

A Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory

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Narrative

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In a widely quoted statement that can be regarded as foundational for the study of narrative, Roland Barthes writes:

The narratives of the world are numberless ... Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting ... stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society ... Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: *it is simply there, like life itself*. (1977, 79; my italics)

When Barthes writes that narrative is “like life itself,” does he simply mean that life, like narrative, is everywhere and its existence is taken for granted; or is he inspired, perhaps unconsciously, by another relation: narrative is like life, because it is an image of life, because life is the proper subject matter of narrative? Here life is not to be taken in its biological, scientific meaning, but rather in its phenomenological, existential dimension. Life is human life, or the life of anthropomorphic creatures, which means, the sum of the experiences that accumulate for a subject between birth and death. It is through narrative that individual lives receive a representation that can be communicated.

The ubiquity and multiple manifestations of stories in human societies mean that the relevance of the theoretical concept of narrative extends to all the disciplines concerned with human experience, including cultural studies. Yet there is one discipline, narratology, that regards narrative as its exclusive territory, and that views with suspicion the use of the term in the discourses of other fields. In this chapter I propose to contrast the narratological and the cultural studies approach, in the hope that the narratological section will help cultural studies to tighten its concept of narrative, and that the cultural studies section will broaden the concept beyond its technical dimension by outlining its implications for our sense of who we are.

Narratological Approaches to Narrative

In its broadest conception, narrative is a use of signs – language, image, perhaps music, and their various combinations – that evoke in the mind of the receiver a certain type of representation known as “story.” While it takes both a text made of material signs (a discourse) and a certain meaning (a story) to make a narrative, it is in the story that the text’s narrativity is invested, since there are types of texts whose purpose is not to tell stories but to present other forms of discourse, such as philosophy, law, or science. If story is a mental representation, it can be detached from the signs that evoke it, and it can be re-encoded into other signs, as the phenomena of retelling, translation or adaptation demonstrate.

This conception of narrative as a text that conveys a story (by text I mean not only language-based acts of communication but any deliberate and structured use of signs) situates the essence of narrativity on the level of story. Defining narrative means defining the conditions under which the content of a text can be regarded as a story. The extent to which content fulfills these conditions determines the degree of narrativity of the text that transmits it.

If a narrative is a text that brings a story to mind, a story, conversely, is a mental representation formed in response to the clues provided by a text. Is this connection between text and story necessary, or can stories exist as purely mental images? Whether or not there are “untold stories” is one of the many controversies that surround narrativity. I will argue that “untold stories” exist. The child who ponders how he will explain to his teacher why he cannot turn in his assignment, and comes up with the explanation “the dog ate my homework,” has a story in his mind even before he textualizes it. And while many authors claim that they discover the plot of their novel through the process of writing, some of them do not start writing until the plot is reasonably complete in their mind. In both of these cases, the story is conceived as the object of a future act of communication, and its textualization will shape and solidify a still tentative, malleable content. Yet imagining stories for their own sake, without any intent to turn them into texts, plays an important role in the life of the mind. Sexual fantasies, the stories that children tell themselves before falling asleep, the activity of revisiting memories, or the scenarios that some of us imagine when a loved one is late coming home are all examples of purely mental constructs that fulfill the requirements of narrativity. Regarding these constructs as stories presupposes a definition that links them to the same semantic structure as the texts that most people recognize as narrative, such as “Little Red Riding Hood,” *The Great Gatsby*, or the story of how they met their spouse.

Defining Narrative

Narratologists generally agree that stories consists of characters, setting, and events – in other words, that they feature intelligent agents located in a world who participate in, or are concerned by, events that change the state of this world. This last condition, which corresponds to what is known as a “narrative arc,” makes narrativity into a scalar property, since the number and the importance of the transformations that affect the story-world is a matter of judgment rather than an objective property of stories. Some people want narrative to describe a complete arc, with a well-defined beginning, middle, and end, while others are satisfied with any kind of change of state. The advantage of a scalar

conception of narrativity is its ability to explain why people's opinion may diverge when asked: is this text a narrative? If the set of all narratives is a fuzzy set, there is a lot to learn about the nature of narrative from the texts of questionable narrativity. The texts whose narrativity has been debated, and which occupy at best the margins of the set include:

Historical chronicles. As lists of events happening during a more global event (such as a military campaign or an expedition), this type of history writing lacks the teleological selectivity of true narratives. As Hayden White has argued, the chronicle "does not so much conclude as simply terminate" (1981, 16). There is no global narrative arc that brings closure and retrospective meaning. Beginning and end are determined by external factors rather than by a significant process of transformation. But chronicles may contain stories on the micro-level.

