated here for convenience:

- (3) Well, this person had a little too much to drink and he attacked me and the friend came in and she stopped it.

The narrative core is there, but as an anecdote (3) is a horrible failure. It has no abstract, coda, evaluation, or orientation. (The first clause could be construed as either narrative or orientative. Labov treats it as a narrative clause, but even if it is an orientation, it is decidedly rudimentary and colorless.) If we had to assign (3) a place on Stankiewicz's poetic/nonpoetic continuum, we would surely locate it at the nether extreme. It has no "poetic" properties. And that is probably about all Stankiewicz would have to say about this utterance. But there is a good deal more to say. The following dialogue immediately precedes (3) in Labov's interview (A = interviewer, B = informant):

- (8) A: Were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed?

5. I believe this argument can be extended to lyric poetry as well, though I have not undertaken to prove it in this study. Here and throughout, I have chosen to concentrate on narrative discourse, partly because it turns up so frequently as the fly in the poetic language ointment; occasionally, however, I have made suggestions as to how the lyric fits into the schema I am proposing.

B: Yes.

A: What happened?

B: I don't really like to talk about it.

A: Well tell me as much about it as you can?

(Labov, 1967:16)

Labov comments:

The suppression of full narrative structure [in (3)] is plainly motivated by the explicit reluctance of the narrator to identify persons and places. Here as in many of the critical issues discussed below, it is essential to preserve the context of the narrative. Because such originating context is often missing and cannot be reconstructed in traditional folk tales, it is more difficult [i.e., in the case of the folk tale] to relate analysis to the originating function. (Labov, 1967:32)

Narrative (3) does not have any orientation, abstract, coda, or evaluation because the narrator does not *want* to foreground his subject matter; he does not want anyone to focus on his message. He refuses his interlocutor's invitation to tell the story and consents only to answer the latter's question in the most minimal way possible by stating the complicating action and the resolution. Now this information about the context is crucial to our understanding of the way language is functioning in (3), but it is in no way derivable from the intrinsic analysis of (3). The speaker in this case is using language "antipoetically," and though this fact largely determines the syntax of his utterance, it cannot be discovered by observation of the utterance. If this utterance had been addressed, for example, to a policeman called to the scene of the fight, uttered by the straight man in a comedy show, if it were intended ironically, or if it were the abstract of an anecdote to follow, we would have to analyze its function differently. Obviously, there are contexts in which evaluative narrative is not appropriate. Recording secretaries do not interpolate in the minutes their astonishment at what the

chairman said next. Television courtroom dramas like *Perry Mason* find an important source of comic relief in the naive witness who, unaware of the difference between telling a story and testifying, starts out giving his own highly evaluative version of events, only to be coldly advised by the judge to "stick to the facts" or "just answer the question." The situation in (3) is just the reverse: an evaluative narrative is called for, but the speaker does not cooperate.

Structural poetics as a rule frowned on the use of the kind of contextual information we need to analyze (3) correctly—information, that is, about the speaker's intent, his relation to the hearer, his attitude to his utterance, and so on. Such information, being "mentalistic" and not empirically verifiable, belonged to what Eijzenbaum called "speculative aesthetics." In formalist or intrinsic criticism, every statement has to be referred back to "the text itself," the assumption being, of course, that poeticality inheres in the text and that if language is functioning poetically in an utterance, this fact will be evident from the "unordinary" linguistic properties of that utterance.

Labov, by contrast, argues on several occasions that the grammatical surface structure of an utterance is not enough. He warns, for example, that "to identify the evaluative portion of a narrative, it is necessary to know why this narrative—or any narrative—is felt to be tellable" (1972:370). In fight narratives, he points out, tellability depends on an "*unspoken* permanent agenda" of topics (emphasis mine). Certain types of evaluatives cannot be identified by their grammatical properties: "In fight narratives there are many ritual utterances (such as the Black English Vernacular expression 'And there it was') which do not contain any overt markers of emphasis . . . yet a knowledge of the culture tells us that these apparently unexpressive utterances play an evaluative role" (p. 380). Labov's entire analysis is stated not in terms of characteristics utterances manifest but in terms of devices speakers use to produce effects in hearers. He introduces his discussion of comparators by asking a question that is

simple yet more revealing than any we could expect from an intrinsic critic:

Why *should* narratives require syntactic complexity? Why should the auxiliary contain anything but simple preterits and quasi-modals? If the task of the narrator is to tell what happened, these will serve very well. What use has he for questions, or what reason does he have to speak of the future, since he is dealing with past events? Why should the auxiliary contain negatives? What reasons would the narrator have for telling us something did not happen, since he is in the business of telling us what did happen? (p. 360)

Poetics' answer to Labov's "whys" would have been "because it is literature." But of course in Labov's case it isn't literature, and a much more powerful explanation is required. Labov in effect translates the rather opaque question "Has the poetic function dominated the verbal organization of this message?" into the broader and more meaningful questions "What is the speaker trying to do in forming this discourse?" and "What does the hearer do when he receives it?" It is the answers to these questions which motivate Labov's statements about the formal properties of his data. His analysis, in other words, is context-dependent, anchored in the circumstances surrounding the utterance. This fact about Labov's methodology suggests a solution to the problem his data raise for poetics. His data make it impossible to attribute the aesthetic organization of prose fiction to "literariness," but his methodology shows us what we can attribute it to: the nature of the speech situation in which the utterance occurs, in which the speaker and his audience are engaged. The formal and functional similarities between literary and natural narrative can be specified in terms of similarities in the speech situation and their differences identified in terms of differences in that situation. We can discuss them, for example, as similar ways of displaying and contemplating experience, which differ in their manner of composition and transmission. Thus the point of departure gets

shifted from the message (to use Jakobson's terms) to the addresser, the addressee, and the context. Notice that such a shift eliminates the circularity of defining literature in terms of poeticity and poeticity in terms of literature (or message in terms of function and function in terms of message).

The degree to which contextual statements such as Labov's were repugnant to structural poetics is well revealed by the pains they usually take to avoid them. Almost invariably, by a kind of verbal sleight of hand, they convert contextual information about a work's effect on the reader or its author's intention into attributes of the text itself. When Ėjxenbaum describes Šklovskij's principles of estrangement and palpableness of form, for example, he feels obliged to justify the obviously perceptual, reader-oriented basis of those two concepts by making perception a textual property: "It should be evident that *perception* figures here not as a simple psychological concept (the perception of individual human beings) but as an element of art itself, since it is impossible for art to exist without being perceived" (Ėjxenbaum, 1926:12). The well-known term dominant⁶ was frequently used to convert author intention into an aspect of the text, too: the dominant is the "focusing component" which "specifies the work" (Jakobson, 1935:82). The overriding tendency to disguise all notions of intention, perception, and value by converting them into textual attributes has a conspicuous stylistic effect on almost all formalist and structuralist writings. They are a grammarian's goldmine of agentless passives, statives, reflexives, and attributives, all with conspicuously nonhuman subjects. Some samples (emphasis mine):

Poetry may employ the methods of emotive language but only for its own purposes. (Jakobson, quoted in Ėjxenbaum, 1926:26)

New form *comes about* not in order to express new content but in order to replace old form. (Šklovskij, quoted in Ėjxenbaum, 1926:29)

Verse itself a system of values . . . it *possesses* its own hierarchy. (Jakobson, 1935:82)

Poetic language imposes on the discourse some structure in addition to that which *derives* from [ordinary language]. (Levin, 1962:18)

The *intentions of a poetic work* are often closely related to philosophy. (Jakobson, 1935:83)

In the degree to which care *is exercised* in the selection and arrangement of the individual units . . . the text *is elevated* from the status of a . . . non-poetic text to a text *exhibiting* certain characteristics of style. (Levin, 1962:60)

The style is familiar to us all. In a sense, the view of poetic language implied by these quotations is as impoverished as the view of ordinary language lying behind them. Literary composition appears as a kind of self-motivated automatic writing dependent only incidentally on the participation of human beings. The poetic text, which "forms itself" and "orients itself" according to its own intentions and values, is every bit as mechanistic, as divorced from the reality of human communication as the "ordinary" utterance that "transmits merely information about the outside world."⁶ Spitzer, by contrast, simply declares, "Whoever has thought strongly or felt strongly has innovated in his language" (1948:15).

