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# From Narrative Representation to Narrative Use: Towards the Limits of Definition

“one will define narrative without difficulty as the representation of an event or sequence of events.”

(Genette 127)

“A narration is the symbolic presentation of a sequence of events”

(Scholes 205)

“Narrative has been . . . defined as the representation of at least one event”

(Prince, “Revisiting Narrativity” 43)

“Narrative . . . may be defined as the representation of real or fictive events and situations in a time sequence.”

(Prince, *Narratology* 1)

“narrative is the representation *of at least two* real or fictive events in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other.”

(Prince, *Narratology* 4)

“Any representation of non-contradictory events such that at least one occurs at a time  $t$  and another at a time  $t_1$  following time  $t$  constitutes a narrative (however trivial).”

(Prince, *Narratology* 145)

“What we get in a narrative text are not events as such, but signs, the representations of events.”

(Onega and Landa 5)

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“narrative is a semiotic representation of a series of events.”

(Onega and Landa 6)

“A *story* is a *fabula* that is presented in a certain manner. A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events”

(Bal 5)

Throughout the tradition of narratological scholarship, it has generally been the norm to define narrative along the lines of the above quotations. What these definitions have in common, at a basic level, is the view that what constitutes narrative is the representation of a series or sequence of events. There is, as Brian Richardson points out (169), a certain amount of variation within this representational view: some narratologists accept Genette’s suggestion that a narrative needs only one event, whilst others insist on a series of events linked by causality. But on the whole, the term “representation” (or, occasionally, “presentation”) is so widely used in defining narratives that this way of understanding narrative is arguably one of the few methodological constants of narratology.<sup>1</sup> That the concept of representation should play such an important role in narratology’s definition of its subject matter is unsurprising: narratology, so closely bound up with semiotics, is predicated on a view of language as signifiers (*sjuzet*) and signifieds (*fabula*), the former conveying a representation of the latter. To disagree with the narratologists therefore raises and begs a great many troublesome questions about the very nature of narrative, and perhaps even about communication itself. Surely, at least at an intuitive level, representing events is simply what narrative does.

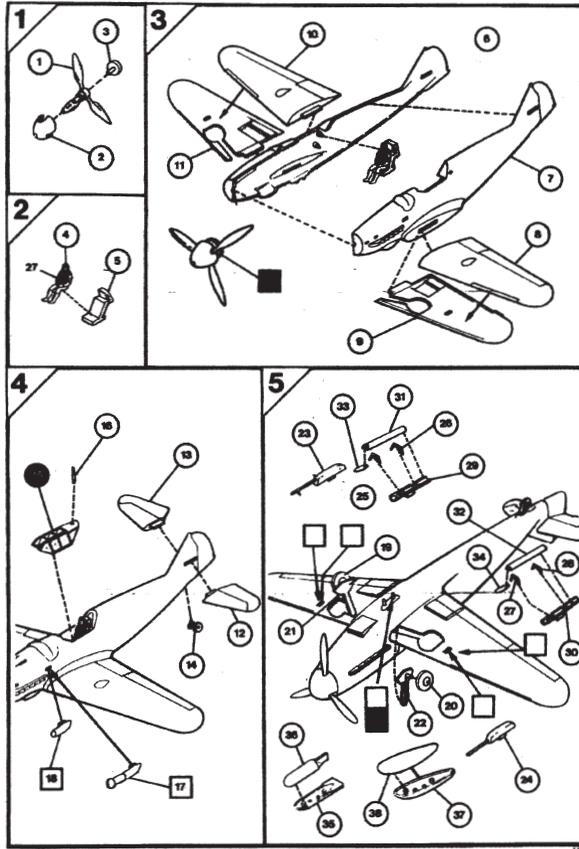
However, in the light of the above quotations, consider the two illustrations below: Figure One and Figure Two. They are, respectively, a comic strip from Bill Watterson’s widely read *Calvin and Hobbes* series, and the assembly instructions from a plastic model aeroplane kit. What is striking about these two very different “texts” is the similarity of representational devices they use. Both use a sequence of illustrations to represent a series of events; both use frames to demarcate the different stages of the events depicted; and both sequences are clearly ordered chronologically, with early events leading up to, or in to, later ones. (It can even be seen that

Figure One<sup>2</sup>



CALVIN AND HOBBS © 1986 Watterson. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. All rights reserved.