Annals and diaries. These genres are even more lacking in teleological selectivity than chronicles, since the author adds to them at intervals of variable regularity, not knowing what the future will bring, and what the consequences of the recorded events will be. Like chronicles, however, annals and diaries may contain stories in their individual entries.

Recipes. While they concern the transformation of multiple raw ingredients into a palatable dish, a process that can be regarded as a narrative arc, recipes propose an endlessly repeatable algorithm, rather than representations of unique events. They also lack individuated characters, since anybody can execute the directions.

Lyric poetry. Poems may represent subjective experience, but they rarely involve identifiable events leading to determinate changes of state. Moreover, they do not feature individuated characters: the "I" and "you" of a love poem can stand for any lover and love object.

Dreams (as lived experience, rather than as report of dreams). Dreams may consist of events that, when reported, may present the characteristics of a story, but the actual experience of dreaming is not a "text" that tells or shows events. It is rather the dreamer's unmediated perception of and participation in these events. Just like everyday life, dreams are not representations of experience, but experience itself, although in a different state of consciousness and taking place in a different world than everyday life.

The marginalization of these cases suggests several conditions of narrativity:

- Stories are representations of life, not life itself (transgressed by dreams).
- Stories are about singular, not endlessly repeatable events (transgressed by recipes).
- Stories must involve individuated characters (transgressed by lyric poetry and recipes).
- Stories are not automatic recordings of "everything that happens" in an arbitrarily determined time span, they focus on events that cause significant changes in the state of a world, and they involve selection and organization of materials, a process which may be called emplotting (transgressed by diaries, annals, and chronicles).
- Stories are told from a retrospective stance that provides a comprehensive view of the reported events and of their consequences (transgressed by diaries).

If narrativity is a scalar concept that tolerates various degrees of realization (Ryan 2007), there will be prototypical as well as marginal forms of narrative. Several narrative genres have been regarded as prototypes by different schools in narratology: simple folklore forms such as fairy tales or fables; narratives with a specific dynamic contour,

such as tragedy, thrillers, and mystery stories; conversational narratives of personal experience; and literary fiction (i.e., the novel). A look at each of these prototype candidates provides us with an idea of the hidden complexity of the concept of narrative, and of the variety of approaches that it has inspired.

Folklore Tales as Prototype

It is a safe bet that the narrativity of a tale like “Little Red Riding Hood” will be universally acknowledged. The origin of narratology, for those who regard the “simple forms” of folklore as prototypical, can be traced to Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928). In this study, Propp dissected a corpus of Russian folktales into thirty-two possible functions, i.e., actions of characters bearing strategic significance for the action as a whole (for example: an interdiction is addressed to the hero; the interdiction is violated; the villain receives information about his victim; the hero and the villain join in direct combat; a difficult task is proposed to the hero; the task is resolved, etc.), and seven roles for the characters: villain, donor, helper, dispatcher, the princess as sought after object, hero, and false hero. Individual tales consist of a subset of the thirty-two functions, but the functions are always presented in the same order, because many of them are linked to others by relations of logical entailment. If we read the list of functions as a story, we get an archetypal pattern that appears worldwide and is commonly used in computer games: the adventures of a hero who is sent on a quest, solves a number of problems, and is rewarded in the end. Reduced to its logical bare bones, the pattern can be described as: “problem–action taken to solve it,” a sequence of events that can result in either success or failure. (Failure is not represented in Propp’s corpus, but its mere possibility is what creates interest to the story. Even though the reader knows how things will turn out, he will experience uncertainty if he adopts the perspective of the hero.) Another minimalist conception of narrativity is Jurij Lotman’s model of narrative action as the transgression by a character of forbidden boundaries, a model which singles out from Propp’s list of functions the pair “an interdiction is given to the hero” – “the interdiction is violated” as embodying the essence of narrative.

