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Toward a definition of narrative

In the past fifteen years, as the “narrative turn in the humanities” gave way to the narrative turn everywhere (politics, science studies, law, medicine, and last, but not least, cognitive science), few words have enjoyed so much use and suffered so much abuse as *narrative* and its partial synonym, *story*. The French theorist Jean-François Lyotard invokes the “Grand Narratives” of a capitalized History;¹ the psychologist Jerome Bruner speaks of narratives of identity;² the philosopher Daniel Dennett describes mental activity on the neural level as the continuous emergence and decay of narrative drafts;³ the political strategist James Carville attributes the loss of John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election to the lack of a convincing narrative;⁴ and “narratives of race, class and gender” have become a mantra of cultural studies. Gerald Prince regards the contemporary use of the term narrative as a hedging device, a way to avoid strong positions: “One says ‘narrative’ instead of ‘explanation’ or ‘argumentation’ (because it is more tentative); one prefers ‘narrative’ to ‘theory,’ ‘hypothesis,’ or ‘evidence’ (because it is less scientific); one speaks of a ‘narrative’ rather than ‘ideology’ (because it is less judgmental); one substitutes ‘narrative’ for ‘message’ (because it is more indeterminate).”⁵ Another narrative theorist, Peter Brooks, attributes the surging popularity of the word to a more positive cause: “While I think the term has been trivialized through overuse, I believe the overuse responds to a recognition that narrative is one of the principal ways we organize our experience of the world – a part of our cognitive tool kit that was long neglected by psychologists and philosophers.”⁶ Whether it is due to the postmodern loss of faith in the possibility of achieving truth or knowledge, or to current interest in the functioning of the mind, the current tendency to dissolve “narrative” into “belief,” “value,” “experience,” “interpretation,” “thought,” “explanation,” “representation,” or simply “content” challenges narratologists to work out a definition that distinguishes literal from metaphorical uses. Neither bowing to current fashion nor acting like a semantic police, this definition should prevent the inflation

of the term from getting out of hand, but it should also help us understand the mechanisms of this inflation by disclosing the genealogy of the metaphorical uses.

Previous definitions of *narrative*

At first sight nothing seems easier to define than narrative. As the following examples show there is a strong consensus among narratologists on the nature of the object of their discipline:

Genette: “One will define narrative without difficulty as the representation of an event or of a sequence of events.”⁷

Prince: “The representation . . . of one or more real or fictive events communicated by one, two or several . . . narrators . . . to one, two or several narratees.”⁸

Abbott: “**Narrative** is the representation of events, consisting of *story* and *narrative discourse*, **story** is an *event* or sequence of events (the *action*), and **narrative discourse** is those events as represented.”⁹

Looking deeper than events, some authors define narrative in terms of what makes sequence and change possible:

Ricoeur: “I take temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity, and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate reference.”¹⁰

Brooks: “Plot is the principal ordering force of those meanings that we try to wrest from human temporality.”¹¹

But a temporally ordered sequence of events could be a list rather than a story: for instance, the list of all the patients that a doctor sees in one day. As the next batch of examples shows, many authors feel indeed the need to add something to “representation of a sequence of events” to turn it from a thumbnail characterization into a full(er) definition:

Prince invokes a certain type of logical relation: “Narrative is the representation of at least two real or fictive events in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other.”¹²

Onega and Landa regard causality as the cement that turns sequences of events into stories: “The semiotic representation of a sequence of events, meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way.”¹³

Bal introduces change, causality, and an experiencing subject: “The transition from one state to another state, caused or experienced by actors.”¹⁴

All of these characterizations provide useful insights, but none offers a complete and self-sufficient definition of narrative, because they depend too much on implicit elements. It is admittedly debatable to what extent definitions should rely on implications. For instance, “event” implies transformation and “action” involves agents; if these agents decide to take actions, they must have motivations, and they must be trying to solve problems. If agents have problems, they must experience some sort of conflict.

A definition should support, even entail, statements like these, but it does not have to spell them out:

Narrative is about problem solving.

Narrative is about conflict.

Narrative is about interpersonal relations.

Narrative is about human experience.

Narrative is about the temporality of existence.