Figure Two<sup>3</sup>



each has a beginning, a middle, and an end). According to the quotations with which this paper began, then, both Figure One and Figure Two conform in more or less equal measure to the criteria for narrative set out by the narratologists, and both can therefore be defined, on these grounds, as narrative.

Figure One, it seems fairly clear, is indeed a narrative: it “tells” (if that is the right word for pictorial narratives) a brief but amusing story about a boy who takes a nasty tumble and covers it up by pretending to have executed a deliberate gymnastic maneuver of some kind. But what is the story represented in Figure Two? Certainly, it would be counterintuitive to paraphrase its contents as one might for Figure One, and even if one did so, a straightforward enumeration of the represented events would fail to recapture the force that Figure Two carries as a set of instructions. Indeed, I would venture to suggest that a reader endowed with what some narratologists have called “narrative competence” is extremely unlikely to identify Figure Two as a narrative at all.<sup>4</sup>

This is not to say that Figure Two cannot be *read as* a narrative: it could quite easily be a pictorial narrative of a construction project, for example. Archaeologists many years hence might well interpret it as a piece of artwork documenting, commemorating, or celebrating the building of such an object. There is nothing to stop such a reading, and indeed, under the circumstances, it may well be plausible. But the need to imagine scenarios and explanations to justify reading Figure Two as a narrative is telling, and underscores the point that conventionally, we would not do so. In any case, “reading as” a narrative is not quite the same as reading a narrative: classifying Figure Two as a narrative simply because it can be “read as” one would be a rather suspicious move.

So far, then, we have identified the two figures as amounting, in more or less the same degree, to a representation of a series or sequence of events. Yet only the first is readily identifiable as a narrative, while the second is just as readily identifiable as a set of instructions. Why, given the defining features set out by the narratologists in the quotations above, should this be so? The clearest answer would be that it seems that the representation of a series or sequence of events is not, in and of itself, enough to provide a full definition of narrative. Perhaps such a representation is a necessary condition for narrative,<sup>5</sup> but it does not appear to be a sufficient one. Something more is needed to make a text a narrative.

For some narratologists, this “something extra” is provided by the concept of narrativity, which has gained in currency in recent years. On this view, a text is defined as narrative to the degree that it contains or exhibits narrativity. Prince advocates a definition of narrative in terms of its narrativity because he recognizes that representational definitions such as those above can be equally applied to some non-narrative texts—interestingly, the example he gives is, like Figure Two, also a set of instructions: “First you wash and drain a cup of rice and place it in a heavy kettle with three cups of cold water; then you boil for five minutes; then you reduce the heat and cook covered for eighteen minutes; then you remove from heat, let stand for a few more minutes, and enjoy!” (“Revisiting Narrativity” 43). For Prince, this text cannot be defined as a narrative because it lacks narrativity. However, there is, as Prince’s literature review abundantly demonstrates, little or no agreement as to what narrativity is. Building on the work of Marie-Laure Ryan, for whom narrativity arises in a network of relations between the different parts of a narrative, Prince argues that the concept of narrativity has to do with the dynamics of “general narrative configuration” (“Revisiting Narrativity” 48). Whilst Prince does not define exactly what he means by this phrase, I take it to involve the structural interrelation between the various parts of the narrative whole.

That this is unsatisfactory can be seen by returning to the two figures, for here it appears that both make use of similar configurational devices, and, if anything, the “general narrative configuration” in Figure Two’s non-narrative is simultaneously easier to follow and more sophisticated than in Figure One’s narrative. Both, for example, use frames to separate out distinct states of affairs, and use lines within these boxes to convey the movements, transitions, or transformations that happen between these states of affairs: the trajectory of Calvin’s fall is plotted using a pair of curly lines, whilst a variety of different lines (broken lines, solid lines, labels, and arrows)

