

CATCH-UPS AND WORKAROUNDS: A JURY RIGGED LIFE

Michael Holquist

A first law of narrative maintains that every tale have both a story – a mere chronological list of events – and a plot, an arrangement of events in a sequence that thematically binds them together in an over arching meaning. The textbook example usually given is taken from E. M. Foerster’s *Aspects of the Novel*: “‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot.”

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A common strategy in biographies for achieving a bond between story and plot is to weave the sheer chronology of events in a particular person’s life into a pattern that is taken from the pre-existing model of a career. Xenophon famously tells the unique events of Agesilaus’ life, and then shows how these define Agesilaus in such a way that he fits neatly into the career template of what Spartans thought a king should be. The life provides the story and the career furnishes the plot in such narratives.

This afternoon – in a modest way – I’ll use this tried-and-true life/career narrative pattern in an effort to avoid regurgitating a mere redaction of my CV. I probably flatter myself by thinking that in my case the difficulty of fusing idiosyncratic chronology with a pre-existing career template is increased as a result of irregularities in both my life and my career from the outset.

‘From the outset’ means in this case first grade at Ellis School in Rockford Illinois, whence my mother was summoned on a lovely spring day in 1942 to be told that I would not be passing on to second grade because I had not learned to read. It was a shock from which I’ve never recovered. The following year, as I repeated first grade, I was taken in hand by a librarian named Miss Pratt, who opened up for me the miracle of books beyond the picket fence bound universe of Dick and Jane (and their unspeakable dog, Spot).

So, in 1943 I fell in love with reading. But this did not mean I was transformed into a good student. Over the years, my report cards kept telling the same story: “impulsive; easily distracted;” “not working to potential;” “unable to focus.” Today we would recognize these remarks as indicators of ADHD – as I later did with two of my five sons. But in the 1940s, everybody thought – as I did – that a kid so afflicted was just another troublemaker. Automatically promoted to the local public high school, I did well in Latin and English, but was hopeless in all my other courses, and was lucky to graduate at all.

Going to college was an iffy proposition in any case – no one in my large immigrant family had ever gone, and my father, a former bellboy turned factory worker, never finished high school. My mother was a remarkable woman who worked at three different jobs during the week to keep our family together. She had graduated from

high school, and had a mother's faith that I might not be as dumb as my grades seemed to indicate. When she heard about the county scholarships the State of Illinois offered to the University of Illinois, she encouraged me to try for one. The test favored areas in which my deficit would let me sustain interest, so I arrived in Urbana in 1954, the year of the Army/McCarthy hearings. Refashioning scholastic problems into what my adolescent imagination conceived as principled rebellion, I became active in the anti-McCarthy movement. My usual mixed grades and political activity led to withdrawal of my scholarship and expulsion from the university after a particularly lively May Day demonstration in the spring semester. For the next two years I worked in various factories in Rockford and Chicago.

It was a bad time, and one night while working the swing shift in the plating room of a hardware plant, half asphyxiated by the vapors rising from the acid vats, I felt I had hit bottom. The friends I most admired were all Jews, so I visited the local Rabbi to see about converting. A wise man, he said, "You don't want to be a Jew. You want to be an intellectual." In order to do that, I had to stop pretending, cease merely smoking Gauloise cigarettes, pining for Juliette Greco, and reading Nietzsche and Sartre in translation. I needed to travel and to learn languages, and for a poor kid in Illinois in 1957, there was only one way to do that. So, in January, 1958 I joined the Army. I wanted to go to the Army Language School, but the only way an enlisted man could do that was to belong to the Army Security Agency. Through the kindly intervention of a friend's father, who happened to be an FBI agent, I was given a security clearance despite my politics. I spent a wonderful year in Monterey, California learning Russian. Sent to Europe after graduation, I was assigned to a listening post in Coburg, Germany. Our job was to monitor Soviet tank traffic on the other side of the East/West German border. But when my German matured, I was transferred to Army Intelligence, and reassigned to detached duty with the West German Border police, the BGS, or *Bundesgrenzschutz*, patrolling the little triangle between the West German, East German and Czech borders.

I loved the work – I extended my tour by six months – but a new sense of direction the Army (and a new wife) had helped to foster led me to resign and return to school in 1961. After some negotiation, I was re-admitted – on probation – to the University of Illinois, where I did a double major in Slavic and German, graduating, finally, two years later.

