I
Preliminaries

1

DAVID HERMAN

Introduction

In this introduction I seek to provide context for the chapters that follow by addressing questions that many readers of this volume are likely to have – particularly readers coming to the field of narrative studies for the first time. These questions include: Why a *Companion to Narrative*? What is narrative (what are its identifying traits and key functions)? What are some of the major trends in recent scholarship on narrative? What are the distinctive features of this book, and some strategies for using it? My attempt to address the second of these questions (what is narrative?) is meant to be read in tandem with chapter 2, where Marie-Laure Ryan reviews recent suggestions about what constitutes a narrative and proposes her own definition.[1] Conversely, this introduction should afford a sense of the broader research tradition from which attempts to define narrative have emerged.

The working definition that I myself will be using in this introduction, and that I spell out in greater detail below, runs as follows. Rather than focusing on general, abstract situations or trends, stories are accounts of what happened to particular people[2] – and of what it was like for them to experience what happened – in particular circumstances and with specific consequences. Narrative, in other words, is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change – a strategy that contrasts with, but is in no way inferior to, "scientific" modes of explanation that characterize phenomena as instances of general covering laws. Science explains how in general water freezes when (all other things being equal) its temperature reaches zero degrees centigrade; but it takes a story to convey what it was like to lose one's footing on slippery ice one late afternoon in December 2004, under a steel-grey sky.

Yet just as it is possible to construct a narrative about the development of science, to tell a story about who made what discoveries and under what circumstances, it is possible to use the tools of science – definition, analysis, classification, comparison, etc. – to work toward a principled account of what makes a text, discourse, film, or other artifact a narrative. Such an

account should help clarify what distinguishes a narrative from an exchange of greetings, a recipe for salad dressing, or a railway timetable. Collectively, the chapters in this book demonstrate how far theorists of narrative, sometimes working in quite different disciplinary traditions, have come in developing a common framework for narrative study. An overarching goal of the book is to enable (and encourage) readers to build on the contributors' work, so that others can participate in the process of narrative inquiry and help create further productive synergies among the many fields concerned with stories.

Why a *Companion to Narrative*?

In keeping with the overall purpose of the Cambridge Companion series, this book seeks to provide an accessible introduction to key ideas about narrative and an overview of major approaches to narrative inquiry. Further, like other Companions, the volume offers a variety of viewpoints on the field rather than an outline or summarization by a single commentator. By registering multiple perspectives on the study of stories, the book not only furnishes a synoptic account of this area of investigation but also constitutes in its own right a unique contribution to the scholarship on narrative. Hence, although it is like other Cambridge Companions targeted at student readers who need a reliable, comprehensive guide – a point of entrance into a complex field of study, as well as a basis for further research – the volume also aims to be a helpful tool for more advanced scholars needing a convenient, affordable, and up-to-date treatment of foundational terms, concepts, and approaches.

Thus far, I have focused on the objectives and design principles of this Companion. But what is the impetus for its publication, the reason for its appearance at *this* moment? The past several decades have in fact witnessed an explosion of interest in narrative, with this multifaceted object of inquiry becoming a central concern in a wide range of disciplines and research contexts. In his contribution to a volume titled *The Travelling Concept of Narrative*, Matti Hyvärinen traces the extent of this diffusion or spread of narrative across disciplinary boundaries, suggesting that "the concept of narrative has become such a contested concept over the last thirty years in response to what is often called the 'narrative turn' in social sciences . . . The concept has successfully travelled to psychology, education, social sciences, political thought and policy analysis, health research, law, theology and cognitive science."[3] The "narrative turn," to use the term that Hyvärinen adopts from Martin Kreiswirth,[4] has also shaped humanistic fields in recent decades, thanks in part to the development of structuralist theories of narrative in France in the mid to late 1960s.