The semiotic status of narrative

Most narratologists agree that narrative consists of material signs, the discourse, which convey a certain meaning (or content), the story, and fulfill a certain social function. This characterization outlines three potential domains for a definition: discourse, story, and use. These domains correspond, roughly, to the three components of semiotic theory: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

Syntax is the most problematic area for a definition of narrative, because the concept applies only to semiotic systems with clearly definable units that combine into larger linear sequences according to precise rules. But there is no such thing as clearly definable “narrative units” comparable to the words or phonemes of language. The narratologists who have attempted to divide narrative into constituents have come up with vastly different catalogs of basic elements: for instance, Aristotle’s exposition, crisis and denouement; Propp’s functions and roles, Greimas’s types of actants; Barthes’s kernels and satellites, and the more traditional notions of character, action, and setting. If we cannot agree on the basic units of narrative, in the way grammarians (more or less) agree on the syntactic categories of language (nouns, verbs, adjectives, articles, etc.), there is no hope of defining the rules of their combination and of distinguishing well-formed and ill-formed sequences. In narrative matters, there is no equivalent to Chomsky’s syntactically grammatical but semantically deficient sentence “colorless green ideas sleep furiously.” Eliminating syntax from the definition of narrative means that narrative discourse cannot be described as a specific configuration of purely formal elements.

The second possibility is to define story in semantic terms. In semiotic theory, semantics is the study of the relation between material signs and the states of affairs to which they can refer. But since we cannot isolate a group of properly “narrative” signs distinct from the signs (or sign) of the supporting medium, the standard conception of semantics does not apply to the case of narrative. Or rather, the semantic system that underlies narrative texts cannot be distinguished from the system of the supporting medium: it is because we know what words mean that we can make sense of written or oral stories, and it is because we know what images represent that we can make sense of a comic strip or a silent movie. This is not to say that narrative cannot be defined through conditions pertaining to meaning; I believe indeed that semantics is the most promising avenue for a definition; but for the concept to be operational, it must be redefined as “the type of mental image that a text must evoke as a whole to be accepted as narrative,” regardless of the nature of its individual signs. “Narrative semantics,” in other words, is not a fixed relation between so-called “narrative signs” and their meanings, but the description of a certain type of cognitive construct.

Is this construct sufficient to categorize a semiotic object as a narrative, or do we need to take into consideration how the object is used? Here we broach key issues in pragmatics, or the study of how signs relate to users and to contexts of use. The proponents of a pragmatically based definition of narrative¹⁵ argue that it is possible to submit a given text to multiple “language games,” or textual speech acts. “Narrative” would be one of these games, and there would be others, though it is difficult (or downright impossible) to establish what they might be. According to speech-act theory, you can perform different communicative acts with a proposition like “the cat is on the mat”: assert it, ask about it, or make it the content of a command. Now if texts, like propositions, lend themselves to various games depending on the rules selected by their users, it should be possible to read them against the grain, that is, use the texts in games for which they were not necessarily intended. I call this transcategorical reading.

The best candidates for this operation are narrative and recipe, because they both rely on the representation of a sequence of events, the most universally accepted feature of narrative. But consider these instructions: “Beat eggs until they form peaks; pour on fruits; bake 10 minutes until custard is set; cool and serve.” To make this text into a story it would be necessary to imagine individuated participants, for instance a chef as agent and the patrons of his restaurant as beneficiary, give the agent a particular goal (acquire a third Michelin star), and assume that the events happened only once, instead of being endlessly repeatable. Conversely, to read a story as a set of instructions, for instance the episode in *The Odyssey* that describes, step

by step, how Odysseus builds a boat to escape from Calypso's island, you would have to ignore Odysseus and his goal (return to Ithaca), and extract from the description of particular events a protocol that can be performed over and over again, with you or me or anybody else in the role of agent. In both cases, the transcategorical reading requires the addition and subtraction of so many features that it becomes a demonstration *ad absurdum* of the resistance of content: you just cannot read a text that tells you how to cook a dish as being about an evolving network of human relations – the preferred subject-matter of narrative. The claim that narrative is a particular type of use is further defeated by the fact that narrative itself can be put to many different uses: telling a joke to entertain an audience; reporting current news; confessing one's sins to a priest; testifying in court; reading a story to a child at bedtime, and so on. I am not saying that the same concrete story could be put to all these uses, but rather, that all these communicative situations require a text that fulfills the abstract pattern constitutive of narrativity (= that which makes a text a narrative).

