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AN ORAL PATTERN AND ITS LITERARY ADAPTATION

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This essay is part of a larger project on the historical present in English. In a recent issue of *Text* (Fludernik 1991) I have presented a model for dealing with the historical present tense in present-day oral narrative, and the present paper intends to demonstrate that one can find precisely the same oral pattern in medieval English narrative and in English literature up until the eighteenth century. I contend that there exists an underlying narrative structure which allows the use of the present tense at specific points within a narrative episode, and I argue that these points be described as 'turns,' which correlate with reportability — the subjective experiential tellability of the story (Labov 1972; Fludernik 1991; Fludernik 1992a) In English literature this pattern already occurs in the very first text which has historical present tenses, and I suggest that it has therefore been directly adopted from oral narrative. In the process of narrative development from the written codification of oral storytelling via the written composition of texts on an oral model towards a purely writerly conception of narrative structure, the shape and function of the historical present tense necessarily undergo equivalent changes with the result that the oral pattern — except in pseudo-oral narrative forms (the diary, the letter, fictive oral discourse, e.g. in dramatic monologues) and in verse narrative (where the historical present tense seems to survive as a generic feature) — disappears in the realist novel and facilitates the proliferation of other uses of the present tense. What has traditionally counted as "the" historical present tense in nineteenth-century realist fiction in fact constitutes a phenomenon which is entirely different from the oral pattern of the historical present tense discussed in this essay. Whereas the oral pattern dominates medieval narrative poetry and texts in the early modern canon, the 'classic' nineteenth-century historical present tense needs to be described as a typical phenomenon of *written* prose narrative. The differences between these two patterns can be observed on both the formal and the functional level. Whereas the 'classic' historical present tense of nineteenth-century fiction and historical writing extends for passages of several consecutive sentences, frequently ranging from between a whole paragraph to a series of paragraphs and entire chapters (that development can be observed in great detail in the work of Charles Dickens¹), the oral pattern is based on "tense switching" (Wolfson 1978, 1979, 1982; Schiffrin 1981), that is to say on the sudden shift into the present tense and the equally sudden shift back into the past tense sometimes even within the same sentence. This dynamic tense switching pattern becomes obsolete as episodic narrative structure slowly turns into teleological narrative and replaces the narrative episode by a series of 'scenes.' (See

below.) Since the nineteenth century the classic historical present tense of extended passages has developed further in a new direction, usurping the position of narrative tense itself. What is now being analyzed as the "narrative" present tense (Cohn 1989, 1991; Neumann 1990, 1991) describes texts in which the entire narrative (or a series of chapters, or strand of scenes) is related in the present tense as the basic narrative tempus. In this latest use of the present tense in narrative, the present *replaces* the former 'epic' preterite. It therefore loses its inherent marked or foregrounding quality, which had derived from the very contrast between the present tense and the preterital background norm.

In this essay I will concentrate on medieval English narrative and analyze the historical present tense pattern and its interplay with other uses of the present tense. I will briefly also attempt an outline of the functional changes brought about in the course of the orality-literacy continuum characteristic of medieval narrative genres (Fleischman 1990, Tristram 1983²), and I will point out how these changes directly produced the avatars of the typical nineteenth-century historical present tense. For reasons of space I have to dispense with a discussion of the more traditional accounts of the historical present tense.

The Historical Present Tense in Oral Narrative

In recent years there has been a renewed effort at understanding the historical present tense. In the wake of Labov/Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972), who analyzed narrative structure in everyday conversational storytelling, Wolfson (1978, 1979, 1982) produced a theory of narrative "performance." Within this framework the historical present tense constitutes one of several devices employed to emphasize the performative quality of an orally told story. Such performative features correlate with what Labov calls internal evaluation, i.e. all those narrative factors except explicit ("external") evaluative commentary that enhance the tellability of the narrative.³ This framework has been adopted also by Schiffrin in her incisive (1981) study of tense switching in oral narrative. Schiffrin particularly notes the dynamic of the shift *back into* the past tense and locates the present tense occurrences within the "complicating action" category of Labov's narrative schema. In Fleischman's recent (1990) monograph Schiffrin's excellent contribution has now been refined and adapted to the situation of medieval narrative. Fleischman demonstrates her temporal theory on the Old French narrative corpus. She therefore has to deal with the more literary types of competing present tenses in medieval texts, and she additionally introduces the all-important perspective of the oral-literate continuum, a question which she discusses at length. Fleischman's study deserves particular recommendation also for having recognized the existence of what she calls the "visualizing present," i.e. the common medieval use of the present tense in descriptive passages and at other junctures where the plot progression is momentarily halted.

My own model (Fludernik 1991, 1992a) departs from the details of Labov's narrative structure and supplements Fleischman's model by reanalyzing the functions of her fore-

grounded and backgrounded narrative levels as parts of a dynamic pattern that constitutes a semiotic system of narrative text production and story appreciation. In the development from oral to written composition this double-tiered semiotic system breaks down, and as a consequence the concomitant loss of intonational marking causes an eventual systematic change of the tense pattern, too.⁴

Although Labov's distinction between narrative clauses and (embedded) evaluation already prefigures what I call the plot-line and off-plotline levels of narrative, this two-level pattern has been described most clearly in Livia Polanyi's work, as early as her "False Turns Can Be True" (1978). Polanyi demonstrates a frequent oral pattern in which initial orientation is radically cut short to jump right into the major narrative episode and where, once that highlight has been mentioned, the narrator drops into off-line to retrieve the formerly excised orientational material or to explain the situation and its significance by means of narrational commentary:

- (1) B: {...} he said could you come now so he . described where it was and off I went --- {...} frightfully expansive collection of flats set in {...} gardens
 {...} very well kept and everything you know

A: m

B: m - so off I went . the flat was {...} (Bublitz 1989, handout)

In contrast to Fleischman (and Labov) Polanyi therefore stresses the dynamic interaction of off-plotline material with the level of plot-oriented narrative clauses.