To regard folktales as narrative prototypes amounts to locating narrativity in the plot. By plot (a seemingly intuitive notion about whose definition narratologists seem unable to agree) I understand the scheming (i.e., plotting) of characters, and the physical actions they undertake to fulfill their goals. Plot is a slightly more abstract concept than story, since different stories – let’s say Cinderella and a Chinese folktale, or *Romeo and Juliet* and the musical *West Side Story* – can have the same plot. If narrativity is a matter of plot, its prototypical manifestations are not just folktales, but all the genres that give high priority to conflicts between the goals of different characters, or between the goals of a character and the state of the world: tragedy, epic poetry, myth, legend, superhero comics, action films, and many, but not all novels.

A shortcoming of a plot-centered conception of narrative is exemplified by the case of summaries. The summary of a novel is pure plot, bones stripped of any descriptive fat, but its flat recording of events does not generate narrative interest, because it lacks vivid evocations of characters and setting, and the power to create effects that are central to the prototypes discussed in the next section. Under a “plot” approach to narrativity, a summary would be more narrative than the novel it represents, and E. M. Forster’s minimal example of plot (1990, 87), “the king died then the queen died of grief,” more narrative than *Anna Karenina*.

Tragedy, Mystery Stories, and Thrillers as Prototypes

Plot may be conceived not only in terms of its semantic substance or content (characters, setting, events, changes of state, etc.) but also in terms of the form that this substance must take. Tragedy, mystery stories, and thrillers are not only genres in which plot is dominant, their plots are characterized by a certain dynamic form, an intentional design that exercises a strict control over the audience's cognitive and emotional experience. We may call this form, or rather its effect on the audience, "narrative tension." (The title of the French-language book that Raphaël Baroni [2007] devotes to this phenomenon leads to an interesting pun: *la tension narrative* = *l'attention narrative*, a narrative grabbing of attention.)

Tragedy plays a central role in a formal approach to plot, because of the very distinctive contour of its design. Though Aristotle does not describe the tragic plot in terms of exposition, complication, crisis, and resolution, this structure is widely regarded as "the Aristotelian plot." In the late nineteenth century, the German playwright and critic Gustav Freytag captured the cognitive and affective contour of a typical five-act tragedy by means of a triangle with three points: A (the left end of the base) is exposition, B (the apex) the climax, and C (the right end of the base) the catastrophe (Jahn 2005). The terms that label these points refer to what happens to the characters; yet the rising and falling contour of the triangle describes the affective state of the spectator. During exposition, characters, setting, and the initial state of the world are presented to the audience. The ascending edge of the triangle represents the protagonist's attempt to achieve her goals; this corresponds, in the audience, to a rise of tension, but complications arise, and a turning point takes place at the climax. The descending edge leads in tragedy to the downfall of the hero, but it can also be interpreted as conflict resolution and restoration of a stable state. The resolution brings in the spectator a relief of tension. This visual model not only describes tragedy, it is regarded as a basic guideline by Hollywood scriptwriters.

While Freytag's triangle conceives narrative dynamics in terms of a rise and fall in both the fortune of the hero and the emotional involvement of the audience, Meir Sternberg's theory of narrativity focuses on the manipulation of the expectations of the audience through a strategic disclosure of information. "I define narrativity as the play of suspense/curiosity/surprise between represented and communicative time (in whatever combination, whatever medium, whatever manifest or latent form). Along the same functional lines, I define narrative as a discourse where such play dominates" (Sternberg 1992, 531–532). Suspense arises when the audience can anticipate two (or more) possible future developments out of a given situation and is dying to know which one will be actualized. The heroine tied to the railroad tracks is a classical instance of suspense because the future can be reduced to an either/or choice: either she will die, or she will be rescued. Curiosity is awakened when the audience knows how things will turn out, but does not know through what route the story will get there. As for surprise, it presupposes an incomplete computing of possible outcomes by the audience and an unexpected fork taken by the plot. (These are my formulations; Sternberg's are different.) If we accept Sternberg's conception of narrativity as purposeful manipulation of expectations, then narrativity reaches its fullest manifestation in thrillers and mystery (i.e., detective) stories. But effects of suspense, curiosity, and surprise can be exploited to great efficiency in all narrative genres, especially in our next category.