In summary: if narrative is a discourse that conveys a story, this is to say, a specific type of content, and if this discourse can be put to a variety of different uses, none of them constitutive of narrativity, then its definition should focus on story. As a mental representation, story is not tied to any particular medium, and it is independent of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. A definition of narrative should therefore work for different media (though admittedly media do widely differ in their storytelling abilities), and it should not privilege literary forms.

Narrative, compared to what?

The task of defining narrative – or in fact any concept – will be greatly facilitated if we can situate stories within a class of related entities. But what can we place on the same shelf? In the past few years, many scholars have attempted to capture the nature of narrative through a typology of basic types of text, but there is no consensus regarding what other categories besides narrative should be included in the taxonomy: Chatman opposes narrative discourse to persuasive and descriptive;¹⁶ Fludernik's model comprises narrative, argumentative, instructive, conversational, and reflective discourse;¹⁷ and Virtanen envisions five basic types: narrative, description, instruction, exposition, and argumentation.¹⁸ The lack of agreement concerning what is to be considered a text type – and what, consequently, is narrative – is symptomatic of the unsystematic nature of these typologies: rather than consistently relying on one of the three domains of semiotic

theory, they arbitrarily mix semantic and pragmatic criteria. Narrative and description are arguably defined by the content of the text – a changing world for narrative, a static one for description – but categories such as persuasion, instruction, and argumentation are things we do with language rather than what language is about, conversation is a socially defined speech situation, and reflective discourse is a meta-category whose object could be any other text type. As long as the text-type approach remains unable to make a choice between semantic apples and pragmatic oranges, it will not lead to a satisfactory definition of narrative.

An alternative to the text-type approach is to avoid the notions of text and of semiotic artifact altogether, and to conceive narrative as a cognitive style or a mode of thinking. In this view, stories can exist in the mind as pure patterns of information, inspired by life experience or created by the imagination, independently of their representation through the signs of a specific medium. Jerome Bruner suggests, for instance, that “there are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another.”¹⁹ Bruner calls one mode the narrative and the other the argumentative, or paradigmatic. The narrative mode concerns the particular: it deals with “human or human-like intentions and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course.”²⁰ The argumentative mode, on the other hand, “deals in general causes, and in their establishment, and makes use of procedures to assure verifiable reference and to test for empirical truth.” It “seeks to transcend the particular by higher and higher reaching for abstraction.”

It is easy to recognize the argumentative mode as the scientific and philosophical way of thinking; but the domain of narrative is less clear. When Bruner writes that stories are judged as “good” or “bad,” and not by criteria of truth and verifiability, he limits narrative to its entertainment-oriented manifestations, and ignores the vast domain of narratives produced for the sake of information, such as news reports, historiography, courtroom testimony, and to a lesser extent narratives of personal experience. Moreover, the two so-called modes of thinking differ more through their subject-matter – the particular versus the general, the temporal versus the timeless, and the human versus its other, whatever that is – than through the cognitive processes that they bring into play. Both constitute attempts to make sense of the world, and they do this to a large extent through a common pool of mental operations: comparison, distinction, deduction, induction, sequencing (whether events or ideas), and seeking explanation through causal relations. The only significant difference, if indeed the narrative mode

specializes in the human, is that narrative involves the reconstruction of minds. But we perform this operation as a normal part of social life. Does it mean that we engage in private storytelling whenever we interact with human beings?

Equating narrative with thought in general, some leading researchers in cognitive science might answer this question in the positive. Schank and Abelson proclaim, for instance, that all of memory consists of stories,²¹ while according to Mark Turner, “Narrative imagining – story – is *the* fundamental instrument of thought . . . It is a literary capacity indispensable to human cognition generally.”²² For Turner, noticing objects or events in our perceptual environment amounts to constructing embryonic stories about them: “Story depends on constructing something rather than nothing. A reportable story is distinguished from its assumed and unreportable background. It is impossible for us to look at the world and not to see reportable stories distinguished from background.”²³ In this view, the mere action of focusing on a certain tree in the forest is a narrative act, because it makes the tree into the protagonist of a virtual story. But if “thinking about,” i.e., distinguishing figure from ground, is always already storytelling, the task of defining narrative becomes both superfluous and impossible: superfluous, because it is no longer necessary to differentiate narrative from any other manifestation of human thought, and impossible, because it is inseparable from a complete theory of mind. We can avoid this impasse, without falling back on a segregationist conception of thinking that distinguishes narrative and non-narrative operations, by regarding narrative as the outcome of many different mental processes that operate both inside and outside stories. The purpose of a definition will then be to delineate the set of cognitive operations whose convergence produces the type of mental representation that we regard as a story.