Thus ends my first life, the life of a mixed-up kid. During these years I read voraciously, but in no particular direction. This was to change when I began my second life as an academic. I won a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, which – with my G. I. Bill money – let me become a graduate student in the Slavic department at Yale in 1963. Although my reading now became more concentrated, I took courses in several different departments. I studied with the people who defined literary criticism at Yale during those years as a means by which I could continue to learn how to read. In my own department I did a dissertation with Victor Erlich, but discovered the charms

and rigors of philology in Alex Schenker's course on Old Church Slavonic. Being appointed an assistant professor in 1968 made me feel like an ugly duckling who finally discovered a community that recognized him as one of their own.

It was an exciting time to be even a very small part of Kingman Brewster's Yale, and perhaps even more exhilarating to be professing literature. The early work of the great Russian philologist Roman Jakobson began to be felt in the US in the 1960s, an influence abetted by publication of Victor Erlich's book on Russian Formalism. But just as US scholars were discovering the Formalists, influential admirers of Jakobson in France, such as Claude Levi-Strauss, discovered Jakobson's later work as a founder of Prague Structuralism. The French consolidated their gains in the seventies, as figures such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes produced a body of radical Post-Structuralist works that came to dominate the profession.

Distinguished representatives of the new schools in New Haven maintained Yale's traditional preeminence in literary study throughout these years. For a neophyte assistant professor afflicted with terminal impulsiveness, it was a chaotic period of hyper stimulation. Jacques Ehrmann, before his premature death, made *Yale French Studies* a necessary tachometer for anyone wishing to experience the velocity of change in literary study during the sixties, and I was pleased to contribute to a number of issues he edited. My appointment was in Slavic, and I wrote a book on Dostoevsky and a number of articles on Gogol and other Russian figures. But my inability to focus led to work on a wide variety of non-Slavic topics, such as utopian fiction, chess (inspired by Bill Wimsatt's Christmas cards), detective stories, fairy tales, and the nonsense of Lewis Carroll.

I discovered others who were teaching beyond their departments in Peter Brooks from French and Al Kernan in English. What interested us was *literature*, not just a particular national example of it. There was a history department for history, a philosophy department for philosophy, but no literature department as such. The classicist Adam Parry later joined our group, and together we planned a course and a textbook that would focus on aspects of fiction often unattended in national language departments.

The course, when it was introduced in September 1970, was called Literature X (spelled out in the blue book as "eks, not ten") because it was not part of any of Yale's existing departments. The syllabus included Sophocles and Dickens, but contained Tarzan and Superman as well. Students attended Joseph Heller's anti-Viet Nam War play, "We Bombed in New Haven" (which did, indeed, bomb in New Haven). Erich Segal, fresh from helping to script the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*, lectured on his new novel, *Love Story*. We visited professional wrestling matches and religious theme parks to analyze their hidden narratives, and had a sexologist from Sweden come by to explain the semiotic implications of S/M in *The Story of O*.

The course was popular with students – not merely because of the notoriety it occasioned (articles in the New York Times and the august pages of *College English*), but

because it was where basic questions got addressed that were not then part of other introductory literature courses. Several students of Lit X later evolved into leaders of the field, such as David Damrosch, now Chair of Comparative Literature at Harvard.

Yale faculty response was, to say the least, mixed. But as more and more senior professors came on board, and follow up courses were introduced: (Lit. Y, a survey of literary theory taught by Peter Demetz) and Lit Z (dramatizing new modes of close reading), taught by Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman, the initiative gained respectability. Finally, a new Literature Major was established in 1973, administered by a board of distinguished senior scholars. In 1979 the major officially became the undergraduate program of the Comparative Literature department. In a classical Weberian progression from charisma to institution, Lit X became Lit. 120, Lit Y became Lit 300, and Lit. Z became Lit. 130.

But by that time I had discovered I was not quite the swan I thought I was when I was first appointed an Assistant Professor at Yale: denied tenure in 1975, I had gone off to the University of Texas. Although I was now Chair of a Slavic department, I felt like a bit of a fraud as a Professor of Russian. Not really convinced I was a professor at all, my doubts were compounded by that fatal preposition that always accompanies the title, that is, “Professor OF ...” It was getting harder and harder to define what followed that “of.”

During these years, I spent a lot of time in the Soviet Union. In Moscow, I became friends with a group around the Russian thinker and scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. I was immediately drawn to Bakhtin because – in a much profounder and creative way – he, too, had struggled with the gap between his life and his career. No one (including himself) ever figured out what discipline could claim him – he was read as a social theorist, a linguist, a Neo-Kantian philosopher, a religious guru, and a historian of the novel.