My model for the historical present tense in oral and quasi-oral narrative relies on insights presented by Harweg in a little-known essay from the 1970s (Harweg 1975). I have adapted Harweg's categories and incorporated them into the double-tiered system of plotline and off-plotline levels which is so characteristic of oral narrative. This system requires a semiotic model of narrative appreciation. The two narrative levels have important functions in the presentation of the story and are distinguished from one another by means of intonational, morphological (tense), syntactic, and structural features. In so far as certain elements function as signals that alert the listener to their functional status within the pattern of episodic narrative, such signals operate as signs on higher interpretational levels in the sense of Lotman's secondary sign system (Lotman 1977). The model therefore entails a complementary semiotic system of narrative comprehension.

The basic contrast is between the plotline and the off-plotline. The off-plotline basically includes two kinds of elements — embedded orientation and commentary (explanatory, evaluative, orientational). These can interrupt the plotline at almost any point. The off-plotline foregrounds the narrator-narratee relationship and frequently elicits verbal interaction from the listener. In the exchange quoted under (1) above, speaker A signals his understanding of B's explanation (which is particularly addressee-oriented) by contributing an encouraging *m*.

- (4) In Armorik, that called is Britayne,
 There was a knyght that loved and dide his payne [...]
 (CT F 729-730; "Franklin's Tale")

The beginning of the story line, the *incipit*, as I call it, is set off from the orientation section by a second temporal marker, this time a punctual (though usually indefinite) temporal expression. Harweg calls this an *adeictic* (Harweg 1975). Examples are *one day, on a beautiful morning in May, in that seson on a day*, etc. This specification of the incipit may sometimes be left implicit. Oral narratives as a rule consist of a series of episodes strung together within a frame of an initial incipit and a final resolution. Story-internal incipits therefore use a number of different temporal and non-temporal incipit markers such as temporal *when* or *while* clauses (*when I arrived in town...*) or anaphoric temporal expressions such as *the next morning, later, after a while* etc. Story-internal incipits in oral narrative are also consistently marked by connectives such as *so, now, or anyway*. These closely correspond to what Schifffrin (1987) has presented as "discourse markers."

- (5) So he calls me up the next day (Wolfson 1978: 217)

Incipits both external and internal can be emphasized additionally by syntactic means. Internal episode incipits frequently receive double marking with directional adverb or (directional) prepositional phrase preposing with or without concomitant inversion:

- (6) so off I went (= (1) above)
 So (0.11) off he went again
 with net over his back (Fludernik 1991: 384)
- (7) a. Bifil that in that seson on a day (CT A 19)
 b. Amorwe, whan that day bigan to sprynge,
 Up roosoure Hoost, and [...] (CT A 822-823)
 c. And so bifel that in a dawenyng [...] (CT B2 2882; *4072)

Initial story incipits in Middle English frequently employ the sentence-initial *bifil*. Dislocation is another common device used to emphasize the beginning of the story (or even an episode beginning):⁷

- (8) THIS DUC, of whom I make mencion,
 Whan he was come almoost unto the toun,
 [...]
 HE was war, [...] (CT A 893-896; italics and capitals mine)

This passage exemplifies both the temporal specification by means of a *when*-clause and the topicalization (left dislocation).

The *setting*, as I call it, designates the episode-internal state of affairs which precedes, and provides the background for, the imminent incidence of events that will mark important

- (12) Now by that he [Tomazo] had remained there for some time meditating upon his misfortune in chill-blood [setting], Jemmy *gets* up [incipit] and, perceiving his master gone, *runs* [incidence] into the back side where he *finds* [incidence] the horse in a cold trance, wondering what was become of the grass that used to grow in England, but could [result] not imagine where Tomazo should be.

(*Don Tomazo*; Peterson 1961: 196; my emphasis)

- (13) One afternoon, when the chestnuts were coming into flower, Maggie had brought her chair outside the front door, and was seated there with a book on her knees. Her dark eyes had wandered from the book [...] they seemed rather to be searching for something that was not disclosed by the sunshine [...]

Suddenly she was roused by the sound of the opening gate and of footsteps on the gravel. (*The Mill on the Floss* IV,iii; Eliot 1986: 278-279)

The point of *incidence* can be emphasized by the use of a historical present tense and additionally marked by directional adverb or directional prepositional phrase preposing.

- (14) [...] when I went to see it [the house],
the guy says to me incidence
(Wolfson 1978:217)
- (15) And then he's had another look up incipit
and there were three nuns
and they're all (h)uddled together (0.71)
sheltering, you see [...] embedded orientation
And he shouts incidence
'Hey (0.85), the bloody nuns.'
(Fludernik 1991: 384)
- (16) One day, when I was sitting all alone,
In comes Philotas from a victory... (Denk 1948: 56)

Note the use of the present perfect in the function of a historical present tense in (15): *he's had another look up*. This is a common feature also in Middle English, as Roloff (1924) and Bauer (1970) noted already.

Incidences are not necessarily definable in terms of plot climaxes but correlate with subjectively determined emotional highlights, which for the narrator constitute tellable occurrences. The switch into the historical present tense therefore comes at the onset of reportable events. A subsequent switch *back into the past tense* then either signals a result/reaction/resolution moment (see below), or initiates an off-line section of embedded orientation. In the

oral pattern the points of incidence are frequently marked lexically by expressions denoting the unexpectedness or uncanniness of an event: *suddenly*, *all at once*, etc.