Narrative: a fuzzy-set definition

Rather than regarding narrativity as a strictly binary feature, that is, as a property that a given text either has or doesn't have, the definition proposed below presents narrative texts as a fuzzy set allowing variable degrees of membership, but centered on prototypical cases that everybody recognizes as stories.²⁴ In a scalar conception of narrative, definition becomes an open series of concentric circles which spell increasingly narrow conditions and which presuppose previously stated items, as we move from the outer to the inner circles, and from the marginal cases to the prototypes. The proposal below organizes the conditions of narrativity into three semantic and one formal and pragmatic dimension.

Spatial dimension

- (1) Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents.

Temporal dimension

- (2) This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations.
- (3) The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events.

Mental dimension

- (4) Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world.
- (5) Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents.

Formal and pragmatic dimension

- (6) The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure.
- (7) The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the storyworld.
- (8) The story must communicate something meaningful to the audience.

Each of these conditions prevents a certain type of representation from forming the focus of interest, or macro-structure, of a story. This does not mean that these representations cannot appear in a narrative text, but rather, that they cannot, all by themselves, support its narrativity.

- (1) eliminates representations of abstract entities and entire classes of concrete objects, scenarios involving “the human race,” “reason,” “the State,” “atoms,” “the brain,” etc.
- (2) eliminates static descriptions.
- (3) eliminates enumerations of repetitive events and changes caused by natural evolution (such as aging).
- (4) eliminates one-of-a-kind scenarios involving only natural forces and non-intelligent participants (weather reports, accounts of cosmic events).
- (5) (together with 3) eliminates representations consisting exclusively of mental events (interior monologue fiction).
- (6) eliminates lists of causally unconnected events, such as chronicles and diaries, as well as reports of problem-solving actions that stop before an outcome is reached.

- (7) eliminates recipes, as well as texts entirely made of advice, hypotheses, counterfactuals, and instructions.
- (8) eliminates bad stories. This is the most controversial condition in the list, because it straddles the borderline between definition and poetics, and because it needs to be complemented by a full theory of the different ways in which narrative can achieve significance. If we accept 8 as part of the definition, then narrativity is not an intrinsic property of the text, but rather a dimension relative to the context and to the interests of the participants. A sequence of events like “Mary was poor, then Mary won the lottery, then Mary was rich” would not make the grade as the content of fictional story, but it becomes very tellable if it is presented as true fact and concerns an acquaintance of the listener.

The eight conditions listed above offer a toolkit for do-it-yourself definitions. When they are put to the question, “is this text a narrative,” some people will be satisfied with conditions 1 through 3 and will classify a text about evolution or the Big Bang as a story, while others will insist that narrative must be about human experience, and will consider (4) and (5) obligatory. Some people will regard a chronicle listing a series of independent events with the same participant as a narrative while others will insist on (6). Those who accept recipes as narratives consider (3) and (7) optional; and there are scholars who draw the line below (8), while others may think that a pointless utterance or a boring account of events can still display a narrative structure (this is my own inclination: I regard the “Mary” story quoted above as narrative regardless of context). But if people differ in opinion as to where to draw the line, they basically agree about what requirements are relevant to narrativity and about their importance relative to each other. If we ask: “is *Finnegans Wake* more narrative than *Little Red Riding Hood*?” we will get much broader agreement than if we ask (mindless of the incompatibility of a yes–no question with a fuzzy set): “is *Finnegans Wake* a narrative?”

Through its multiple conditions organized into distinct areas, the definition proposed above not only provides criteria for determining a text’s degree of narrativity²⁵ it also suggests a basis for a semantic typology of narrative texts. While degree of narrativity depends on how many of the conditions are fulfilled, typology depends on the relative prominence of the four dimensions. The Grand Narratives of Lyotard can only be called narrative in a metaphorical sense, because they do not concern individuals and do not create a concrete world, while postmodern novels are often low in narrativity because they do not allow readers to reconstruct the network of mental representations that motivates the actions of characters and binds the events into an intelligible and determinate sequence. Through a structure

that I call “proliferating narrativity,”²⁶ contemporary fiction (especially magical realism and postcolonial novels) may also shift condition (6) from the macro- to the micro-level, becoming a collection of little stories loosely connected through common participants. Among narratives that fully satisfy all the conditions, some emphasize the spatial dimension, others the temporal, and still others the mental. With their detailed construction of an imaginary world, science fiction and fantasy locate interest in the spatial dimension, and these genres often treat the plot as a discovery path across the fictional world. The demand for action and changes of state that makes up the temporal dimension is the dominant feature of thrillers and adventure stories, while the mental dimension, by insisting on the motivations and emotions of characters, rules over tragedy, sentimental romances, detective stories, comedies of errors, and, in the nonfictional domain, narratives of personal experience. In contrast to modernist novels that represent the mind for its own sake, these narrative genres evoke mental processes as a way to explain the behavior of characters.