are used to convey different operations in Figure Two. Figure Two's frames are numbered, imparting to them a clearer sequentiality than in Figure One, but it should not be deduced from this that the frames lack a progression of their own. On the contrary, it will be seen that both the early events—frame 1 and frame 2—are embedded in frame 3, so this event is dependent on the earlier events having taken place already. (To emphasise this embedding, the combined height of the frames of the embedded events equals the height of the frame that embeds them). Frame 4 depicts the state of affairs as at the completion of the events conveyed in frame 3, just as frame 5 depicts the state of affairs as at the completion of the events conveyed in frame 4: a “plot” unfolds in which subsequent events are always entirely dependent on preceding ones. On Ryan's view—and presumably on Prince's—this level of interrelation between events should optimize narrativity. Each episode of this sequence of events, then, is conveyed with a greater level of clarity, sophistication, and narrativity than can be found in Figure One. Of course, this is because the reader of Figure Two needs to be able to understand, follow, and replicate the sequence for him/herself, but this by itself is not a reason to suppose its “general narrative configuration” is inferior to that of Figure One. So it seems that, in its present form at least, the concept of narrativity does not give us enough to distinguish a narrative text from a non-narrative one, nor to formulate a watertight definition of narrative, any more than does the concept of representation. Neither concept can explain how and why we distinguish (as I would imagine most readers do) between Figure One as a narrative and Figure Two as assembly instructions.

Where, then, are we to look for an understanding of narrative that is not based on narrativity or on representation? A good place to start might be to turn to a philosophy of language based on *use*. Consider the following extract from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: “Imagine a picture representing a boxer in a particular stance. Now, this picture can be used to tell someone how he should stand, should hold himself; or how he should not hold himself; or how a particular man did stand in such-and-such a place; and so on” (11).<sup>6</sup> Here, Wittgenstein is effectively summarizing the problem we have been discussing thus far. The concept of representation has many different functions, since we use representations in a great many different ways throughout our everyday lives. Accordingly, any given representation may have any number of uses. One of these might be narrative (“to tell someone . . . how a particular man did stand”); another might be instructional (“to tell someone how he should stand”); there may be many others (“and so on”). But there is nothing in the picture itself, nor in any of these interpretations, nor in the concept of representation *per se*, that can ground any application or reading of this picture of the boxer—or, for that matter, of Figure One and Figure Two—as definitive.

This is not to say that we do not, or cannot, differentiate between a comic strip and an instructions manual. Most of us manage to do this every day of our lives, without recourse to problematic definitions and concepts. What guides us in making these differentiations is rather a matter of use: how texts or graphics such as these are normally used (consumed, read, acted upon, laughed at, etc.) by the members of our linguistic or cultural community. The question of use is therefore intimately bound up with the question of social practices and conventions. Generally, competent

members of a linguistic community are able to recognise the use for which a narrative is intended and respond appropriately.<sup>7</sup> There is thus an element of responsiveness involved in any given appropriation of narrative: in an ideal narrative situation, the narratee's response will be to put the narrative to the use for which the narrator intended it (internalizing the moral of the story, passing a legend on to the next generation, or just tuning into a soap opera again at the same time next week, for instance). But it is important to stress this is what happens in "ideal" narrative situations—in everyday life, the narratee's response is not entirely predictable, and can be far more complex. Narrating, instructing, or any other form of language game (to borrow Wittgenstein's term) is, after all, a social phenomenon, and therefore what gets identified as narrative (or not), and hence responded to as narrative (or not), is first and foremost a function of social conventions, rather than exclusively formal or linguistic concepts. To formulate any kind of definition of narrative, even to form a basic understanding of narrative, we need first to consider how narrative is practiced and experienced by the linguistic community. As Wittgenstein puts it, "Our *language-game* is behaviour" (*Zettel* §545).