- (17) And when he heard me comming
He suddenly lookes up... (Denk 1948: 56)
- Thus spoke she, when from sea they suddenly do hear
A strong and horrid noise (Drayton, *Polyolbion* XIX, 139; cited Denk: 57)

In the medieval corpus these criteria also apply, but the present tense is additionally utilized to mark events of general significance for the plot. I will illustrate this on the basis of the *Genesis and Exodus* text. As far as I am aware, the suggestion that plot-related significance might influence the choice of a (historical) present tense has been proposed only for the classic languages (von Fritz 1949), Old Irish (Fulk 1987), and Enos (1981) for the presents in the *King James Bible* (where classical linguistic norms could arguably be said to interfere with native English usage). What I propose to do is to reintroduce these findings into the discussion and to point to a common denominator between the standard oral pattern for the historical present tense and the thesis of a plot-related significance. This common denominator can be posited to exist in what I call the narrative 'turn.' The oral pattern typically highlights major (surprising, remarkable and emotionally memorable) incidences, 'turns' of the screw, so to speak, which heighten the suspense and involve narrator and audience in a conceptualization of a series of occurrences. This is not to say, however, that the historical present is used for 'vivid' events, because the supposed vividness of the events is an *effect* of the succession of plot-line aorists, which transform the occurrences into punctual progression, and of the replacement of such aorists by the historical present tense. The term aorist here is a nar-ratological one, used in accordance with Bal (1985: 15), and does not imply the existence of a morphological aorist in English. In conversational narratives the historical present tenses of the incidence points regularly correlate with the reportability of the events thus performatively foregrounded.

In the development from the oral to the written pattern of episodic narrative, a number of modifications can be observed. In a longer text 'turns' may be visualized by the narrator at major episode junctures. It then becomes possible also to use the historic present at the beginning of episodes. We have noted this correlation already in oral stories, and it is a pervasive feature of early modern English episodic narrative. Defoe makes frequent use of this doubly marked incipit structure:

- (18) She laid her Scheme another way, and without acquainting me of it, but she was resolv'd to find it out, if possible; *so she goes* to a certain Friend of hers who was acquainted in the Family, that she guess'd at, and told her Friend she had some extraordinary business with such a Gentleman (who by the way was no less than a Baronet, and of a very good Family)

In early modern English literature one can observe a breakdown of the episodic narrative pattern and its replacement by the narrative "scene" (Ermarth 1981). Ermarth connects the adoption of the scene pattern with dramatic models of a teleological kind. Whereas episodes are dynamically structured in terms of immediate reactions to incidences, drama and narrative transfer dynamicity (if I am allowed to coin this term) to the interaction of larger structural units. Teleology becomes operative particularly through the importance of closure of the narrative as a whole, with dramatic narrative plotted to inevitably tend towards its endpoint (and comedy here retains more of the haphazard episodical quality of oral narrative). Fiction thus substitutes the life story, i.e. a typically reflective historical pattern, for the earlier picaresque series of unreflected exploits of no ultimate personal, moral or developmental significance. Although the influence of drama, particularly of tragedy and the genre of Elizabethan history, on early fiction and, later, on the structure of the nineteenth-century novel deserves some serious attention from such a perspective, there is unfortunately no space for a discussion of this ulterior development in the present paper. Ermarth's thesis, which needs to be considered a valuable first step towards such a discussion, seems to me to jump too quickly from the episodic to the scenic pattern, without elaborating how this development precisely came about. Early modern English prose offers some first indications or guidelines towards answering this question. For thematic reasons sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century narrative (and Defoe's fictional oeuvre) foreground not the experiencing self of the protagonist but the protagonists' ability to — literally — plot, to get the better of their antagonists in tricks, intrigues, and knavery. In that framework, which is already heavily influenced by the dramatic tradition (if one only thinks of the Jacobean stage), the protagonist's moves and their originality acquire prime importance. One can therefore argue that the oral narrative episode undergoes a restructuring process in order to make it compatible with the new function of describing plot moves and thus replaces the oral pattern and its experiential core. Such a restructuring was already quite evident from the examples quoted above from *Don Tomazo* and *Moll Flanders*. A second major problem with the oral episode is its brevity since it requires that numerous episodes be strung together, and it then becomes difficult to handle larger structural units. In medieval narrative narratorial commentary manages most of these transitions, but in early modern narrative there is usually little narratorial evaluation. The concatenation of aimless exploits that do not lead to any real resolutions helps to collapse the result slot with the incipit of the following sub-episode, and as a consequence one encounters practically only present tenses — except for the backgrounded off-plotline material):

- (20) In that amaze he *flies* [incipit] about to seek him, but not succeeding in his search, *away he posts* [incidence, combined with result] to Moffat. In the meanwhile the old man *rises* [incipit], who finding [incidence] both his son and Don Tomazo absent, yet seeing their horses, could not conjecture

[result] what the De'll should be become of 'em. He waited [incipit?] for some hours with patience, expecting their return, but neither appearing, *away goes he also* [result combined with incipit] to draw dryfoot after both.
(*Don Tomazo*; Peterson 1961: 196; my emphasis)

It is therefore the dismantling of the oral episode pattern which paves the way towards a linear plotline of narrative clauses. At the same time the renewed eighteenth-century interest in the figural psyche, allows narrative to recapture the experiential quality that it had practically lost in the picaresque tradition. The adoption of the scene as a structural pattern can then be regarded as a direct consequence of this restitution of the original experiential core of the oral narrative episode, but it is adopted at a time when that oral pattern has already become replaced by a less and less dynamic linear structure. The realist novel alternates between dramatized scenes and narratorial summary. In this new pattern the incipit of a scene becomes the major structural point of importance, and it is the point at which the pattern of incidence survives as we have seen. The importance of the incidence in this pattern lies no longer in an unexpected event itself (as it would in the oral pattern), but in its preparatory introduction to the scene. It is what transpires between Maggie and Bob in the passage that I have quoted above under (13) that will be important for the novel, not the simple arrival of Bob as an experience in itself.

Since even this survival of the setting/incipit complex from the oral pattern no longer employs a historical present tense, the present tense in nineteenth-century fiction is now free to be used for a larger structural pattern, too. It can then either highlight descriptions of breathtaking events — e.g. in the escape passage of chapter III,xiii of *A Tale of Two Cities*, or in the fatal episode of chapter II,xiii in *The Elective Affinities* — or it can simply be used descriptively. Both of these uses implicitly suggest the transferral of microstructural functions of the present tense in the oral pattern (for narrative turns and descriptions respectively) onto a larger macro-structural level. As such one can even find first examples in Chaucer, as the battle scene in "The Knight's Tale" (CT A 2600 ff.), which can serve as an example of the action scene, and the descriptions of poor Custance at the mercy of the elements (see below) as a model for the static scene.