An important difference between plot-as-type-of-content and plot-as-dynamic-design is the former's indifference to, and the latter's concern with efficient storytelling, in other words, with aesthetics. If narrativity lies in plot, and plot is a sequence of events, even the flattest report of events is a full member of the narrative set; but if plot is conceived as design meant to arouse the interest of the audience, only successful narrative performances will be regarded as prototypical. Yet even though this conception of narrativity stresses aesthetics, its critics may argue that it is unfit for "high" literature, since its best examples are the most stereotyped genres of popular culture.

Natural Narrative as Prototype

While narratology, a child of structuralism and semiotics, was developing in France as the study of folklore and literary texts, linguists on the other side of the Atlantic who were trying to expand their discipline from the sentence to the discourse level became interested in the analysis of "natural narratives," i.e., oral narratives spontaneously told in conversation, or produced in response to questions by an interviewer. William Labov's work on narratives of personal experience has remained foundational for this type of research. Collecting stories from African American informants on the theme "were you ever in a serious fight," Labov observed that the texts followed a dominant pattern of organization not significantly different from the structure described above as the Aristotelian plot. Labov defines this structure as: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, and coda (Labov 1972, 363). The difference between this model and a plot model strictly centered on what happens in the story-world lies in its combination of actions performed by the characters and belonging therefore to the story world (complicating action and resolution) with rhetorical actions performed by the storyteller to attract the interest of the audience and stress the points that make the story tell-able: abstract, orientation, evaluation, and coda.

In 1977, Mary Louise Pratt's ground-breaking *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* argued for the applicability of Labov's model to some texts of "highbrow" literary fiction, thereby putting narratology and sociolinguistics on converging courses. Almost twenty years later, in *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* (1996), Monika Fludernik went even farther by declaring conversational (i.e., "natural") narrative to be the prototypical manifestation of narrativity. Viewing the representation of personal experience as the main function of natural narrative, she proposed to replace "plot" with what she calls "experientiality" as the essence of narrative. This emphasis on experientiality expels historical chronicles, thrillers, folktales, and all sorts of action-oriented stories from the center of the fuzzy set of all narratives, and replaces them with texts that develop in great detail, as David Herman puts it, "the lived, felt experience of humans or human-like agents interacting in an ongoing way with their cohorts and surrounding environment." For, as Herman adds, "unless a discourse encodes the pressure of events on an experiencing human or at least human-like consciousness, it will not be a central instance of the narrative text type" (2007, 11). Under this criterion, a text made solely of the cogitations of a narrator, such as Samuel Beckett's *The Unnameable*, is more narrative than a fairy tale that focuses almost exclusively on physical events.

The expression of human experience is certainly a compelling reason for telling stories, but whether "experientiality" can be elevated into the highest criterion of narrativity remains debatable. While storytelling is a very efficient way to represent one's

experience or the experience of others, a painting, like Edvard Munch's "The Scream," or a piece of music like Beethoven's Pastoral symphony would also seem capable of expressing intimately felt experience. So are some largely non-narrative texts such as lyric poetry. This suggests that "experientiality" is not a sufficient condition of narrativity. Nor is it a necessary condition. A text that develops in great detail how events affect characters is not *eo ipso* more narrative than a fairy tale that limits itself to the bare report of events. As Erich Auerbach (1953) observed, there are lengthy representations of felt experience in *The Odyssey* (think of Odysseus weeping for Ithaca and his family while held prisoner by Calypso), but none in the episode in Genesis where God orders Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Yet for most readers, Genesis is no less narrative than the *Odyssey*. Could it be that "experientiality" can be left implicit? But if this is the case, any story implies subjective experience, since stories concern anthropomorphic creatures dealing with changing circumstances or with the threat of change, and the distinction between plot-based and experientiality-based conceptions of narrative collapses.