It can therefore be argued that any definition of narrative that ignores the importance of use is giving an incomplete picture. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith and, more recently, James Phelan have argued, the task of defining a narrative cannot afford to neglect the practical aspects and consequences of narrative as an act: "the act of somebody telling somebody else *on a particular occasion for some purpose* that something happened," as Phelan defines it (8, 218 my emphasis). With this definition in mind, consider the following commonplace narrative forms: confessing one's sins in church; writing an accident report while completing an insurance claim form; and testifying against a murderer in court. In all three cases, it is possible to see a representation of events here. But if we assume this representation is an inherent property of these speech acts *qua* narratives, rather than, say, a requirement imposed on them by the social institutions and conventions in which they are spoken/written, we may well court a charge of naïveté. Nor are narratives like these three, all of which are enmeshed in rigid institutional practices, the only kinds of narratives with clear uses and purposes. Narratives take on an active, performative force in an infinite variety of ways throughout our everyday lives: consider the very broad spectrum between lulling a child to sleep with a fairy tale and scaring a child into sleeplessness with a ghost story. Ross Chambers, for example, has demonstrated that Balzac's "Sarrasine" is a narrative that is simultaneously a thinly-veiled attempt by the narrator to seduce his narratee, Madame de Rochefide (73–96). Interestingly, says Chambers, the attempt fails because Madame de Rochefide chooses pensively to contemplate his story as an artistic tale rather than to respond to it in kind: in other words, the narratee puts the narrative to a very different use from the one the narrator has in mind. Chambers's argument illustrates the point that the form a narrative ultimately takes—and, hence, the properties by which one would attempt to define it—is as mutable as the uses to which it is put, making the task of neat definition a practically hopeless one. As Wolfgang Iser has it, "The more fiction eludes an ontological definition, the more unmistakably it presents itself in terms of its use" (267).

What the above examples suggest is that such classifications as "narrative" and "non-narrative" are at best provisional, inconsistent, and not mutually exclusive.

They certainly cannot be grounded in the classic narratological notion of a representation of a series or sequence of events. It is even possible to conclude that there can be no such thing as a watertight definition of narrative that can be given independent of context, and of the uses and practices to which texts are put: narrative practice is simply too vast and diverse a realm to make a simple definition workable, and, as the examples of Figure One and Figure Two suggest, non-narrative texts can be used as narratives (and, as I will demonstrate shortly, the *Calvin and Hobbes* narrative text of Figure One can also be used in non-narrative ways). But the “boundary crossing” involved in these examples opens up a related, but more radical possibility: that narrative is not a stable entity, and that positing “narrative” as a category or concept foists upon it an illusory self-identity and ontological fixity that narratives themselves, as dynamic acts, do not have. On this view, there is, perhaps, a fundamental problem with the very idea of a definition of narrative, or a hard and fast line between narrative texts and non-narrative texts.

Rather than trying to advance strict definitions that account for all the necessary and sufficient conditions that a text must satisfy in order to be classed as a narrative, narratologists might do better to reconsider their strategy of pithy definitions based on a view of narrative as representation, and to think of narrative instead as a family of language games. Language games are specific ways of using language that are inextricably linked to specific ways of acting, specific forms of behaviour. As Wittgenstein has it, “I . . . call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the “language-game” (*Philosophical Investigations* §7). He goes on: “Here the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §23). It is Wittgenstein’s contention throughout his later philosophy that endless confusions are occasioned as a result of failing to differentiate between language games. “We do not realize that we calculate, operate, with words, and in the course of time translate them sometimes into one picture, sometimes into another” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §449). Only by calling to mind the multiplicity of language games, and the differences between them, can one hope to get clear about a piece of language, and this clarity comes from contemplating use, function: “According to the role which propositions play in a language game, we distinguish between orders, questions, explanations, descriptions, and so on” (Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books* 82). To this list needs to be added “narratives.”

Perhaps the argument thus far can best be exemplified by returning to the two figures. Earlier, we imagined a hypothetical team of archaeologists interpreting Figure Two as a piece of artwork, narrative in form, that documents or commemorates the construction of a fairly complex object. We further saw that there is much about Figure Two that does indeed lend itself to being read as some sort of narrative along these lines. Insofar as this is the case, the hypothetical archaeologists’ interpretation of the diagram is a perfectly reasonable one *qua* diagram. The only thing they fail to take into account is the fairly widespread practice of constructing plastic model aeroplanes from kits. To simplify, there is nothing to prevent anyone from reading the representation of a series of events in Figure Two as a narrative except for the use

that is commonly made of such diagrams. This use, this practice, would be more or less the only thing we could cite to counter someone who perceived and read a narrative in its five frames. Figure Two, then, is not a narrative commemorating the construction of a plastic model—not because it cannot be read this way, but simply because for a reader with narrative competence and any degree of familiarity with instructions manuals, such a task is not performed by a text that is recognizably of this genre.