In English realist fiction the second half of the nineteenth century sees a further development in the use of the present tense in novels. From paragraphs and then entire chapters the present moves to usurp the place of the preterite as the basic narrative tense. Those novels which employ this device for aesthetic reasons correlate the use of the present tense with a lack of narrative distance which is motivated either thematically or psychologically, for instance through the person of a narrator who is unable or unwilling to judge or evaluate events (Coetzee's protagonist in *Waiting for the Barbarians* or *In the Heart of the Country*). The narrative present tense can be employed with great psychological validity in figural narrative (i.e. narrative focalized through a reflector character) as in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, Butor's *La*

Modification, or in Atwood's *Surfacing* (Part I).⁸ In figural narrative the present tense constitutes an ideal device for capturing the developmental quality and the simultaneity features of mental processes. The nineteenth-century use of the classic historical present tense also survives in twentieth century fiction, but only in rare places. It additionally invades figural narrative, where the change of tense within descriptions of consciousness or perceptions becomes hardly noticeable and loses its foregrounding quality.

To document these historical developments would require ample illustration and elaboration. On the other hand, one cannot really discuss the historical present tense even in medieval English literature without at least a glance at this larger development. Only such a larger perspective makes it possible to see how peculiarities of the medieval evidence fall into place as intermediary forms between changing oral and written structures of narration.

***The Historical Present Tense in Middle English Narrative:
Evidence for the Oral Pattern***

In the following I will document the existence of the oral pattern in Middle English narrative. For reasons of space I concentrate on two texts: *Genesis and Exodus*, the earliest English narrative that uses historical present tenses; and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, from which I have chosen "The Man of Law's Tale" for extensive demonstration (most examples are usually derived from "The Knight's Tale"). These are representative *samples* of ME narrative. For the purpose of the present argument, the *existence* of the oral pattern is at issue, *not* its statistical occurrence in ME narrative in general. (As is to be expected, one can of course make distinctions between, say, the use of the device by Gower and Chaucer.) A more exhaustive analysis can only be presented in monograph fashion.

I will now turn to what is probably the earliest English text using the historic present tense, the early Middle English *Genesis and Exodus*. All historical presents in *Genesis and Exodus* can be analyzed as marking high points of the narrative sequence which change the direction of the plot. This entirely conforms to what Pfister has claimed regarding the Wulfila Gospels, where, he argues, the historical present is employed to mark the beginning of a new 'scene', the introduction of a new person, or a new topic (see also Enos 1981). Graef (1889) also notes the use of the historic present at the beginnings of new episodes and at important points of the narrative. Since the use of the historical present tense is optional, it can be argued that only those events which seem to be particularly noteworthy or dramatically interesting receive the particular emphasis supplied by the shift in tense.

Let us now look at some examples in their narrative context. In line 465 there is a historical present:

(21) Sella wuneπ oc lamech wið.

This verse occurs in the middle of a longish sequence, which starts out with the remark that Lamech was the first bigamist (ll. 447-448)—a 'point' of the story that is in the preterite. We hear next that he took Adah and "another" wife (l. 454). The text dwells at length on Adah's offspring, and then changes the topic to Sella and the offspring that Lamech has from her. The historical present in l. 465 thus marks a change in narrative focus, turning to the second wife, while at the same time emphatically foregrounding the deed that made Lamech a bigamist. The *wuneπ* is inchoative rather than durative (as one would surmise from the etymology) because it really corresponds to 'and then he went and slept with Sella as a husband.'

A similar focal point is expressed by l. 1172 ('and Abemelech now takes Sarah'), because the event ushers in the succession of mishaps befalling Abemelech as a consequence of this action.

The same use can be observed very well in the larger context of Jacob's service with Laban and Joseph's adventures with Pharaoh's wife. The story of Laban and Jacob reaches a first point when the narrator remarks

(22) Longe haued nu iacob ben her
wið laban fulle .xiii. ger;⁹ (ll. 1709-1710) (my emphasis)

This is one of the uses of the present tense for the narrator's concluding summary which can be observed as a common feature also in Chaucer. (I will comment on the summative present below.) The quarrel with Laban now takes its course, and the 'turn' of the story comes with Laban's promise that Jacob can have whatever he wants (l. 1717 ff.). Following this we get a description of the terms of the covenant (*forward*), which are explicated precisely in the present tense, but the eventual outcome (Result) is given in the past:

(23) Wel he feið him ðat he fal hauen
for hire, quat-fo he wile crauen.
forward if mad of alle fep,
Of onef bles iacob nim kep,
And if of ðo fpotted cumen,
ðo fulen him ben for hire numen;
fep or got, hafwed, arled, or grei,
Ben don fro iacob fer a-wei;
ðog him boren ðes onef bles
Vn-like manige and likeles. (ll. 1717-1726)

As regards the terms of the treaty between Laban and Jacob, it has to be noted that this can be taken as a kind of free indirect discourse, with the present tense acting as a tense metaphor, although it may be safer to assume the narrator is citing the terms of the treaty on the level of

the narration—terms not being narrative events. When Jacob realizes he has been cheated (all in the preterite), he becomes angry ("is him loð", as the text says) and "takeð red" and departs (ll. 1736-37), marking another turning point in the narrative.

The same pattern is repeated in Joseph's adventure with Pharaoh's wife. The long sequence in which she tries to seduce him is given in the narrative past, with the episode beginning marked by a temporal specification (*an time*), but when Joseph refuses to respond, she "decides" to take revenge (l. 2028 ff.). This initiates a sequence of historical presents, including her crucial actions to go to her lord and accuse Joseph. The terms of this accusation are then given in direct speech:

- (24) An time he was at hire tgeld,
 ðo ghe him his mentel for-held;
 for he wið hire ne wulde fpeken,
 Ghe ðhenkeð on him for to ben wreken;
 Sone ghe mai hire louerd fen,
 Ghe god him bitterlike a-gen,
 And feið iofeph hire wulde don,
 ðat ghe ne migte him bringen on;
 "ðif mentel ic wið-held for-ði,
 To tawnen [ðe] ðe fode her-bi."
 ðe wite if hife(.) ðe right if hire,
 God al-migtin ðe fode fhire. (ll. 2025-2036)

After the direct accusation we then have the odd lines: 'The blame is his, the right is hers, / May God discern the truth!' (ll. 2035-36), which I take to be the narrator's resumé of the situation—as the Pharaoh's wife she has the greater claim on truth.