By this time, I had discovered that cooperating with others helped me to stay focused on long-range projects. So together with a gifted graduate student named Caryl Emerson (now professor at Princeton) and my old friend from graduate school, Vadim Liapunov, we initiated a series of Bakhtin translations. They were first in a series that included other books focused Russian and Czech literary theory. The decade of the seventies was a kind of golden age for what came to be known simply as “Theory,” and Bakhtin became one of the people you had to read if you were a player.

Although by this time I had seen a bit of the world, living in Austin, Texas was an exotic adventure. I reveled in it. I learnt about the distinctiveness of Texas Chili (for openers, no beans), Moravian barbecue, and the fine points of saloon life etiquette. I became a fan of cowboy whorehouse piano and Willie Nelson, who lived in Austin at that time. Roman Jakobson’s ex-wife, Svatya, taught Czech in the department, and I used to swim in the Lower Colorado with her and her two police dogs. But the university was crippled by Texas politics, and so in 1980 I moved to Indiana University, where my new wife, Katerina Clark, and I wrote a biography of Bakhtin that Harvard

brought out in 1984. Bloomington lacked Austin's glamour, but the University was even more generous in granting frequent leaves, so I spent the next four years traveling all over the place proselytizing for Bakhtin.

The decade I spent away from Yale was full of work, marvelous colleagues and foreign adventures; but at 4 o'clock in the morning, it had always seemed a kind of exile. So I was delighted to be called back to Yale by the Comparative Literature department in 1986. The scene that greeted me was very different from the one I had left. The age of high theory was over, and it was still not quite clear which of the contending schools would emerge as the new Next Thing. I did a book summarizing what I thought were the major lessons to be derived from Bakhtin. Among these was an emphasis on the interrelations between dialog in literature and dialogic processes in society. This led to a number of experiments in team teaching: "Problems in Cultural Criticism," with Sara Suleri, and World Literature with Vilashni Coopan. But by far the most interesting team teaching I did was in a course Bob Shulman, Professor of Molecular Biophysics and Biochemistry, and I did together several times on "Literature and Science." We sponsored conferences and co-authored indignant letters to the *New York Review of Books*. All in all, it was an experience that for me was life changing

These courses unfolded in the conflicted space between different factions of literary scholars, each of which fought for hegemony in the humanities. Combat was most intense on the border between those calling for a return to traditional, Western classics and those who sought to inscribe literature into a larger social matrix. The conflict sharpened after Alan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* became a best seller in 1987. Some members of the MLA defected to form their own, more traditionally defined organization, the National Association of Scholars. Actively partisan Chairs of NEH, such as Bill Bennet and Lynn Cheney, believed that a group of godless deconstructionists were leading the youth of America astray.

This polarization in the country at large was reflected at Yale with particular intensity. In 1989, Benno Schmidt appointed as Dean of Yale College Don Kagan – a much-respected historian for whose scholarship I have the highest regard. The new Dean made establishment of a Western Studies program a major goal for his administration. In a 1991 address to the National Association of Scholars he raised the stakes by erecting a binary opposition between scientists and humanists. He encouraged other administrators to hire more scientists, because "I don't know a single natural scientist who does not believe in the efficacy of reason, or the possibility of truth arrived at through reason. *On the other hand, the woods are full of humanists who doubt those things. Therefore, increasing the number and percentage of your faculty who believe in reason and truth is inherently a good thing*" (emphasis added.)

You may remember that this was a period when there was serious discussion at the highest level of eliminating whole departments at Yale, such as Sociology and Linguistics. From our quarters in Connecticut Hall, we couldn't help feeling that if the Humanities in general constituted a woods full of what the Dean called "a very

funny bunch of guys;” he must think that Comparative Literature was the very heart of the Black Forest of unreason itself. So I officially moved that time be set aside at a Yale college Faculty meeting for the faculty to discuss the Dean’s views, a proposal to which he graciously acceded. On October 4, 1991, at one of the largest Yale College faculty meetings ever held, the Dean’s printed remarks were discussed, capped by Bob Shulman’s remark that, in his view, the Dean’s vision of things was uninformed and divisive. With all the *maestoso* of a Sterling Professor, he added that the Dean had a naïve conception of how scientists really work: the Dean seemed to think every day they simply cut off another slice from the great salami of truth. No doubt coincidentally, very soon after that, the Dean and the President who appointed him were replaced (after some brief intervening appointments). The president left for good, but happily the Dean returned to his life as one of the university’s great scholar-teachers.