How important is a definition of narrative anyway?

There may be many different ways to draw the frontiers of narrative, but these differences of opinion do not carry significant cognitive consequences, because when we read a text, we do not ask “is it or isn’t it a narrative,” nor even “to what extent does this text fulfill the conditions of narrativity,” unless of course we are narratologists. Asking people to decide whether or not a text is a story is one of those artificial situations in which results are produced by the act of investigation.

Let me tell a story in support of my claim that judgments of narrativity are variable, and that they are not crucial to understanding. After presenting my definition of narrativity during a lecture, I once asked the audience whether this text, adapted from Brian Greene, qualifies as a story:

The universe started out as cold and essentially infinite in spatial extent. Then an instability kicked in, driving every point in the universe to rush rapidly away from every other. This caused space to become increasingly curved and resulted in a dramatic increase of temperature and energy density. After some time, a millimeter-sized three-dimensional region within this vast expanse created a superhot and dense patch. The expansion of this patch can account for the whole of the universe with which we are now familiar.²⁷

The response was almost unanimously negative, but a few days later, I received an e-mail from an audience member telling me that he had changed his mind: the Brian Greene text was a story after all. No longer under the

influence of what was then my personal definition of narrative, this person had decided to evaluate the text according to his own criteria of narrativity. But this does not mean that he had changed his interpretation of the text. Before and after, he probably read it as the representation of a causal chain of extraordinary events that led to a major transformation within the universe.

I can sense at this point disapproval brewing among proponents of a cognitive approach to narrative. But what I am denying is not the importance of narrative for social life, intelligence, memory, knowledge, and our sense of identity, but rather, the importance of *conscious judgments of narrativity* for the processing of verbal or visual information. When we are presented with a text of unknown origin, and asked: “is this or isn’t it a narrative” (an exercise occasionally practiced by narratologists),²⁸ we may diverge in our answers, but this does not mean that some of us are right and some of us are wrong (unless of course we blatantly misread the text), because we apply different criteria of narrativity, and because we can decide whether or not the text fulfills these criteria by paying attention to what it says. If, on the other hand, we are presented with unknown texts and asked: “is this fiction or nonfiction,” our answers will be right or wrong, because they will not be an assessment of what the text is all about, but a guess of the author’s intent. Fictionality is indeed a type of game that authors invite readers to play with texts: a game variously described as make-believe, suspended disbelief, or immersion in an imaginary world.²⁹ The same text could, at least in principle, be presented as a creation of the imagination or as a truthful account of facts, and we must be guided by extra-textual signs, such as generic labels (“novel,” “short story”) to assess its fictional status.³⁰ Because judgments of fictionality affect what the reader will or will not believe, they are much more important than judgments of narrativity.

“Narrative” is less a culturally recognized category that influences our choices of reading, viewing, or listening materials than an analytical concept designed by narratologists. In everyday conversation we speak about novels (a specific literary genre), about tales (something false or exaggerated), or about stories, meaning compact forms of narrative (gossip, anecdotes, news, folktales, or short fiction) rather than the abstract technical concept that narratologists oppose to “discourse,” but we hardly ever use the word “narrative” outside of academic discussions. Nobody would walk into a bookstore and ask for “a narrative,” because what matters to us are individual narrative genres, such as historiography, biography, science fiction, or fantasy, and not the general category that subsumes them all. It was not until the sixties that literary theorists and semioticians began talking about narrative: their predecessors discussed instead folk tales, myth, or the novel. Assessing

the narrative status of a text is not a cognitive question that we must consciously answer for proper understanding, but a theoretical question that enables narratologists to delimit the object of their discipline, to isolate the features relevant to their inquiry, and to stem the recent inflation of the term narrative.