The story then takes its fatal turn—the Pharaoh *believes* his wife and *incarcerates* Joseph, still in the line of historical presents, and the result of this decision is then given in the preterite, which marks the conclusion of the episode:

- (25) Pvtifar trewið hife wiwes tale,
 And haued dempt iofep to bale;
 He bad [him] ben fperd faft dun,
 And holden harde in prifun. (ll. 2037-40)

Note that the second 'present' is a historical present perfect. The episode thus reflects the very present-day pattern in oral narrative in which the episode beginning is marked by temporal specification and a preterite and the tellable events are narrated in the present, with a closure in the preterite.

The following episode is signalled by the new start, "While he was there, the gaoler conceived such a liking for him," in which *gan* is inchoative for the next episode and the

temporal clause ("quile he waf ðer") marks the temporal departure point for the new sequence. And this is immediately followed by the first major turning point of that episode: Joseph is given the run of the prison—with a historical present perfect: "haueð bi-tagt" (l. 2043). This constitutes an important turning point not only for the plot (enabling Joseph to hear of the dreams of the baker and the butler, but it is an important aspect of the 'point' of the biblical story as such, since it anticipates Joseph's eventual raising to the position of the Pharaoh's son-in-law, allegorically giving Joseph the keys to the earthly kingdom since he has merited being so raised by his steadfastness and virtue. The significance of his marriage to the Pharaoh's daughter is again highlighted by a historical present

- (26) Iofep to wiue his [Pharaoh's] dowter nam.
 Oðer *is nu* quan ear bicam. (ll. 2147-48)

The marriage to Pharaoh's daughter clearly marks the resolution of Joseph's troubles (l. 2147), and the narrator's resumé in the present tense emphasizes how Joseph has changed status, both in reality as well as symbolically.

Although most presents in Genesis and Exodus are historical presents, the text also has a very characteristic use of the present tense which is closely aligned to the narrator's resumé and occurs only in concluding parts of episodes, providing a perspective onto the future. This use of the present is interesting because it can be found also pervasively in later Middle English narrative, e.g. in Chaucer.¹⁰ Note that most of the verbs at such points are imperfective, durative, like the *is* in l. 2148—"oðer is nu quan ear bicam". I will give only one example, the banishment of Adam and Eve from Paradise. The clothing of Adam and Eve constitutes a topic of concluding status, since they will from now on continue to be clothed. So, too, the shutting of the gates of Paradise, which will remain shut until Jesus' death on the cross, an event referred to by a 'future' present:

- (27) ðor-wið he ben nu boðen frid,
 And here fame fundel is hid.
 He ben don ut of paradif,
 ðat erd al ful of fwete blif;
 He ben don ut of bliffes erd,
 Cherubin hauet ðe gatef fperd;
 Ne fulen it neuere ben un-don,
 Til ihesus beð on Rode don;
 Ne fulen it neuermore ben opened,
 Til ihesus beð on rode dead. (ll. 379-388)

Not only are these kinds of passages oriented towards 'future events;' they additionally exemplify the narrator's 'omniscience' and his evaluative involvement in the telling, a feature that is generally prominent in Middle English narrative.

I will now turn to Chaucer and attempt to discuss the beginning of the "Man of Law's Tale" with a view towards explaining *all* the present tenses encountered between ll. 134 and 217 of the text. It should be borne in mind that, as Bauer reminds us considerably (1970: 53), in "The Knight's Tale" alone eighty percent of all historical presents have preterite readings in other manuscripts. One hardly needs to be amazed at this, considering that the historical present, as an optional device, has been considered to occur at random, therefore easily falling prey to scribal inaccuracy and textual revision.

The "Man of Law's Tale" starts with a preface that provides some explanation how the Sultan of Syria got to know about Custance and came to fall in love with her. The tale begins with the past story time markers "whilom" and the preterite—"In Surrye whilom dwelte a compaignye" (134), and the beginning of the 'action' is marked by "Now fil." (l. 141) The orientation in ll. 134-140 provides some general remarks about the quality of the merchandise produced and sold by the Syrian merchants and emphasizes this general 'fact' (exceeding the limits of the story in their temporal dimension) by a present:

- (28) Hir chaffare was so thrifty and so newe
That every wight *hath* deyntee to chaffare
With hem, and eek to sellen hem hire ware. (B¹ 138-140)

The onset of the merchants' journey to Rome, which is important because they there come to see Custance and can report to their Sultan of her beauty and virtue—after the 'here starts the action' marker in line 141 ("Now fil")—continues in the present, since the decision to go to Rome constitutes an important development in the plot.

- (29) Now fil it that the maistres of that sort
Han shapen hem to Rome for to wende; (B¹ 141-142)

Likewise, the merchant's arrival in Rome is marked by the historical present: "they take hir herbergage" (l. 147).