Another feature of natural narrative that could be invoked in elevating it to the status of prototype is its pragmatic or communicative framework. James Phelan defines this framework as follows: "the act of somebody telling somebody else on a particular occasion for some purpose that something happened" (2005, 217). If this formula is constitutive of narrativity, there are two ways to deal with narrative fiction: either relegate it to the fuzzy outer reaches of the narrative set, a rather counterintuitive move, or try to force-fit it into the formula. But if we chose this second alternative, who will be the somebody who performs the act of narration in the case of a novel: the author or the narrator? Let's assume that "somebody" is the author; then what exactly is the "purpose"? While intention can be reasonably well defined for conversational narrative (satisfying the hearer's curiosity for a specific type of information), it is the object of endless speculation in the case of literary fiction. Who is the "somebody else" who functions as recipient: the particular reader (hearer, spectator) or the general public that any published narrative addresses? What is the occasion? Narration takes place in a cultural context, of which readers are broadly aware (for instance by knowing in which period the text was written, or to what genre it belongs), but this context is not a specific occasion, because the author cannot anticipate the exact circumstances in which the text will be received, and the user does not know the circumstances in which it was composed. Since Phelan's formula does not yield satisfactory results on the level of the authorial utterance, let's try to apply it to the imaginary transaction between the narrator and his audience. This transaction can sometimes be regarded as the imitation of a "natural" (= non-fictional) type of narrative (confession, biography, autobiography, letter-writing, or the gossip of a barber, as in Ring Lardner's "Haircut"), but for every fictional narrator who narrates in a specific situation and in a recognizable "natural" genre, there are countless others who operate in some kind of contextual vacuum. In most cases of third-person narration, we can't even regard the narrator as "somebody," i.e., as an individuated, embodied creature, since he (she? it?) not only lacks defining properties, but also possesses supernatural abilities, such as reading into people's minds, seeing through walls, and freely changing his/her/its spatial and temporal point of view. Moreover, even when narrative fiction *does* mimic a genre of non-fictional narrative, it hardly ever imitates this genre exactly, because the demands of the real act of communication between author and audience override the demands of the fictional transaction

between the narrator and his fictional audience. All this disqualifies “natural narrative” as a valid model of literary fiction.

Narrative Fiction as Prototype

An alternative to force-fitting narrative fiction into the framework of natural narrative is to regard narrative fiction itself as the prototype of narrativity. Since it creates its own world, rather than proposing a falsifiable image of the real world, fiction is free to report the most credibility- and probability-defying sequences of events, as well as to interleave or embed these sequences into the most complex patterns. And since its narrator need not be a possible human being (if it needs a narrator at all – a view made questionable by film and drama), narrative fiction is not limited to the kind of information that is available to natural narrators. The freedom to report, or rather to make up normally inaccessible information, such as the private thoughts of characters, gives fiction a power to capture the “what it is like,” the felt quality of experience that cannot be equaled by strictly truth-functional storytelling. On the level of discourse, fiction can rely on resources of unlimited diversity: telling out of sequence, unreliable narration, embedding stories within stories, telling from the point of view of multiple characters, alternating between plot lines, slowing down or accelerating the pace of narration, etc. Fiction, in short, affords much more immersive modes of storytelling, which lead to a much more powerful sense of being there than factual narratives. This explains why what David Herman (1999) calls “classical narratology” (by which he means French and structuralism-inspired narratology) has developed as the study of literary fiction. Gérard Genette’s *Figures III*, a monumental catalogue of the expressive resources of narrative discourse, was based on a close reading of Marcel Proust’s novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

There are, however, two caveats to elevating narrative fiction into the prototype of narrativity. The first is that not all narratives are fictional, *pace* those constructivists who argue that, because narratives are “made and not found,” they fulfill the etymological meaning of fiction: *figere*, to fashion, to shape. While all narratives are “constructed in people’s heads,” as Jerome Bruner puts it (1987, 11), fictional and factual narratives are constructed from elements coming from different sources (the imagination versus real-world experience or documents); they fulfill different functions (entertainment versus information); and they are evaluated according to different criteria (pleasure versus truth). To argue for the fictionality of all narratives amounts to denying differences of major ethical importance, since the endorsement of what I have called “the doctrine of panfictionality” (Ryan 1996), if taken seriously, would relieve historians, journalists, and even natural storytellers of commitment to a fair and properly documented representation of reality.