Thus, around the same time that William Labov and Joshua Waletzky developed their model for the analysis of personal experience narratives told in face-to-face interaction, thereby establishing a key precedent for scholars of narrative working in the fields mentioned by Hyvärinen, the literary scholar Tzvetan Todorov coined the term "la narratologie" (= "narratology") to designate what he and other structuralist theorists of story (e.g., Roland Barthes, Claude Bremond, Gérard Genette, and A. J. Greimas) conceived of as a science of narrative modeled after the "pilot-science" of Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics.[5] As I discuss in greater detail below, the structuralists drew not only on Saussure's ideas but also on the work of Russian Formalist literary theorists, who studied prose narratives of all sorts, from Tolstoi's historically panoramic novels to tightly plotted detective novels to (Russian) fairy tales. This broad investigative focus helped initiate the narrative turn, uncoupling theories of *narrative* from theories of the *novel*, and shifting scholarly attention from a particular genre of literary writing to all discourse (or, in an even wider interpretation, all semiotic activities) that can be construed as narratively organized. That same shift helps explain why the present volume is titled *A Companion to Narrative* rather than *A Companion to the Novel* – even though Part II of the volume provides a "starter-kit" of terms, concepts, and methods for studying narrative fiction in particular, a major form of storytelling highly developed in the world's literatures.

Taking their cue from the Formalists, and noting that stories can be presented in a wide variety of textual formats, media, and genres, structuralists such as Barthes argued explicitly for a cross-disciplinary approach to the analysis of narrative – an approach in which stories can be viewed as supporting many cognitive and communicative activities, from spontaneous conversations and courtroom testimony to visual art, dance, and mythic and literary traditions.[6] Only after the heyday of structuralism, however, did their call for an interdisciplinary approach to narrative begin to be answered. Although more needs to be done to promote genuine dialogue and exchange among story analysts working in different fields, it is undeniable that the past decade in particular has seen an exponential growth of cross-disciplinary research and teaching activity centering on narrative.[7] International in scope, this activity has also spawned book series and journals in which scholarship on narrative figures importantly.[8] Other manifestations of the way narrative cuts across disciplinary boundaries include initiatives such as the Centre for Interdisciplinary Narratology at the University of Hamburg (www.icn.uni-hamburg.de); the Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London (www.uel.ac.uk/cnr/); Columbia University's Program in Narrative Medicine (www.narrativemedicine.org/), which aims "to fortify medicine

with ways of knowing about singular persons available through a study of humanities, especially literary studies and creative writing"; and Project Narrative at Ohio State University (http://projectnarrative.osu.edu), which brings together folklorists, scholars of language and literature, theorists of storytelling in film, digital media, and comics and graphic novels, and researchers in other fields concerned with narrative. By the same token, over the past decade alone many conferences and symposia have been dedicated to exploring the potential of narrative to bridge disciplines, in ways that may in turn throw new light on narrative itself.[9] The present volume, with contributions by authors in fields that include literature, linguistics, computer science, and film and television studies, can be seen as an outgrowth of this same trend toward interdisciplinarity in narrative research. Collectively, the chapters reveal complex relationships between literary fiction and other kinds of storytelling, and between the analytic frameworks that have grown up around these different modes of narrative practice.

I turn now from the factors contributing to this volume's publication and cross-disciplinary profile to its focal concern: namely, narrative itself.

What is narrative (what are its identifying traits and key functions)?

Consider the following two texts, both of them concerned with human emotions. The first is an excerpt from an encyclopedia article on the topic; the second is a transcription of part of a tape-recorded interview with Mary, a 41-year-old African American female from Texana, North Carolina, who in the transcribed excerpt refers to the fear that she and her childhood friend experienced as a result of being pursued menacingly by a large, glowing, orange ball that Mary characterizes earlier in the interview as "[a] UFO or the devil."[10]

Text 1:

An emotion is a psychological state or process that functions in the management of goals. It is typically elicited by evaluating an event as relevant to a goal; it is positive when the goal is advanced, negative when the goal is impeded. The core of an emotion is readiness to act in a certain way . . . ; it is an urgency, or prioritization, of some goals and plans rather than others; also they prioritize certain kinds of social interaction, prompting, for instance, cooperation, or conflict.[11]

Text 2:

(1) But then . . for some reason I feel some heat or somethin other
(2) and I look back
(3) me and Renee did at the same time
(4) and it's right behind us.

