

The story as cure in Richard Ford's "Occidentals."

In her book on Richard Ford, Elinor Ann Walker observes that, "[i]n texts as diverse as *Wildlife*, the *Rock Springs* stories, the Frank Bascombe books, and *Women with Men*, characters ponder how to know themselves, how to know others."¹ And one may infer from Ford's own comments on his work that the theme of self-knowledge is one he consciously explores. He has noted that his fiction is about "what we do as a consequence to dramatic acts,"² and that "the illumination of character"³ which he seeks is achieved through confronting his characters with predicaments and crises and then following them as they react to and work their way through these. One interpretation of Ford's use of the term "illumination" in this context is the manner in which his characters, following momentous events or experiences, move toward comprehension, toward an insight into the person he or she is, toward, therefore, greater self-understanding and self-knowledge.

This endeavor to understand and to know oneself and others is such a central concern in Ford's writing that it is often more than simply a theme in his work; in several of Ford's texts, this endeavor decisively influences, indeed dictates, the structure of the narrative itself. The need to understand oneself, therefore, regularly informs both form and content in Ford's writing. Specifically, it is at the point where experience is articulated in language, or, more precisely, where events and actions are recounted in narrative, that the structuring effect of the quest for self-knowledge manifests itself. Ford himself is fully alert to the presence and function of narrative both in our lives and in his own writing. Responding to an interview question on the theme of "the inherent loneliness of the human condition" in his work and in his novel, *Wildlife* (a central concern of which is the adult narrator's attempt to understand his adolescent relationship with his parents), Ford observes:

¹ Elinor Ann Walker, *Richard Ford*, Twayne's United States Authors Series 718 (New York: Twayne, 2000) 203.

² Huey Guagliardo, ed., *Conversations with Richard Ford*, Literary Conversations Series (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001) 106.

³ Guagliardo 149.

It's what Emerson in his essay on Friendship ... calls the "infinite remoteness" that underlies us all. But I also think that that predicament is a seminal one; that is, what it insemminates is an attempt to console that remote condition. If loneliness is the disease, then the story is the cure. To be able to tell a story like that one about your parents is in itself an act of consolation. Even to come to the act of articulating that your parents are unknowable to each other, unknowable to you, is itself an act of acceptance.⁴

While the telling of a story whose goal it was to better understand the past and one's parents may be deemed to have failed in this case, what is significant is that narrative and knowledge are explicitly linked: Ford's adult narrator in *Wildlife* resorts to the structure and discourse of a story in his attempt to understand decisive events in his adolescence. Indeed, as Ford suggests, the story has in fact succeeded, as it has brought his narrator to the hitherto unavailable knowledge that his parents are unknowable, and that he has understood all that will be given him to understand. The adult narrator is now at peace with his past, and an important measure of solace and serenity has been achieved.

Given Ford's alertness to the function and consolations of narrative, articulated in his lapidary formulation of story as cure, it is hardly surprising to find evidence of the storytelling instinct elsewhere in his work. Such evidence is found in an exemplary manner in one of the three *Women with Men* stories, "Occidentals." Narrative in "Occidentals" is both a theme and a significant factor in the plotting of the story itself (beyond the obvious fact that Ford's story is itself a narrative): it is a theme because of the deeply rooted narrativizing instinct of Ford's protagonist, Charley Matthews; and it contributes to the plotting of the story in so far as Matthews's ambitions, actions, and responses are decisively influenced by his tendency to orient his life according to a narrativized understanding of his sense of identity. This article will trace the development and identify the role of Matthews's self-narrative(s) in "Occidentals," and will examine the properties in narrative discourse that lend themselves so readily to the task of self-interpretation, the attainment of self-knowledge, and the construction of a sense of identity.

Charley Matthews arrives in Paris to spend a few days there with his girlfriend, Helen, still carrying the burden of sadness and disappointment that has marked his personal and professional life in recent years. His wife Penny has left him for another man, taking their daughter with her to

⁴ Guagliardo 143-4.