The more particular onset of the Custance plot is again marked by the preterite: "so bifel" (l. 150), which introduces the crucial encounter with Custance. The sojourn in Rome is then quickly brought to an end ("But now to purpos lat us turne agayn" (l. 170)), and the merchants wend their way home:

- (30) Thise merchantz han doon fraught hir shippes newe,
And whan they han this blisful mayden sayn,
Hoom to Surrye been they went ful fayn,
And doon hir nedes as they han doon yoore,
And lyven in wele; I kan sey yow namoore. (B¹ 171-175)

All these tenses are presents or relate to the present tense system (Weinrich 1964). In ll. 171-172 the present perfect marks anteriority, but the main action of going home is signalled as

important by a historical present perfect (*been they went*¹¹). Note also the preposing of the adverbial phrase "home to Syria," which additionally emphasizes a major turning point. It is of course no coincidence that their seeing Custance is also noted in the 'historic' present perfect tense, albeit in an anterior temporal clause. The point is that—for the "purpos" of the tale—to see Custance constitutes the merchants' major achievement in Rome. This is borne out by the narrator's following remarks, in which he uses the present to mention a state of affairs reaching into the 'future,' after which he immediately leaves the topic of the merchants behind: 'They lived happily ever after, but it is of no concern to us.' The merchants, except for the report they give to the Sultan, here exit from the plot and are heard of no more (not even among those killed in the 'blood bath' instigated by the Sultan's mother).

The next turn again comes with a "Now fil it" (l. 176), and the report of Custance's beauty and its effect on the Sultan are then given in highlighted version:

- (31) Amonges othere thynges, specially,
 Thise marchantz han hym toold of dame Custance
 So greet noblesse in earnest, ceriously,
 That this Sowdan hath caught so greet plesance
 To han hir figure in his remembrance,
 That al his lust and al his bisy cure
 Was for to love hire while his lyf may dure. (B¹ 183-189)

"Han hym toold," another historical present perfect, and "hath caught" mark the junctures of the plot, and the (enduring and fatal) *effect* of this information on the Sultan is given in the preterite: "*Was for to love hire.*"

After a lengthy ominous remark by the narrator on how the stars in the sky preordain every man's death (ll. 190-203), the story proceeds with the council scene, the outcome of which is the Sultan's intention to acquire Custance, even though this means conversion to Christianity. (One can speculate on the propriety of this 'means to an end' adoption of Christianity in the story, particularly since it is obviously motivated by sexual desire and the decision to ruthlessly acquire by all means what is out of one's reach.) The Sultan's decision is again appropriately marked by the historical present perfect: "hath to hem declared" (l. 206).

Ll. 211-217 portray the council given to the Sultan.

- (32) Diverse men diverse thynges seyden;
 They argumenten, casten up and doun;
 Many a subtil resoun forth they leyden;
 They speken of magyk and abusioun.
 But finally, as in conclusioun,
 They kan nat seen in that noon advantage,

Ne in noon oother wey, save mariage.

The alternation of tenses at the beginning of the stanza ("seyden," "argumenten," "casten," "leyden," "speken") could be explained by conjoining and subsequent deletion of the tense morphemes (the Kiparsky theory), although one can consider these presents as exemplifying descriptions, particularly so since their *order* is readily invertible (Labov's criterion for non-narrative clauses). The final couplet, however, is important to the plot because it resolves the issue of how to 'get' Custance: this can only be done by way of marriage. Here the present marks a 'turn.'

These final lines need to be noted especially for the fact that the councillors' opinions are summarized, as if in a free indirect discourse rendering of what they say. Already Graef, Roloff, Benson and Bauer noted that the rendering of character's speech and thought in indirect discourse is frequently cast in the present tense. There may be various different reasons for this. In the present case the passage introduces the necessity of marriage, a further developing point of the plot—hence 'highlighting' is a convincing explanation. There are additional passages in which it seems fair to say that the content of the directly quoted utterance needs to be considered a highlight in terms of the plot, and one can find additional passages also where a present appears to be used as a tense metaphor, signalling a description of the character's consciousness. (I will quote an example of this later on.) Although the possibility of alternative interpretations of such present tenses smacks of the very undecidability and erraticness with which earlier accounts of the historical present have been charged, these alternatives are alternatives of *interpretation* (except in the case of the Kiparskyan zero-morpheme), and they are therefore mutually compatible alternatives. That is to say, functionally speaking, it makes as much sense to interpret these lines as the narrator's summary of these councillors' incompetence, as to speak of an oblique free indirect discourse rendering of their words. A free indirect discourse reading of this final couplet is supported additionally by the adverb *finally*. According to the pattern I have presented *finally* should trigger a resultative preterite. Since this is not in fact the case, the present in this place becomes emphatically foregrounded (departing from the expected pattern) and therefore invites a 'metaphorical' (Weinrich 1964) reading.

I will here break off from this detailed stanza by stanza account of "The Man of Law's Tale." A brief summary of the types of presents that I have found in the text is now in order.

(i) The major use of the present besides the historical present occurs in what I term the "*scene*." The "*scene*" is a device by which the narrator stops the plot sequence and describes—usually in condensed form—a series of actions or states, lifting them to a level of general contemplation, or of narratorial comment.

- (33) Yeres and dayes fleet this creature
Thurghout the See of Grece unto the Strayte

Of Marrok, as it was hire aventure.
 On many a sory meel now may she bayte;
 After hir deeth ful often may she wayte,
 Er that the wilde wawes wol hire dryve
 Unto the place ther she shal arryve. (B¹ 463-469)

The stanza starts in the preterite, summarizing the adventures of Custance over years in three bare lines of verse. Then the present tense (in a modal connotation) presents her dire situation—'she will have to eat many a sorrowful meal' etc.—and the scene is closed by the narrator's omniscient conclusion of where she will land. The narrator here clearly arrests the plot sequence, 'discussing' rather than 'narrating' (Weinrich 1964) Custance's destiny, and condensing it into a static picture. This device, as we have seen, was available already in Genesis and Exodus in the "Longe haued nu iacob been her / wið laban fulle .xiii. ger" (ll. 1709-1710).

A more extended scene occurs at the reunion of Custance with her husband Alla:

(34) But finally, whan that the sothe is wist
 That Alla giltelees was of hir wo,
 I trowe an hundred tymes been they kist,
 And swich a blisse is ther bitwix hem two
 That, save the joye that lasteth everemo,
 Ther is noon lyk that any creature
 Hath seyn or shal, whil that the world may dure. (B¹ 1072-1078)

Again the narrator is very active in this scene, even after the two highlighted narrative actions have been mentioned (*sothe is wist*—"the truth is (finally) recognized;" *been they kist*), when he goes on to describe their joy eternal. Note that the first of these two historical presents occurs in a subsidiary clause, and that the present perfect (*been they kist*) overrules a resultative preterite after *finally*.