(5) We like . . we were scared and . .
(6) "Aaahhh!" you know
(7) at the same time.
(8) So we take off runnin as fast as we can.
(9) And we still lookin back
(10) and every time we look back it's with us.
(11) It's just a-bouncin behind us
(12) it's NOT touchin the ground.
(13) It's bouncin in the air.
(14) It's like this . . behind us
(15) as we run.
(16) We run all the way to her grandmother's
(17) and we open the door
(18) and we just fall out in the floor,
(19) and we're cryin and we screamin
(20) and we just can't BREATHE.
(21) We that scared.[12]

Text 1 exemplifies what Jerome Bruner calls "paradigmatic" or logico-deductive reasoning.[13] The author uses definitions to establish categories in terms of which (a) emotions can be distinguished from other kinds of phenomena (goals, events, evaluations, etc.), and (b) different kinds of emotions can be distinguished from one another. The author also identifies a core feature (readiness to act) that can be assumed to cut across all types of emotion, and to be constitutive of emotion in a way that other features, more peripheral, do not. In turn, the text links this core feature to a process of prioritization that grounds emotion in contexts of social interaction.

By contrast, text 2 exemplifies what Bruner characterizes as "narrative" reasoning. In this text, too, emotion figures importantly. But rather than defining and sub-categorizing emotions, and explicitly associating them with aspects of social interaction, Mary draws tacitly on emotion terms and categories to highlight the salience of the narrated events for both Renee and herself at the time of their occurrence – and their continuing emotional impact in the present, for that matter. Mary uses terms like *scared* (lines 5 and 21), reports behaviors conventionally associated with extreme fear (screaming, running, feeling unable to breathe), and makes skillful use of the evaluative device that Labov called "expressive phonology,"[14] which can include changes in pitch, loudness, and rhythm, as well as the emphatic lengthening of vowels or whole words (see lines 12 and 20). More than just reflecting or encapsulating pre-existing emotions, the text *constructs* Mary (and Renee) as an accountably frightened experiencer of the events reported. Mary's story provides an account of what happened by creating a nexus

or link between the experiencing self and the world experienced; it builds causal-chronological connections among what Mary saw that night, her and Renee's emotional responses to the apparition, and the verbal and nonverbal actions associated with those responses. Text 1 abstracts from any particular emotional experience to outline general properties of emotions, and to suggest a taxonomy or classification based on those properties. By contrast, text 2 uses specific emotional attributions to underscore the impact of this unexpected or non-canonical (and thus highly tellable) sequence of events, which happened on this one occasion, in this specific locale, and in this particular way, on the consciousness of the younger, experiencing-I to whose thoughts and feelings the story told by the older, narrating-I provides access.[15]

Hence, besides using principles of reasoning to develop definitions, classifications, and generalizations of the sort presented in text 1, people use other principles, grounded in the production and interpretation of stories, to make sense of the impact of experienced events on themselves and others, as in text 2. But what are these other principles? Or, to put the question differently, assuming that (as Bruner puts it) "we organize our experience and memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on,"[16] what are the design principles of narrative itself? What explains people's ability to distinguish storytelling from other kinds of communicative practices and narratives from other kinds of semiotic artifacts?

To capture what distinguishes text 2 from text 1, it is important to keep in mind the ideas about categorization developed by cognitive scientists such as George Lakoff and Eleanor Rosch – ideas that Ryan also alludes to in her own proposal for a definition of narrative in the next chapter.[17] This work suggests that at least some of the categories in terms of which we make sense of the world are gradient in nature; that is, they operate in a "more-or-less" rather than an "either–or" fashion. In such cases, central or prototypical instances of a given category will be good examples of it, whereas more peripheral instances will display less goodness-of-fit. Thus, a category like "bird" can be characterized as subject to what Lakoff calls *membership gradience*: although robins are more prototypical members or central instances of the category than emus are, emus still belong in the category, albeit farther away from the center of the category space. Meanwhile, when one category shades into another, *category gradience* can be said to obtain. Think of the categories "tall person" and "person of average height": where exactly do you draw the line? Narrative can be described as a kind of text (a text-type category) to which both membership gradience and category gradience apply. A given text can be a more or less central instance of the category, and less central

instances will be closer to neighboring text-type categories (descriptions, lists, arguments, etc.) than will prototypical instances.[18]

Thus, whereas prototypical instances of the category "narrative" share relatively few features with those of "description," more peripheral cases are less clearly separable from that text-type, allowing for hybrid forms that Harold F. Mosher called "descriptized narrations" and "narrativized descriptions."[19] Consider the nursery rhyme "This Little Piggy Went to Market":

Text 3:
This little piggy went to market.
This little piggy stayed home.
This little piggy had roast beef.
This little piggy had none.
This little piggy cried "Wee! Wee! Wee!" all the way home.