The other, less evident caveat lies in the fact that not all fiction is narrative, or is not narrative to the same extent. While fully non-narrative fiction is rare (an example would be the synchronic, pseudo-ethnographic description of an imaginary world, as in Jorge Luis Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” which lack the time dimension essential to narrativity), postmodern authors have found many ways to decouple fictionality from narrativity:

- The interior monologue of Beckett’s narrator in *The Unnameable*, a text that takes readers into the theater of a character’s mind but gives them no ideas of what happens

in the outside world. (Doesn't narrative need to establish facts for a world presented as an objectively existing reality?)

- The contradictions that pepper some of the novels of French New Novelists Alain Robbe-Grillet or Robert Pinget, creating a "Swiss cheese world" where violations of the principle of non-contradiction drill quantum tunnels into an otherwise coherent world.
- The fragmentation of Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" into multiple short paragraphs, suggesting different versions of events, but preventing the reconstruction of even one full version of what happened when a couple left for a party, leaving its three children in the care of an attractive teenager.
- Novels made of fragments that can be read in any order (*Composition no 1* by Marc Saporta, a novel printed on a deck of cards), so that no causal chain can be established.
- Remixes and cut ups: texts created by cutting fragments from other texts and gluing them together (a favorite technique of William Burroughs).
- The calligraphic arrangements of printed text in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, which invite the user to look rather than to read.

If fiction can subvert narrativity for aesthetic purposes, only *narrative* kinds of fiction can occupy the center of the fuzzy set of all narratives. But then we will have to define what makes these fictions narrative (plot as content? plot as form? experientiality?), and we will be right back to square one.

Mimesis, Worldness, and Narrativity

All the genres we have examined so far have shown some weaknesses if regarded as the sole standard of narrativity. Does it mean that we should abandon the idea that the fuzzy set of all narratives has a center, and that the narrativity of a given text can be assessed in its relation to this center? Or should we define the center more broadly, so that it can contain more than one prototype? Then the narrativity of a text T will depend on its resemblance to either A or B or C, but since some texts will resemble A and others will resemble B or C, it will not be possible (nor necessary) to rank the A-relatives with respect to the B- or C-relatives in terms of degree of narrativity. Under this system, a postmodern novel full of contradictions will be less narrative than a realistic novel, and so will a flat list of "everything that happened to somebody in a day" compared to a story whose plot follows a proper narrative arc, but the "lessness" or "moreness" relates to different criteria and presupposes different standards of comparison. But if different types of narrative can occupy the center, this means that they must have something in common; otherwise there would be no reason to exclude any type of text from this center. In other words, narrativity must be conceived in terms of something broader than "being about the plotting of characters" or "expressing experience" or "creating a certain type of interest."

This more general property, I would suggest, lies in a text's mimeticism. To be regarded as constitutive of narrativity, *mimesis* must be conceived not merely as the imitation of something that happens in our world (this is the ambition of non-fiction), nor as the imitation of something that *could* happen in our world (Aristotle's conception of poetic mimesis, which applies to realistic fiction), but more generally, as the ability to summon a world to the imagination, together with the individuals who populate it, and the events that make it evolve and that matter affectively to its inhabitants. By insisting on *worldness*, and by associating worldness with something that can be

imagined, i.e., pictured in the mind, this conception of mimesis does not restrict the concept to representations of the real world, nor to realistic ones. However distant from the world we live in, the more vividly a storyworld imprints itself in the reader's, hearer's or spectator's imagination, and the more all of its parts form a coherent whole, the greater the narrativity of the text that displays it.