California, and is now seeking a divorce. Matthews's academic career, too, had been a source of frustration and disenchantment: the realization that he hated teaching led him to resign his college post. Nor had the reaction to the novel he had finished in the aftermath of his resignation led to renewed purpose and direction: "once published [it] had gone immediately and completely out of sight.... [T]here was never any mention of another contract or of a book he might want to write at a future date."⁵ The news, then, that a French publisher wishes to translate and publish his novel comes as a timely and welcome boost, and Matthews and Helen make "eager plans for their trip" (149) to Paris, where Matthews is to meet his publisher. But hardly have they arrived in Paris than disappointment sets in, undermining Matthews's tenuous source of hope, and allowing the suppressed unhappiness of his recent failures to well up in him again, precipitating in him a stock-taking review of his life and the pattern of failure that has marked it. And, not unnaturally for a novelist, it is to narrative that Matthews unconsciously turns as he seeks clarity and understanding about himself and his past. In fact, it is less a "turn" to narrative that we witness than the revelation of a full-scale narrativizing instinct in Matthews, one already thoroughly developed in him, and that has shaped his sense of identity and his notion of his place in the world all through the period of his personal and professional tribulations.

The initial evidence of the importance and function of narrative in Matthews's life is not simply the causal relationship between the failure of his marriage and the writing of his novel but also the intentions and expectations invested in the story he had wished to tell: "He had begun *The Predicament* intending it as a plain yet accurate portrayal of his marriage to Penny.... [H]aving the book published, Matthews had hoped, would be a dramatic and direct public profession of new faith to Penny" (159). The novel tells the story of an academic marriage that fails, of the wife who runs off with another man. It is, in other words, Matthews's own story, in which the fictional wife, Greta, is but "a thin, unflattering disguise for Penny" (154). The novel, then, is more autobiography than fiction, to the point that Matthews had "come close to calling his book a memoir and not a novel at all" (159). So, in the aftermath of the failure of his marriage, Matthews's "great source of disappointment and woe" (159), he turns to the order and

⁵ Richard Ford, "Occidentals," in *Women with Men* (London: Harvill, 1997) 161. All further quotations from "Occidentals" will be followed by a parenthetical reference.

structure of narrative to trace the development of that failure and to understand and articulate the motives and responsibilities of those involved. The meanings and lessons that would emerge from the telling were to culminate, in the blessed light of greater self-knowledge, in a “profession of new faith to Penny.” But the fine line that initially held fiction and autobiography apart in Matthews’s mind ultimately dissolves when he rewrites the ending of the novel following Penny’s refusal to read an early, inscribed proof copy: in a spasm of vengefulness, Matthews revises the ending and kills off Greta in a road accident. But beyond the black comedy, we see the confusion of fiction and reality as Matthews’s narrative conflates the two: “Occasionally he confused Greta in his book with Penny and imagined Penny dead” (171). His ostensibly fictional story could not withstand the provenance, exigencies, and teleology of this personal narrative, and the story of his novel became, as he acknowledges, “too much about his own life” (162). The narrative and meanings of the fiction were arrogated to the greater need for self-understanding and for a bearable account of experiences in Matthews’s own life.

Matthews’s narrativizing instinct, however, extends well beyond one isolated instance of self-investment in storytelling: the appropriation of his novel is but a symptom of his systematic, instinctive recourse to narrative discourse in order to understand his experience and confer meaning and direction on his life. The writing of the novel, in fact, feeds into a wider grand narrative, into the new life story and identity that Matthews began to narrate to himself in the wake of the troubled period of his life:

[H]e’d begun getting used to what had departed (conceivably his younger and callower self), what had arrived (not very much), and what the consequences for the future were. The idea of himself as a novelist seemed to be one appealing arrival: a silent artist living obscurely alone in small-town Ohio. Once, he’d been a teacher, but retired early. His wife had left him because he was too eccentric. There had been a child. Occasionally he made a brief appearance in New York, but was mostly content to go on writing small, underappreciated masterpieces that were more popular in Europe than in his own country. (160)

Ford’s use of free indirect discourse in the latter part of the above passage encapsulates Matthews’s emerging narrative identity as the ascetic and misunderstood artist (as well as nicely ironizing Matthews’s tendency to fantasize). The French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, in his

magisterial account of narrative in his three-volume *Time and Narrative*, analyses the manner in which narrative functions as what he terms “a synthesis of heterogeneous elements,”⁶ as a discourse which brings and holds together, in a coherent whole, disparate and disconnected material. Specifically, it is by virtue of the concept of plot, or what he prefers to call “emplotment” (a term which he feels better conveys the idea of an integrating process, of an operation, and which better identifies the dynamic dimension of plot), that this synthesis is achieved. One of the ways in which emplotment accomplishes this is in the temporal ordering it effects:

We could say that there are two sorts of *time* in every story told: on the one hand, a discrete succession that is open and theoretically indefinite, a series of incidents (for we can always pose the question: and then? and then?); on the other hand, the story told presents another temporal aspect characterized by the integration, culmination and closure owing to which the story receives a particular configuration. In this sense, composing a story is, from the temporal point of view, drawing a configuration out of a succession.⁷

A succession is simply a series of events in time that have no relation to each other apart from their taking place one after the other; a configuration is the process of shaping, of creative ordering, by which the different moments of time in which events occur are brought into a meaningful exchange with each other, into the temporal whole of a configuration. It is indeed time which Matthews seeks to configure in the articulation of his identity as the uncompromising writer stoically enduring his lack of recognition. And his formulation of this identity is even classic in its exemplary narrative concern with bringing past, present, and future into coherent, causal relation with each other.

Ricoeur’s vast exploration of historical and fictional narrative ultimately leads him to his theory of narrative identity, “the kind of identity that human beings acquire through the mediation of the narrative function.”⁸ Ricoeur’s elaboration of his theory is too extensive and complex to be explored in great detail here, but its core premises need to be outlined. The theory emerges from

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991) 21.

⁷ Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” 22.

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative Identity,” in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, 188.

Ricoeur's reflection on the competing understandings of the concept of identity, namely the choice between identity as *sameness* and identity as *selfhood*, or between identity as permanence, and identity as a dialectic between permanence and change. It is the latter concept, the understanding of identity as a dynamic exchange between permanence and non-permanence in time, which, Ricoeur insists, is appropriate to selfhood. And it is in the identity of the *story*, specifically in the identity of the operation of emplotment (*la mise en intrigue*) as a dynamic process, that the temporal dialectic in selfhood finds a privileged site of mediation, where the tension between permanence and change can be creatively resolved. As Ricoeur puts it: "I am stressing the expression 'narrative identity' for what we call subjectivity is neither an incoherent series of events nor an immutable substantiality, impervious to evolution. This is precisely the sort of identity which narrative composition alone can create through its dynamism."⁹ At the heart of Ricoeur's theory is the notion of self-knowledge as an interpretation, and, following on from the premise of a continuous negotiation between permanence and change, as an ongoing *re*interpretation. A narrative personal identity, then, embracing difference and change, becomes an operation of constant self-refiguration: "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."¹⁰ What we call "the self," then, is not a substantial self, nor is it characterized by sameness and permanence alone. For Ricoeur, it is the product of an evolving exchange between permanence and non-permanence, one constantly open to imaginative retellings, reshapings, revisions. And if this very flexibility introduces a degree of instability to one's sense of identity, it also allows the ever-present opportunity to review and retell one's story of the self: the self is configured and then refigured as it accommodates the new information of these revised tellings, ever open to the reinterpretations occasioned by new emplotments. As far as Charley Matthews is concerned, his narrative identity as the austere, undervalued writer "living obscurely alone in small-town Ohio" will undergo revision as he reacts to his experience in Paris, and as he draws upon, in his attempt to understand and orient his life, the inherent flexibility of the narrative concept of identity. In so doing, he will respond to what Ricoeur calls

⁹ Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 32.

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 246.

our “intuitive” sense that “human lives become more readily intelligible when they are interpreted in the light of the stories that people tell about them.”¹¹

The thematization of self-narrative is accompanied in Ford’s story by, first, a reflection on the interdependent concepts of knowledge and experience, the latter understood not only in its primary sense as the accumulated events, actions, and emotions of a life but also, and more importantly, as a kind of mute raw material that must be shaped and translated into meaning; and, second, by the recurrent employment of the metaphor of translation and its synonym “conversion.” Matthews had gone from working on the completion of his PhD thesis to an academic post, and had ended up teaching African-American studies, a subject he knew nothing about from personal experience: “He’d only read about it in other books. He knew nothing about the Negro Experience, period” (165). Indeed Matthews has come to view teaching as a barrier to experience and knowledge, as a counterfeit existence of non-experience and useless, bookish knowledge: “Teaching was finally good for this and only this, he thought—intruding on and devaluing life as lived into an indecipherable muddle of lost days and squandered experiences. He wondered how much life he’d already lost to it” (182). Throughout the story Matthews is confronted with and reacts to what he sees as his lack of experience and knowledge. Paris itself had been knowable only in the way the African-American experience had been knowable—from books, and only as long as this knowledge remained unchallenged by reality. But as Paris fails to conform to the clichés of the two narratives upon which its identity for Matthews was based—the tourist-lore mythology of the Fodor’s guidebook and the fictional Paris of his novel (“he’d researched everything out of library books, tourist guides and subway maps,” 154)—these sources are seen to be the substitute for, and even the antithesis of, the true knowledge generated by experience. Matthews’s dilettantish knowledge has not only abandoned him in a disconcerting sense of lostness; the real Paris of experience is actually indecipherable, like a text in an unknown language: “Paris seemed baffling. It might as well have been East Berlin” (154).