Things got better after 1995 or so, as Yale entered a new era of prosperity. Personally, I was wrestling with another dilemma. My work on Bakhtin had the result of type casting me as a spokesman for Dialogism. As in Alexander Dumas’ novel, Bakhtin had become my sinister Corsican twin. As a result, I began to feel hopelessly type cast. I had laughed when I heard Johnny – ‘Tarzan’ – Weissmuller lamented at the end of his career that no one would let him play Hamlet. In the late nineties, however, I began in a small way to see the real pathos of his situation.

I continued to read and learn from Bakhtin, but as the new millennium dawned, I was eager for something new. During a stay in Oxford as a younger man, I had picked up some bad habits at the Brasenose college high table, not least of which was a taste for French wines. This predilection led the distinguished psychoanalyst, Elise Snyder, whom I had married some years before, and me to buy a house in France. We used it as a center from which to visit vineyards up and down the Loire valley. At a certain point, we turned our pastime into a business. We imported wine from our French friends to restaurants and wine shops in Connecticut and New York, an undertaking of which I am sure Bakhtin – an admirer of that eminent citizen of Chinon, François Rabelais – would have approved.

The culture wars were now over. The dichotomy between study of the Western classics and more recent and varied texts could now be conceived with greater depth, complexity, and mutual respect than had been the case in the eighties and nineties. In a kind of provisionary coda, a more academic initiative I explored at this time was a return to Directed Studies and the classics, which I’d never stopped reading anyway. For a founder of Lit X, there was some irony – and much happiness – involved when in 2004 I received Yale’s Byrnes-Sewall prize for teaching in the philosophy arm of DS.

The same year I retired and began my third life in the happy uplands of Emeritania. Elise and I moved to New York, where I was kept out of trouble by serving as President of MLA, and by beginning a series of appointments as a wandering scholar, returning to Yale from time to time, but also teaching at NYU and Columbia. Not only a wandering scholar, I became a scholar who wandered in the courses I now

taught, mostly concerned with literacy. The role that reading has – in one way or another – played in my life eventuated in work I am currently doing with a group of literary scholars from around the country together with cognitive scientists at Haskins Laboratory. Funded by a multiple year grant from the Teagle Foundation, we are trying to grasp some of the implications the digital age holds out for the fate of reading. We are completing even as I speak a series of fMRI studies we hope will tell us more about what happens in the brain when conventional reading habits are challenged by complex literary texts.

This work has led to another turn in my interests. I have been learning about how the brain translates visual signals into auditory signals that can then become language in our minds. Without going into the details, suffice it this knowledge has led to a new recognition of the role contingency plays in our cognition. The focus of cryptanalysis on the stochastic contest between pattern and chance in breaking codes during the Second World War – and subsequent application of these discoveries in Information Theory – suggest that a complex form of mental gambling rules perception. So a new way to understand criticism has been opened that will occupy what is no doubt my final attempt to become an intellectual.

This new fascination with the power of contingency is sparked, I think, by my growing awareness of the huge role that chance has played in my own life. Currently one percent of the population in our country accounts for twenty five percent of the nation's total income. The median income in the US is now less than it costs to send a child to Princeton for one year. The huge majority of our citizens are condemned to stagnant living conditions, exclusion from our best schools, and increasing economic insecurity. So far, this reality has not led to class warfare or a profanation of the American lift-yourself-by-your-own- bootstraps theology. Never the less, all of this makes me deeply conscious that I could never repeat my biography under current conditions in our unhappy nation.

But I'd like to close on a happier note. As I now look back on it, I can see that for me personally, despite having an honorary Ph. D. from the University of Stockholm, I was always a slow learner. I always had to repeat things. But I learned.

The great Polish poet Wisława Szymborska has written

“Nothing ever happens twice.

In consequence, the sorry fact is

That we arrive here improvised

And leave without the chance to practice.”

She adds, “This course is offered only once.” And no doubt she's right, “Today is always gone tomorrow.” You can't really repeat. But I believe you can try again. My life has been a long series of attempts to come back from failure, a story of catch-ups and work-arounds: I had to repeat first grade; in the Army, my awkwardness with an M-1 rifle meant I had to repeat basic training; I was thrown out of the University of Illinois, and had to return to complete a B. A. almost ten years later. I was denied ten-

ure at Yale, returning to a different department only after a hiatus of eight years. By revisiting my childhood obsession with reading in my seventies, I seem to be repeating this pattern of serial recoveries. It appears to be a structure that provides the plot for my story. So, I end as I began, wrestling with literacy, although it is now a joy, and not the trauma I experienced in 1942. As the great hippie philosopher Wavy Gravy has said so well, “It’s never too late to have a happy childhood.”