Besides the "scene" type (i), I have found in the tale the following other uses of the present tense:

(ii) The *Present for 'Future' States*:

(35) This kyng Alla, whan he his tyme say,
 With his Custance, his hooly wyf so sweete,
 To Engelond been they come the righte way,
 Wher as they lyve in joye and in quiete. (B¹ 1128-1131)

After the arrival in England (a plot point expressed in the historic present perfect), their future marital happiness is given in the present for future states: *they lyve in joye and in quiete*.

(iii) The *Present for Conjoined Structures*, which is fairly rare, and which may in fact be explained differently according to context. We have earlier mentioned an example for (ll. 212-214). Another instance is the following:

- (36) With that hir coverchief of hir heed she breyde,
 And over his litel eyen she it leyde,
 And in hir arme she *lulleth* it ful faste,
 And into hevne hire eyen up she caste. (B¹ 837-840)

This is extremely odd, and one not very convincing explanation is that of a Kiparskyan conjoined structure. Fleischman's "visualizing present," or a foregrounding that emphasizes Custance's allegorical posture as the Virgin Mary could be valid alternative explanations. Note that we have here one of the many cases where the preterite could have been chosen without any consequence for either meter or rhyme.

(iv) The *Present for Indirect Speech* (or free indirect speech) or the *Representation of Consciousness*:

- (37) They sworn and assenten, every man,
 To lyve with hire and dye, and by hire stonde,
 And everich, in the beste wise he *kan*,
 To strengthen hire *shal* alle his frendes fonde; (B¹ 344-347)

The passage starts with the foregrounding of the fatal consent and moves off into indirect discourse, with ll. 346-47 in free indirect discourse. We have discussed such instances above. There is a distinct pattern of such tense metaphor for consciousness and speech in Middle English, and from what Fleischman quotes in her book there seems to be similar evidence from Old French.¹²

(v) The *Present Tense for Authorial Summarization of ongoing action*, particularly in the process of a 'change of scene':

- (38) But to kyng Alla, which I spak of yoore,
 That for his wyf wepeth and siketh soore,
 I wol retourne, and lete I wol Custance
 Under the senatoures governance. (B¹ 984-987)

(vi) Finally, but most pervasively, there is of course the *Historical Present Tense* proper, which is employed for inchoative actions initiating episodes and for highlighted moments of the narrative sequence:

- (39) Alla the kyng comth hoom soone after this
 Unto his castel, of the which I tolde,
 And asketh where his wyf and his child is.

The constable gan aboute his herte colde,
 And pleyntyly al the manere he hym tolde
 As ye han herd—I kan telle it no bettre—
 And sheweth the kyng his seel and eek his lettre,
 And seyde, "Lord, as ye comanded me
 Up peyne of deeth, so have I doon, certein." (B¹ 876-884)

An important 'turn' of events is initiated by Alla's return and his surprise at not finding his wife. This has a distinctly adverse *result* on the feelings of the constable, who of course now suspects that Alla has asked him to remove his wife only to make him pay for the crime if he obeyed. The proof of Alla's supposed command constitutes a new 'turn' because with this Alla is (from the constable's perspective) confronted with his own villainy, but—in the framework of the tale—this of course provides proof for Alla of the deception engineered by his own mother.

(40) Whan she [Grisildis] this herde, aswowne doun she falleth
 For pitous joye, and after hire swownynge
 She bothe hire yonge children to hire calleth,
 And in hire armes, pitously wepynge,
 Embraceth hem, and tendrely kissynge,
 Ful lyk a mooder, with hire salte teeres
 She bathed bothe hire visage and hire heeres.
 (CT E 1079-1085; "The Clerk's Tale")

Again we here have an episode incipit marked by a temporal *when*-clause and a historical present tense in combination with adverbial phrase preposing, followed by a series of incidences — all in the historical present tense — and concluded with a preterite (*bathed*).

It is thus arguable—and I am claiming this within reasonable limits—that the pattern which I have presented for present-day oral narrative is a persistent one, which has been in evidence at least from the early thirteenth century, when it first shows up in the written record. However, since the written language is essentially different from the spoken—much as it sometimes tries to *imitate* the spoken—the oral pattern cannot remain entirely the same after its introduction into the written medium and has to be adapted to the discursive mode. Yet in *Genesis and Exodus* as well as in Chaucer the pattern is there almost unharmed, if supplemented by uses of the present tense that do not necessarily belong to the same recognizably oral model. It is fascinating, too, to observe how even these supplementary functions are roughly the same in the *Genesis* text and in Chaucer's *Tales*.

This pattern of the present tense in English texts from the thirteenth century onwards on the whole corresponds to the pattern of the historical present tense in present-day oral narra-

tive. In the medieval corpus it coexists with other uses of the present tense such as the descriptive "scene"—the precursor of the nineteenth century so-called historical present tense in the realist novel—the present tense of the narrator's anticipatory and commentary exegesis, or the present tense for indirect and free indirect discourse. The tense alternation in the written corpus primarily adopts the switch into the preterite to mark embedded orientation as well as result and resolution sections. The present tense is a highlighting device, as in the oral pattern, but—owing to the greater length and 'epic breadth' of the written text—presents are frequently used not only to mark tellable events alone but to mark a 'turn,' or significant progression on the plot line. Such a 'turn' subsumes crucial and climactic events, but allows the additional function of a highlighting of beginnings of new episodes. Besides this dynamic pattern that derives from an oral model and has found such widespread use in English literature until the late eighteenth century, there are the more descriptive uses of the present tense, which in the nineteenth-century realist novel replace the dynamic pattern. Their key feature is a continuous series of presents, in which the narrative events they describe are not ordered sequentially, or in which the presents do not render plot line events at all. There is some reason to surmise that the oral pattern, despite its successful adaptation to literature in the domain of verse narrative, was felt to be too 'colloquial' in prose contexts. I would further maintain that the change of narrative structure from episodic to epic narration decisively contributed to the decline of the oral pattern in narrative prose and helped to spread the static or descriptive present that we know as the so-called "historical" present tense of nineteenth-century fiction. Whole paragraphs of the descriptive "historical present" then contributed to the invention of what I call the narrative present, whose earliest instances are most prominently found in Dickens. In the narrative present whole sections of a narrative are related entirely in the present tense.