In Matthews’s reflection on his situation, he establishes a direct relation between experience and the notions of conversion and translation, and these play a vital role in the renewal of his life that he seeks:

¹¹ Ricoeur, “Narrative Identity,” 188.

He had never particularly wanted to come to Paris. The problem had always seemed to him how to convert anything that happened here into anything that mattered back home. He thought of all the bores who came back and droned on stupefyingly about Paris, trying to make their experience of it matter. (153)

Converting experience into meaning is indeed the wider predicament facing Matthews in his life, but one thrown into stark relief in the cold, shabby-hotel-room existence of alienating Paris to which he is confined for four days—his publisher has flown off on his Christmas holidays, leaving Matthews kicking his heels as he awaits the opportunity to meet with his translator. Pushed by Helen who asks him about the translation of his book, Matthews uses the metaphor of translation to articulate his sense of what he needs to do to give his life a new direction. He sees the literal task of translation as one of invention: “It’s not just putting my book into a different language, like moving your clothes from one suitcase to another one. It’s creative” (164).¹² Matthews then applies the term metaphorically to himself, as he asserts his break with the false knowledge of teaching and declares that he’s “interested in a new life,” adding: “I’m hoping to be translated into something better than I was” (166). The Paris trip represented his “attempt to take an experience with him, and afterwards bring it home again, converted to something better” (169). The raw events of the experience in Paris were to undergo this process of creative translation, or inventive conversion, into something “that mattered,” into a store of life-improving insights. Although the stay in Paris does not turn out as he had anticipated, the desire for self-transformation remains. And as the four-day wait unfolds, it becomes clear that the process of self-translation will be realized through the dynamics of narrative discourse: Matthews’s experience in Paris begins to inspire a very precise and highly teleological self-narrative that accords him a new identity. In a development of his Ohio narrative of the artist misunderstood in his own homeland, Matthews now begins to narrate for himself the identity of the mythic figure of the American writer in Paris.

Matthews’s new story has its initial source in his garbled memories of the micro-narratives that constitute the greater mythology of post-war Paris, embellished with the clichés of these stories

¹² Matthews’s comment here echoes those of Blumberg, his publisher: “Translation is not a matter merely of converting your book into French; it is a matter of *inventing* your book into the French mind” (151).

that he is wont to embrace: “In the past, when he’d imagined Paris, he imagined jazz, Dom Pérignon corks flying into the bright, crisp night air, wide shining streets, laughter. Fun” (153). Woven into this idealized background is the equally idealized artistic and intellectual reputation of the café culture of late-1940s Saint-Germain-des-Prés: “The Left Bank. Many famous American writers had lived near here, though for the moment he couldn’t remember who or where, only that the French had made them feel at home in a way their own countrymen hadn’t” (153). Matthews’s new self-narrative as the American writer living almost in exile emerges tentatively and, initially, disconnectedly, troubled and deflected as he is by the generally unhappy and sometimes tense nature of his relationship with Helen, by the social entanglement with loud, lumpen American friends of Helen they run into, and by his own doleful ruminations on his predicament. But the coincidence of Matthews’s need for “a new life” and his presence in this mythological city nurtures an awareness in him of the possibilities represented by Paris, and, in one important moment of night-time solitude, is of a near-epiphanic nature:

Matthews began to feel different, as if the new moonlight and crinkled stars had configured the world newly, and Paris, even in the frosted glowing night, seemed to lie forth more the way he would’ve wanted had he ever let himself want it. A metropolis of bounteous issue; a surface to penetrate; a depth in which to immerse oneself, even reside in. Coming to Paris now, at his age, with a serious, mature intent, might mean exactly what he’d thought, a wish to stay. Only he wasn’t here to convert anything to a commodity he could take back but to suit himself to the unexpected, to what was already here. (170)