Narrative, Culture, Identity

Once stories are decoupled from text, as I suggest early in this chapter, the door opens for all sorts of metaphorical expansions, since the label "narrative" can now apply to invisible, elusive representations that exist only in the mind. These expansions make narrative into a highly versatile tool that can be applied to many disciplines and problems, but they also run the risk of stretching the concept too thin. Here I will look at applications of the concept of narrative in two areas that test the limits of its usefulness: cultural studies and the discourse of identity.

Narrative may be difficult to define, but the object of cultural studies is even more elusive than the object of narratology. This may explain why anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines culture in terms of narrative: "Culture is the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" (1973, 448). This formula can receive several interpretations, depending on whether we conceive the "we" in collective or individual terms, and "narrative" as concrete text, or as purely mental construct (i.e., as what I have called "story"). By cross-classifying the individual/collective and the mental/textual dichotomies, one obtains four categories, which I will survey below.

If we take "we" to represent the whole of the culture to which a person belongs, and "stories" to stand for oral or written texts, then Geertz's formula applies to the myths, legends, national epics, and, nowadays, bestselling novels, comic books, blockbuster films, and computer games through which a culture defines itself.

Alternatively, if we interpret "we" as meaning "each of us, individually," the stories "we" tell ourselves about ourselves are the oral testimonies, narratives of personal experience, diaries, memoirs, letters, photos, and other documents through which people capture their memories. In this perspective, culture becomes the sum of the personal histories produced by its members. This interpretation reflects the interest of cultural studies in the stories spontaneously told by ordinary people, as opposed to the artworks officially recognized as expressions of cultural identity. Though natural narratives are only a subset of all narratives, their study by sociologists, narratologists, and linguists provides invaluable tools for the analysis of this type of document.

The distinction between collective and individual narratives also applies when narrative is conceived independently of any physical text. On the collective level, narratives that float freely in the ideology of a culture are represented by the so-called "Grand Narratives" (*grands récits*) of Jean-François Lyotard and their many offspring. For Lyotard, *grands récits* are global explanatory schemes, or views of history that legitimize institutions by presenting them as necessary to the historical self-realization of an abstract or collective entity such as Reason, Freedom, the State, or the Human Spirit. *Grands récits* share with G. W. F. Hegel's and Karl Marx's philosophies of history, or with religious eschatology, a totalizing and teleological view of history as a narrative arc that reaches a definitive and identifiable end point; but, in contrast to

these philosophies, they cannot be associated with particular texts. Lyotard condemned *grands récits* as residues from positivism, and prophesized that in postmodernism they would be replaced by multiple “little stories” that represent subcultures or individuals. This rejection of *grands récits* has led to the association of narrative with prejudice and negative stereotypes concerning certain groups. When scholars speak of “the narratives of race, class, and gender,” for instance, they do not mean individual stories that develop a sequence of causally related events, leading to the ultimate victory or defeat of the protagonist, nor do they mean how people of a certain race, class or gender represent themselves through storytelling. These scholars rather have in mind particular constructions of race, class, and gender that enable systemic forms of oppression and discrimination and thus need to be deconstructed. “Narrative,” in this rather loose usage, connotes the idea of being a culturally specific and constructed representation of questionable veracity, rather than an expression of objective truths capturing the nature-given properties of a certain group. But the term “narrative” can also be used positively to represent how a given group conceives its identity. In contrast to Lyotard’s *grands récits*, narratives of group identity do not speak for culture as a whole; rather, their diversity represents culture as a network of competing stories that vie for recognition.