If defining narrative has any cognitive relevance, it is because the definition covers mental operations of a more fundamental nature than passing global judgments of narrativity: operations such as asking in what order did the represented events occur; what changes did they cause in the depicted world; what do the events (and their results) mean for the characters; what motivates actions and how does the outcome of these actions compare to the intent of the agent. If a text confronts us with such questions, and if we are able to answer them, we read the text as a story, or rather, we read the story told by the text, whether or not we are aware of what we are doing.

NOTES

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Grand narratives, also known as metanarratives, are global explanatory schemes that legitimize institutions, such as the practice of science, by representing them as necessary to the historical self-realization of an abstract or collective entity, such as Reason, Freedom, or the State. Hegel's and Marx's philosophies of history are prototypical examples of Grand Narratives. So are the eschatological scenarios of religion.
2. Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), chapter 3.
3. Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin, 1991).
4. William Safire, "On Language." *The New York Times Magazine* 5 (December 2004), p. 36.
5. Gerald Prince, "Revisiting Narrativity." In Walter Grünzweig and Andreas Solbach (eds.) *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologie im Kontext/ Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999), p. 45.
6. Quoted in Safire, "On Language," p. 36.
7. Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*. Translated by Marie-Rose Logan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 127.
8. *A Dictionary of Narratology*, 2nd edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p. 58.
9. H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 16.
10. Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time." In W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.) *On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 165.
11. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. ix.

12. Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Berlin: Mouton, 1982), p. 4.
13. Susana Onega, and José Angel García Landa, "Introduction." In Onega and Landa (eds.) *Narratology: An Introduction* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 3.
14. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 182.
15. For instance, David Rudrum, "From Narrative Representation to Narrative Use: Towards the Limits of Definition." *Narrative* 13 (2005), pp. 195–204.
16. Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1990).
17. Monika Fludernik, "Genres, Text Types, or Discourse Mode? Narrative Modalities and Generic Categorization." *Style* 34:2 (2000), pp. 274–92.
18. Tuija Virtanen, "Issues of Text Typology: Narrative – A 'Basic' Type of Text." *Text* 12:2 (1992), pp. 293–310.
19. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 11.
20. Bruner, *Actual Minds*, p. 13. The next two quotations are also on p. 13 of this text.
21. Roger Schank and Robert P. Abelson, "Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story," in Robert S. Wyer (ed.) *Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995), pp. 1–85.
22. Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 4–5 (my emphasis).
23. Turner, *The Literary Mind*, p. 145.
24. This idea has been suggested by Fotis Jannidis, "Narratology and the Narrative." In Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller (eds.) *What is Narratology?* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter), pp. 35–54.
25. Degree of narrativity can be understood in two ways, one pertaining to story (or the "what" of a narrative) and the other to discourse (or the "way" such narrative content is presented). In the story sense, the one I am using here, it means the extent to which the mental representation conveyed by a text fulfills the definition of story. In the discourse sense (developed by Prince in *Narratology*), it means the importance of the story within the global economy of the text and the ease of retrieving it. The same text can present full narrativity in sense 1, but low narrativity in sense 2, when it tells a well-formed story but the progress of the action is slowed down by descriptions, general comments, and digressions. See also the concept of "diluted narrativity" in Marie-Laure Ryan, "The Modes of Narrativity and their Visual Metaphors." *Style* 26:3 (1992), p. 375.
26. Ryan, "The Modes of Narrativity." pp. 373–4.
27. Adapted from Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 362.
28. For instance David Herman in *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pp. 87–9.
29. The suggestion that fiction is a game of make-believe is due to Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); the formula "willing suspension of disbelief" was coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge; and the concept

of fictional immersion is discussed in Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction* (Paris: Seuil 1999) and Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). The nature of fiction has inspired many more proposals, which cannot be reviewed here.

30. In *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 109–31, Dorrit Cohn has identified “signposts of fictionality,” i.e., features that occur only in fiction. Among these features are, on the discourse level, the description of the private thoughts of characters other than the narrator, which presuppose that the narrator has mind-reading abilities; and on the story level, fantastic themes, such as metamorphosis of humans into animals. (Cohn however restricts her analysis to discourse-related signposts.) But these signposts are optional, and there have been notorious cases of fictional texts being mistaken for biography or autobiography: for instance, the novel *Marbot* by the German author Wolfgang Hildesheimer (1981) was originally reviewed as the biography of a historical individual, though the character of Marbot was invented by the novelist (Cohn, *Distinction*, p. 79). By contrast, one cannot imagine critics mistaking a text for a narrative.