Scholarship on Richard Ford has identified the significance of place in his fiction, encouraged no doubt by Ford’s own frequently expressed views on the relation between characters and place. His theory of person-place dynamics is relevant to Matthews’s response to his presence in Paris. According to Ford, “anything you feel about a place, anything that you think about place at all, you have authored and ascribed to some piece of geography. Everything that defines locatedness is then something that you yourself generate.”¹³ One might modulate Ford’s assertion a little in Matthews’s case: while the latter’s sense of the possibilities of a future life in Paris has its decisive origin in a personal yearning, the warm glow generated by his idealization of Paris is also influenced by his reception of an existing, richly mythical narrative of the city as a *terre*

¹³ Guagliardo 142.

d'asile for exiled American writers. Paris is not quite “some piece of geography” in the way that Haddam, New Jersey, may be said to be in *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*. Yet “Occidentals” remains essentially true to Ford’s belief that we invent a sense of place. While Paris’s imposing history and reputation, its cultural and artistic tradition, its landmarks and iconography, all combine to make it a city especially susceptible to mythologization, it is ultimately the fantasist in Matthews that transforms Paris into the promised land. And everywhere in the story we find evidence of narrative-induced idealization preferred over substance, fantasy over fact, cliché over sober assessment, be it in the landmarks-and-monuments program of activities (garnished with a couple of “incomparable meals”) that Matthews and Helen plan for Paris, the pre-packaged tourist narrative peddled by the Fodor’s travel guide they rely on, or the fanciful image Matthews had initially constructed of his French publisher, that of “a kindly keeper of an ancient flame, overseer of a rich and storied culture that only a few were permitted to share” (152). None of these narrative idealizations, of course, withstand the buffeting of reality. But the flights of fancy continue, manifested most comically in Matthews’s fantasy- and cliché-ridden dream of his sitting on the *terrasse* of a Parisian café volubly speaking perfect French, wearing the *de rigueur* ostentatiously colored scarf of the Parisian artist/intellectual, and a much less likely black beret.

As the days in Paris drift by and as Matthews isolates himself from the familiarity of Helen and his relationship with her, sustainable back home but not in Paris, he lets himself be further seduced by an elaboration on his self-narrative of a writer in Paris. In another “elated” moment of night-time solitude in his Nouvelle Métropole hotel room, he muses:

He had thought of this room as a pit, a hole, a cheap and dingy last-ditch. But he felt better about it. He could stay here.... The hotel would take on another character under other circumstances. He could provide a table and write here, though he had nothing in mind to write.... He’d seen photos of the rooms of famous artists—almost always in Paris—and they were all worse than the Nouvelle Métropole.... Yet in retrospect they seemed perfect, each a place you’d want to be, the only room that this novel or that poem could ever have been conceived in. (217)

Striking in this passage is both the lack of substance and the highly idealized nature of Matthews’s projections. His awareness of the paucity of his experience and achievement, and the

absence of any idea of what he might write, has him draw lifeblood for his new identity from the seductive story of historical literary figures in Paris. And we see the full extent of his narrativizing instinct as he readily consents to the retrospective reconfiguration of the past which transforms the shabby hotel room into the unique and sacred place of artistic creation. The narrative identity of the “silent artist living obscurely alone” that had nourished him back in Ohio is now being updated and reconfigured to this mythologized figure doing the same in Paris.

As Matthews’s stay in Paris unfolds, his narrative instinct becomes more self-conscious as it feeds off the configurations and refigurations this very instinct produces. At a relatively early stage of his wait in Paris, Matthews articulates what the writer in him senses as being the liberating pliancy of storytelling: “This ... was how a novelist thought: things were infinitely mutable and improvable, revisable, renewable” (170). Here is Ricoeur’s notion of the adaptability of narrative emplotment, and here, too, is what becomes Matthews’s credo in the decisive latter pages of “Occidentals,” as his Paris experience begins to imbue him with enthusiasm and, crucially, as he sees the need to give more concrete expression to the mix of intuitions, reveries, and fantasies that have been tumbling through his mind. If Matthews is to find the “new life” he is seeking, he senses that a more active involvement on his part is required. We have seen that narrative emplotment brings together events occurring as a succession in time and draws them into the configuration of a story. In the case of *life* narratives, past, present, and future are integrated, and most often into a teleological story. As Ricoeur puts it:

The structure of narrativity demonstrates that it is by trying to put order on our past, by retelling and recounting what has been, that we acquire an identity.... To “repeat” our story, to retell our history, is to re-collect our horizon of possibilities in a resolute and responsible manner. In this respect, one can see how the retrospective character of narration is closely linked to the prospective horizon of the future.... [N]arration preserves the meaning that is behind us so that we can have meaning before us.¹⁴

Matthews’s more purposive and future-oriented self-narrativizing in the latter pages of “Occidentals” takes the initial form of a self-conscious manipulation of the temporality of his present situation in order to create the conditions for the emergence of the new temporality of his

¹⁴ Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984) 21-2.

incipient story: “He realized that after Penny left, ... his assumption had always been that at some point he would simply ‘switch off.’ Switch *off* from Penny and *on* to something or somebody else.... Now ... he realized that this assumption about lines of demarcation might not be entirely realistic” (227). Matthews now pledges to himself to aggressively conclude the divorce proceedings that Penny has initiated, resolving that “[h]e and Penny would be ‘switched off’ by February” (228). It is less the divorce itself, the symbolic final act of separation from one’s spouse, that matters to Matthews here as the fact that this part of his life will now be definitively consigned to the past, as opposed to its current status as a continuing burden in the present, one impeding his freedom and capacity to shape his future. While this, in itself, is not an act of *narrative* intervention, it is certainly one that is informed by a sharpened sense of narrative temporality: Matthews’s notion of demarcation derives from his instinctive sense of a temporal structure in human experience, and here again Ford’s story accords with Ricoeur’s theory of the relation between life and narrative. Before experience becomes the object of explicit narration in our lives, Ricoeur identifies what he calls points of “anchorage” in human action which “[demand] the assistance of narrative and [express] the need for it.” One of these points of anchorage consists in the temporal features of action, our awareness of which is manifested most obviously in language, for example in time expressions (e.g. “to have the time to,” “to waste one’s time”), in verb tenses, and in the highly ramified network of temporal adverbs (e.g. “then,” “earlier,” “later,” “until”) which resist a purely linear understanding of time. For Ricoeur, we are justified in speaking of life, of human action, as a rudimentary story “which call[s] for narration.” Matthews’s intention to create demarcations reveals an awareness of what Ricoeur terms the “pre-narrative structure of experience,” that which leads us to explicit narration in, and of, our lives.¹⁵ That Ford himself is intrigued by these questions of pre-narrative and narrative temporality seems confirmed when he has Helen, in response to a comment about eras, offer a refutation of the notion of a pre-narrative temporal structure: “I don’t believe in eras, ... I believe it’s all continuous” (206).

Matthews’s intention to become more interventionist in the affairs in his life is articulated as he walks alone through Paris one morning, having left the sleeping Helen behind at the hotel. The

¹⁵ Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” 28-29.

reader has the sense of being invited to understand the passage as representing a classic narrative turning point, pervaded as it is with the symbolism of a new beginning: Matthews awakens feeling restored; a bright morning sun shines into the hotel room; the snow on the ground has almost disappeared; and the warm breeze confirms Matthews's first impression that "the morning was like spring" (220). As he walks through Paris, heady with the excitement of his direct, solitary confrontation with the city, the interaction between his desire to actively shape his future and the exhilaration of his being able to "experience the city the way you should. Close up. Unmediated" (220) liberates the fantasist and self-narrativist in him. Sensing that "[s]omething, without doubt, was changing in his life, and changing for the better" (222), stories of what might have been and what yet could be—fantasies, resolutions, plotments—career through his mind. Happening upon the offices of his publisher, he imagines the "long, memorable lunch" (230-1) in the exclusive restaurant that he and Blumberg could have had and the "staunch friendship" (231) they could have forged as they enjoyed their conversation and Cuban cigars; in the publisher's absence, perhaps a "pretty" assistant editor would answer his ring at the door, to whom he would speak French, whom he would charm, and who would "eye him provocatively" (232); perhaps he would ring a former mistress from Ohio now living alone in Paris, a renewed contact that would make "[a]ll kinds of things" (238) possible, including not even returning to Helen at the hotel.¹⁶ But dominating all of these micro-narratives in his wander through the city is the elaboration of the narrative identity of the American writer in Paris. And as is necessary in this narrative shaping of a life, where things are "mutable and improvable, revisable, renewable," there is indeed a narrative turning point, the moment of change when the future is allowed to liberate itself from the past and the present, and when a new direction may be charted. In Matthews's new story this takes the form of a reversal of the metaphor of conversion he has been deploying. Matthews now concludes that, "instead of worrying about how he couldn't convert experience in Paris to be applicable to Ohio, it might now be possible to convert himself to whatever went on in Paris" (223). He could fit in with Paris in his own way, treating it "like a place he knew and felt comfortable" (226). Liberally employing the term "change," Matthews even draws on the