The idea that poetic language could and ought to be studied intrinsically came of course from structural linguistics. It reflects what Roger Fowler describes as "the belief current among that generation of linguists that their discipline was defined by a set of analytic . . . *discovery procedures*; and relatedly, that linguistic description consisted of the induction of structure, of patterns of abstract units which were inherent in the linguistic materials under consideration"

6. As absurd as it may seem now, this view of poetic language did have psychological reality at the time it was conceived, at least for the surrealists, who made it the basis of their own "formal method" of literary composition, aptly called "automatic writing."

(1971:5). The assumption that the "verbal structure" of an utterance inheres in that utterance and is fully discoverable from it without further information from the context places a formidable constraint on the descriptive power of a grammar, especially when coupled with the structural linguistic model of "verbal structure" in which the upper limit of analysis is a kind of sentence-internal linear parsing based on selection and combination. Within such a model, a distinction between literature and nonliterature, if it existed at all, could only exist context-free at the level of grammatical surface structure. It is this restriction that, as we saw earlier, prevents Jakobson from making full use of his model of the speech situation and that, as we have also seen, Labov does away with entirely.

The tendency to exclude reader, author, and context from poetic analysis has been a rallying point for critical opposition to structural poetics and to structural analysis in general. M.A.K. Halliday and Michael Riffaterre have repeatedly emphasized the inability of structural poetics to provide a relevance criterion for poetic analysis, that is, a criterion which can distinguish those features of a text which have stylistic relevance from those which do not. Since "there is no such thing as an intrinsically stylistic device," Riffaterre argues (1959:172), an analysis which lacks an explicit relevance criterion remains strictly arbitrary and impossible to evaluate. For Riffaterre, it is the reader's intuitions, or more accurately, the collective intuitions of a number of readers, that must form the base for such a criterion. According to Riffaterre, stylistically relevant features will be those "elements which limit the freedom of perception in the process of decoding" (1959:158). In a later article Riffaterre extends his objection to structural analysis in general, whose error, he claims,

is that it fails to recognize one essential condition of the actual literary phenomenon (that is, the contact between text and

reader): the perceptibility condition. Perceptibility, in fact, seems to be the only important aspect of Russian formalist theory which has not been explicitly adopted by French formalism. (Riffaterre, 1971:276, translation mine)

For Riffaterre, the problem of relevance and verifiability is only compounded when the level of analysis is moved to underlying or latent structures that have no surface textual realization. Objecting to "this misleading concept of *latency* which the formalist definition of structure contains within it," he restates the reader's case: "If there is latency, it is a latency encoded in order to (1) reveal that there is something to discover and (2) indicate how the discovery is to be made" (1971:285, translation mine). Halliday similarly objects to the notion of latency on the grounds that any "prominence" (foregrounding) will appear motivated if it relates to our interpretation of the work (1971:339). Halliday proposes a relevance criterion based on reader's intuition and comparison of the given text with appropriate norm texts. Enkvist, Spencer, and Gregory (1964) similarly call for a context-dependent description of style.

These contextual approaches, though they differ a great deal from each other, can all be seen as attempts to restate the problem of linguistic aesthetics at the level of language use, where it belongs and where it is stated from the outset by Labov. The need for such a restatement has been recognized with increasing urgency by critics over the last five years. Karl Uitti objects that "unless . . . some loopholes in either linguistic or literary analysis are left allowing one to deal relevantly with the experiential fact of confrontation between text (and/or author) and reader, the reality of language or of the poetic experience will be necessarily shunted aside and quite possibly other kinds of understanding themselves vitiated (1971: 114). In a similar vein, Hendricks argues that "the emphasis needs to be shifted from considerations of poetic language to considera-