I have argued that it is the switch *into* and *out of* the present tense which is of major importance for the oral pattern, rather than a static relieving of foreground versus background. One reason for my dynamic view of the matter relies on the interpretation of the switch *back into* the preterite, which can be both a step *down* from the plot line to some background information as well as a step *up* into a significant result and resolution section. I am here using these spatial metaphors to indicate attention levels. The pattern is indeed highly compatible with Weinrich's theory of the narrating and discussing tenses. In oral narrative, "discussion" is never far removed from the situation of storytelling, and the audience does not relax in their armchairs—Weinrich's metaphor for the disengaged attitude of the prototypical reader of narrative. Once such an attitude of relaxation becomes institutionalized, however, the frequent occurrence of an attention signal such as the present-tense, which would keep jerking the reader out of his fixation on the story, would have a disorienting effect rather than helpfully marking the dynamics of narrative structure. Weinrich, like Schiffrin, was well aware of the functional, differential effect of tense switching. In English literature, as in its oral models, the historical present tense pattern is a device that focusses attention on decisive turns, rather than

a technique for "making present" and "making vivid" what is recounted to a spellbound audience. It is within a framework of narrative structure that this linguistic device becomes significant and meaningful. The dynamics of the historical present tense therefore needs to be discussed in relation to narrative episodes in their totality, and cannot be elucidated in a sentence by sentence analysis. The 'meaning' of the historical present tense in written and oral narrative is therefore one of reportability in its significant interaction with narrative 'point,' an interaction which constitutes for us readers the conceptual configuration that we have come to call a story.

NOTES

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- 1 Note the development from *A Tale of Two Cities*, where part of chapter III,xiii (the escape), and III,xv (the execution scene) are written in the present tense, to *Dombey and Son* (several entire chapters are written in the present tense), to *Bleak House* and *Edwin Drood*. (Large Roman capitals refer to books or parts, small Roman capitals to chapter numbers.)
- 2 Much work has recently been done on this. The series ScriptOralia, published by an interdisciplinary research institute at Freiburg/Breisgau (Germany), specifically concerns itself with the orality-literacy continuum. Compare also Bäuml (1985), Fisher (1985), Foley (1985), and Olson/Torrance/Hildyard (1985), as well as Tedlock (1983)
- 3 The distinction between external and internal evaluation in discourse analysis derives from the (little acknowledged) fact that, in oral narrative, entire evaluative clauses are separated from the event line by means of clearly marked-off intonational units, whereas "internal" evaluation is irretrievably bound up with the narrative propositions themselves.
- 4 Fleischman's model, particularly in its details, is quite complex, and cannot be discussed here. I have clarified my position more fully in Fludernik (1991). For the purposes of this essay Fleischman's argumentation is less central because it relates to the French tense system and because it operates on a narrative model of episode structure of Labovian origin which I have critiqued elsewhere (Fludernik 1991, 1992a).
- 5 In this essay I do not discuss post-incidentals because they would distract from

the main points of the argument. (Cp. Fludernik 1992a)

- 6 All quotations from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are from the Riverside Edition of Chaucer's works, edited by L.D. Benson.
- 7 There is frequent subject-auxiliary (verb) inversion in paragraph-initial position in Chaucer with additional fronting of the rheme (the sentential object or complement): "A gentil MAUNCIPL was ther of a temple" (*CT A 567*); "With hym ther rood a gentil PARDONER" (*CT A 669*). Hopper (1979) argues that Old English prose narrative uses three types of syntactic patterns to distinguish (a) foreground and (b) background material, as well as (c) the marking of thematic 'turns' or the beginning of new (sub-)episodes. The frequent use of inversion in Middle English at such episode boundaries may indeed be conceived of as a remnant of this Old English system. Hopper's analysis would necessarily need to be extended to the entire Old English corpus before any definitive pronouncements can be made.
- 8 The term *figural narrative* derives from the typology of F.K. Stanzel (1984), where it describes a narrative that is focussed through a character's consciousness. For a discussion of present tense narration see Frey (1946), Fries (1970), Casparis (1975), and — from a theoretical perspective — Cohn (1989, 1990, 1991), Neumann (1990, 1991), Stanzel (1959), and Wright (1986). Other well-known novels written in the present tense are Franz Werfel's *Das Lied von Bernadette*, Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, several of E. Gaines's short stories (e.g. "The Sky is Gray" in *Bloodline*), and quite a few novels by Margaret Atwood.
- 9 All underlined passages are italics in *Genesis and Exodus* (1895).
- 10 Such a tense shift at the end of a tale is moreover common at the end of German fairy tales (although it is now frequently replaced by the preterite: "Und wenn sie nicht gestorben sind so leben sie noch heute"), and the present perfect is an equally frequent device of episode closure in contemporary German narratives of personal experience (Harweg 1987). Weinrich's (1964) argument that the storyteller needs to frame the narrative by references to the moment of narration, implying the tale's relevance ('point') and signalling the opportunity for turn-taking, provides a good explanation for this tense usage. Weinrich also mentions the French imparfait as such a frame marker. This is endorsed by Ducrot (1979).
- 11 Intransitive verbs frequently take *be* rather than *have* as present perfect auxiliary, but the historical present perfect here really has a meaning similar to the present-day perfective "they are gone/come."
- 12 In Fludernik (forthcoming, ch.2) ample evidence for the use of the present in speech

and thought representation is provided. Fleischman attempts to discredit the evidence of present tense free indirect discourse, but her arguments do not hold because she elsewhere confuses interior monologue and free indirect discourse and one may therefore suspect that she departs from an over-simplified concept of free indirect discourse.

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