¹⁶ Matthews actually rings Margie McDermott, only to find that her family has joined her in Paris. This episode is yet another illustration of how the intoxicating combination of storyteller and fantasist in Matthews leads him to inevitable disappointment in his life.

experience of “black artists” (223) whom Paris had welcomed in the past. In his animated state, he considers it not impossible that Paris might even “open its arms to Charley Matthews” (223).¹⁷

Matthews’s *rêverie* of becoming a writer living and working in Paris is confronted with brute reality upon his return to the hotel: Helen has committed suicide, unwilling to live with the slow death that the return of her cancer portends. “Occidentals” concludes in a short final section of two scenes, one dealing with Matthews’s meeting with his translator, and the other with his final thoughts on his experience in Paris. This final section has all the atmosphere of an epilogue, both in tone and in the physical presentation of the text: where up to this point in the story the text had been one long chapter, spaced into sections, now we move to a new chapter. One senses the hand of the narratively-aware author applying his own decisive narrative demarcation, indicating typographically that Matthews’s experience in Paris has already been consigned to the past. And, significantly, the meeting with the translator becomes the occasion for a reflection on the story’s twin motifs of translation and narrative mutability. While ostensibly discussing Matthews’s book, Mme de Grenelle’s pronouncements that translation is an inventive act that improves an original not only repeats a view given voice at several moments in the text but also confirms Matthews’s own metaphorical understanding of the term as he applied it to himself. And that transformation is, of course, a narrative one, the application of which also receives oblique retrospective vindication in Mme de Grenelle’s view of the essential incompleteness of original narratives. She shares Matthews’s view that things are “mutable and improvable, revisable, renewable,” to the

¹⁷ The passage describing Matthews’s solitary walk through the streets of Paris takes up twenty-five pages, almost a quarter of the entire story. It calls to mind two prominent texts in French literature. Thematically, it reminds us of the final scene in Balzac’s *Le père Goriot* as Rastignac surveys Paris and, looking resolutely to the future, sets the terms of his relationship with the city to which he has come to make his fortune: “*A nous deux maintenant !*” (“It’s between you and me now!” [my translation]) (*Le père Goriot*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1983, 336.) Structurally, one thinks of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (*Reveries of the Solitary Walker*). Rousseau’s meditations in this text are structured according to ten walks (*promenades*) he took in the countryside around Paris (in Rousseau’s time, the Champs-Élysées was almost the countryside). Raymond Bernex, in his Bordas edition of Rousseau’s text (Paris: Bordas, 1985), notes the essential properties of the *rêverie* for Rousseau: it is natural and spontaneous (as opposed to demanding an intellectual effort); it engenders a sense of contentment and well-being; it is stimulated by the exchange between the individual and his surroundings; and it appeals more to instinct and the imagination than to reason. In addition, for the *rêverie* to be possible, there are two essential pre-conditions that must be met, that of solitude and the physical activity of walking. All of these properties and pre-conditions are fulfilled in Matthews’s walk through the streets of Paris. Bernex records another intriguing feature of the Rousseauan *rêverie*: while it may often be a passive experience, there is also an active, even creative *rêverie* in which the imagination brings into being an imaginary world. Matthews has a strong tendency to fantasize, to imagine possible happy experiences based on little more than his wish for such experiences. We have just seen that Matthews’s *promenade* produces several examples of such creative fantasies.

point indeed of wishing virtually to rewrite his novel, wondering, for example, whether the entire text is not “all a long dream or a fantasy” (253). But her flight of fancy here does no more than parallel those of Matthews, who has subscribed throughout to the notion of narrative mutability, and who, true to his credo, concurs with Mme Grenelle’s rather arrogant view of the uncompleted nature of his novel’s narrative.