Conversely, imagine the very different impression we might form of Figure One if we encountered an identical four frames in some sort of instructions manual—say, a gymnastics text book, or a manual for clowning techniques. In the former case, we might still regard it as a narrative, but perhaps one carrying a rather different force. It could, for instance, be a cautionary tale, imparting to young gymnasts a valuable piece of advice—for example: no matter what goes wrong during your routine, always act as if nothing has happened, as if it's all part of the act, and maybe the judges won't notice. In this context, budding gymnasts are probably less likely to laugh at Calvin's tumble, and more likely to internalise some sort of message from it. The opposite situation is more likely to pertain if they encounter Figure One as a comic strip. In these cases, of course, neither response need preclude the other: children's textbooks often use humorous graphics like these in educational ways. It is important to note, though, that in both these cases, Figure One is still being read as a narrative. But what if it appeared in a manual for clowning techniques? In this case, a reader may well be forgiven for interpreting it as a set of step-by-step instructions showing trainee clowns how to raise a laugh by taking a tumble. Someone who reads Figure One this way—and there is no obvious reason why they shouldn't—is no longer reading Figure One as a narrative, but as a member of the same genre as Figure Two. In short, just as Figure Two can in some ways be classed as a narrative, there are ways in which Figure One could be classed as non-narrative. Once again, the key factor in making these classifications is the use to which the text is put.

Over the years, much of the prestige of narratology has arisen from its pointing out the sheer proliferation of narratives throughout all aspects of literature, culture, art, and everyday life, and the different forms that narrative can take—whether narrated through pictures, music, mime, gesture, dance, or the spoken or written word. It seems that practically all cultures from all the ages from all parts of the globe have produced some form of narrative or other: from church confessions to insurance claim forms, from Homeric myth to news broadcasting, narratives are indeed everywhere. The ensuing methodological desire to provide a neat definition through which this proliferation can be described and discussed, compared and contrasted, is therefore an understandable narratological goal, and not to be dismissed lightly. Yet it does not follow from this that any one formula based on one type of language use (representation, in this case) can successfully delimit the frontiers of narrative, given the sheer variety of different uses to which narratives are put. Representation offers a single conception of what narrative is that is simultaneously a prescription for what it does. As long as narratology remains tied to this conception, and tied to a

philosophy of language that foregrounds signification above and before questions of use and practice, it seems that a satisfactory way of defining and classifying its subject matter will continue to elude it.

## NOTES

1. It has recently been argued by Meir Sternberg (in “How Narrativity Makes a Difference”) and by Prince (in “A Commentary”) that there is no consensus amongst narratologists on how to define a narrative, or how to differentiate it from other genres of discourse. Prince, indeed, suggests there are few constants to be found in narratology at all. Whilst agreement on an exact definition remains elusive, nevertheless the same terms are consistently advanced, namely: “representation” or “presentation”; “sequence” or “series”; and “event.” Comparatively few narratologists have explored the possibility of defining narrative using terminology or concepts other than these.
2. For the source of this cartoon, see Bill Watterson’s *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes* (177).
3. The illustration is taken from a model kit by Airfix (“Messerschmitt 109G”). I am grateful to Airfix for their kind permission to reproduce this graphic.
4. For the clearest formulation of a Chomskian notion of narrative “competence,” see Prince’s *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*. For a superb critique of this notion, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s “Surfacing from the Deep.”
5. Or perhaps not. It is not clear, for example, what (or even whether) events are represented in certain narratives by, say, Beckett or Robbe-Grillet. But by the same token, it might be argued that it is not clear they *are* narratives for this reason.
6. Following standard practice in philosophy, references to Wittgenstein’s works cite not page numbers, but his numerically ordered paragraphs. This is denoted by the symbol §. Exceptions to this practice—such as this quotation—cite paragraphs which were not inserted into the numerical sequence, and appear in the text as footnotes. These are cited by page number.
7. Generally, but not always: I’m about to argue that the narrator of Balzac’s “Sarrasine” learns this to his cost.

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