Our last type of narrative, stories told by people to themselves (i.e., silently) about themselves, has been at the center of a memorable controversy that involved most of the fields concerned with narrative: psychology, cultural studies, philosophy, and of course narratology. The root of the debate was in claims advanced by some scholars about the “narrative” nature of the mind and the importance of stories for the construction of identity. Particularly representative of this trend is the following claim by Jerome Bruner:

Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and to purpose-build the very “events” of a life. In the end we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives. And given the cultural shaping to which I referred, we become variants of the culture’s canonical forms. (1987, 15)

Or this one, by Daniel Dennett:

We are all virtuoso novelists, who find ourselves engaged in all sorts of behavior, and we always try to put the best “faces” on if we can. We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography. The chief fictional character at the centre of that autobiography is one’s self. (1988, 1029)

There are two ways to deal with such declarations about the narrative nature of identity: one is to treat them as metaphors, which means not taking them too seriously; the other is to hold the author responsible for a literal interpretation, by which identity *is* a narrative. In 2004 the philosopher Galen Strawson took the second route, by launching an attack on what he called the “narrative identity thesis.” In addition to rejecting the idea that “human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or

story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories," he objected even more forcefully to what he calls the ethical narrative thesis: "This states that experiencing or conceiving one's life as a narrative is a good thing; a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood" (2004, 428). Strawson's campaign against the narrative identity thesis is based much less on logical argumentation than on gut feeling. He distinguishes two possible types of persons, the Diachronics, who see the self as continuous over time and tend to conceive of it as a unified narrative, and the Episodics, who experience the self as discontinuous, so that their past selves may seem foreign to them, even though, thanks to memory, they remain aware of the persistence of their person. Strawson rejects the narrative identity thesis by declaring himself firmly to be an Episodic. (It is ironic that Strawson resorts to the narratological concept of episode to defend the idea of a non-narrative sense of self; here he is clearly betrayed by language, since English offers no better term.) While Strawson's self-description does not exclude the possibility that some people may be not only Diachronics but Narratives, it establishes the possibility of a non-narrative sense of self. To sum up Strawson's objections to the narrative identity thesis, what he is telling us with his Episodic/Diachronic dichotomy is that there are people not overly concerned with "who they are," or who do not associate a sense of self with an overarching lifestory, and that these people are not morally inferior to those who conceive their life as an ongoing quest with a prewritten script. The Hitlers of this world, convinced of their historical mission, were certainly Narrative Diachronics.

A possibility that Strawson does not consider seriously, however, is that the narrative identity thesis does not necessarily presuppose a single, overarching, persistent life narrative. As Matti Hyvärinen (2012) has suggested, why couldn't the evolution of a self into another be the subject matter of a story? Why couldn't an Episodic constantly rewrite the narrative of his life? Narratives, after all, may consist of distinct episodes, and episodes are mini-narratives. In the passage quoted above, Bruner uses the plural to speak about the narratives by which we tell about our life. By allowing a plurality of narratives, this choice of grammatical form suggests an equally plural, fragmented, and always renegotiated sense of self. If, taking a clue from Judith Butler, we regard storytelling as a performance of identity, the self becomes something that we constantly create and recreate, not only through the stories we tell ourselves in the privacy of our minds, but also through the ones that we verbalize, since we present ourselves differently to every audience we face. But for these self-representations to construct our sense of identity, we must be aware of what image we project, which is not necessarily the case.

It would be easy to dismiss cultural theory and identity discourse for overextending the concept of narrative, since they use it to refer to phenomena that are not textually embodied, and cannot therefore be objectively observed, at least not in the current state of mind-imaging technology. But it would be equally easy to dismiss narratology as too obsessed with definition and description, and as not sufficiently concerned with the existentially crucial question of the role of narrative in social life and in the life of the mind. As a way to represent life, stories transcend texts, but if it weren't for their textual manifestations, we would not have come up with the concept of narrative. In so far as the free-floating stories of cultural theory and identity discourse are abstractions from the concrete textual objects that form the concern of narratology, the two approaches

I have outlined in this chapter are not antagonistic, but complementary. A case in point is the legacy of Roland Barthes, who, through works as different as *Mythologies*, *S/Z*, and “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” has been equally inspiring for cultural studies and narratology.

- see CHAPTER 1 (FRANKFURT – NEW YORK – SAN DIEGO 1924–1968; OR, CRITICAL THEORY); CHAPTER 3 (PARIS 1955–1968; OR, STRUCTURALISM); CHAPTER 4 (BIRMINGHAM – URBANA-CHAMPAIGN 1964–1990; OR, CULTURAL STUDIES)

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