In the aftermath of Helen’s death, Matthews has cause to regret his insufficiencies where she was concerned, and he misses her. He begins to have an intimation of what absolute aloneness in a foreign city and culture might be like. He senses “the beginning of a state of loneliness and longing which would be his if he stayed” (255). Although the text does not say so directly, one senses that it is experience, that which he craved so much, that has sobered him up: “He had the feeling of having been in a long struggle” (254). But if the fantasist in him ultimately cedes to the realist by turning away from the idea of a future life in Paris, the self-narrativist in him will continue to reshape his understanding of his life and his sense of self by way of the story, as Matthews’s final thoughts (and the final words of the story) indicate:

But he had learned something. He had commenced a new era in his life. There *were* eras. That much was unquestionable. . . . He hadn’t even written a letter to his parents. But in the time that remained here, he would. A long letter. And in his letter he would try as best he could, and with the many complications that would need detailing, to explain to them all that had happened to him here and what new ideas he had for the future. (255)

In a story deeply concerned with narrative and identity, it is fitting, and surely not coincidental, that it concludes with a passage that implicitly acknowledges its narrative themes and genealogy. In his forceful assertion of the existence of eras, Matthews is doing no more than remaining faithful to the convinced storyteller that he is. But Richard Ford himself, in focusing here on eras, and in allowing a refutation of Helen’s claim that “it’s all continuous,” also seems to be inviting us to reflect on narrative organization and narrative understanding of experience. From where do eras emerge? Calendars and temporal delimitations may facilitate and encourage a particular organization of time, but they do not of themselves create eras. Events in time, in their raw, unmediated state, have the condition of annals and chronicles, of mere sequence; or (to return to Ricoeur), their temporality is one of open, discrete, and indefinite succession. If events in time

present themselves to perception as belonging *naturally* to eras, it is surely because our instinct to narrate both history and our lives is so deeply ingrained that we see them as being already, innately, configured. Matthews's eras, then, are narratively contrived orderings and demarcations, the fruit of the creative and necessary work of locating ourselves within time and of giving shape and direction to our lives. If Matthews sees eras, it is because his narrative temporal understanding has put them there.

One may read the concluding line of Ford's story as an exemplification of his notion of the story as cure. Ford does not evoke the practice of psychoanalysis in the interview in which he coins this formulation, but his notion that one's self-narratives constitute a form of therapy is strikingly consistent with a strong body of psychoanalytical opinion which sees the work of the psychoanalyst as that of a facilitator of rehabilitative stories. One of the original and leading theorists of the narrative psychology and psychoanalysis movement, psychoanalyst Roy Schafer, observes that "clinical psychoanalysis is an interpretative discipline whose concern it is to construct life histories of human beings."¹⁸ And Schafer is absolutely clear on the vexed question of the relationship between experience and narrative. Where Ricoeur would allow no more than a pre-narrative structure in human action, Schafer elides the distinction between action and narrative, preempting a pre-narrative meaning in favor of a purely narrative meaning. He puts it thus: "One *tells* a history; one does not *have* a history" (his italics).¹⁹ The psychoanalytic dialogue between analysand and analyst produces a more bearable story, revealing new, productive connections, discarding or reworking old, debilitating interpretations, all in the goal of achieving a new and therapeutic account of the self. This accords with Peter Brooks's reading of Freud's writings: "There is in Freud's case histories an underlying assumption that psychic health corresponds to a coherent narrative account of one's life."²⁰ Matthews's resolution to write to his parents (whose offer of a place in the family business remains open) displays the optimism of one who is emerging from a troubled past and a troubling interpretation of himself, and who now sees a way to move forward with his life. But if this has now become possible, it is because he has

¹⁸ Roy Schafer, *Language and Insight* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978) 6.

¹⁹ Schafer 182.

²⁰ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) 281-2.

gone through the process of self-imagining and self-assessment facilitated by his identity stories: he now knows better who he is, who he is not and can never be. It is by virtue of the self-refigurations of his Paris narratives that he has been brought to the threshold of this new story, of a new, curative self-account. It is Matthews himself who insists here on the “new,” on how he will “explain,” and on the idea of a telling: we can be in no doubt that Matthews’s letter will take the form of a revised self-narrative. It will be one that, from the perspective of its narration in the present, will survey the past and anticipate the future, reminding us of how, in Paul Ricoeur’s formulation, “the retrospective character of narration is closely linked to the prospective horizon of the future.” Matthews’s new story will conform to this essential teleology of self-narratives: it will, to adapt Ricoeur, revise the meaning that is behind him so that he can have meaning before him. For the time being at least, Matthews’s story will be his cure.

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