Recited while one pulls each toe of the child's foot, this nursery rhyme constitutes a playful way to focus attention on and "describe" all five toes by means of a quasi-narrative that groups them together into a constellation of characters, who move along non-intersecting trajectories in a somewhat nebulous space–time environment. The quasi-story is merely a vehicle for the description – that is, the enumeration – of the toes. Conversely, when elaborate descriptions of cultural practices in second-century Carthage encumber but do not completely submerge the plot in Gustave Flaubert's 1862 novel *Salammbô*, the result is descriptized narration. The novel contains many passages where, thanks to provision of elaborate historical details, the forward movement of story time slows without coming to a complete halt – that is, where Flaubert's narrative approaches but does not cross the (porous) boundary separating it from ethnographic description.

But what accounts for where along the continuum stretching between narrative and description (among other text-type categories) a given artifact falls? What are the design principles that, when fully actualized, result in central examples of the category narrative? I suggest that core or prototypical instances of narrative represent or simulate

(i) a structured time-course of particularized events which introduces
(ii) disruption or disequilibrium into storytellers' and interpreters' mental model of the world evoked by the narrative (whether that world is presented as actual, imagined, dreamed, etc.), conveying
(iii) what it's like to live through that disruption, that is, the "qualia" (or felt, subjective awareness) of real or imagined consciousnesses undergoing the disruptive experience.[20]

Taking each of these features in turn:

(i) Whereas stories prototypically focus on particular situations and events, scientific explanations by their nature concern themselves with ways in which, in general, the world tends to be. Further, if particularity sets narrative apart from general explanations, narrative's temporal profile helps distinguish the prototypical narrative from many examples of description. Whereas I can in principle describe the objects on my desk in any order (left to right, back to front, smallest to largest, etc.), narrative traces paths taken by particularized individuals faced with decision points at one or more temporal junctures in a storyworld; those paths lead to consequences that take shape against a larger backdrop in which other possible paths might have been pursued, but were not.[21]

Contrast text 2 with text 3 in this connection: transpose any elements of the sequence that Mary recounts and you would have a different story, whereas in text 3 the order in which the little piggies' actions are recounted is a function of the need to rhyme end words and establish logical contrasts, not of any corresponding sequence of actions in a little-piggy storyworld. Meanwhile, insofar as text 1 outlines features of emotion in general, it does not focus on any individualized actors, nor any specific sequence of events.

(ii) But particularized temporal sequences, though necessary for narrative, are still not a sufficient condition. Building on the work of Vladimir Propp, who characterized disruptive events (e.g., acts of villainy) as the motor of narrative, Todorov specified a further test for when an event-sequence will count as a story.[22] Todorov argued that narratives prototypically follow a trajectory leading from an initial state of equilibrium, through a phase of disequilibrium, to an endpoint at which equilibrium is restored (on a different footing) because of intermediary events – though not every narrative will trace the entirety of this path.[23] Todorov thereby sought to capture the intuition that stories characteristically involve some sort of conflict, or the thwarting of characters' intended actions by unplanned events, which may or may not be the effect of other characters' intended actions.

To be categorized as a narrative, an event-sequence must therefore involve some kind of noteworthy (hence "tellable") disruption of an initial state of equilibrium by an unanticipated and often untoward event or chain of events. At issue is what Bruner characterized as a dialectic of "canonicity and breach": "to be worth telling, a tale must be about how an implicit canonical script has been breached, violated, or deviated from in a manner to do violence to . . . [its] 'legitimacy.' "[24] Judged by this

criterion, text 3 again would not qualify as a prototypical instance of the category "narrative," even though the contrasts drawn in the first four lines may suggest a rudimentary kind of narrativity, involving a disparity between plenty and dearth, hunger and satisfaction. But Mary's story centers on a strongly (and strangely) disruptive event: the apparition of a supernatural big ball chasing Mary and her friend through the woods in the dark of night. The difference explains why, although text 3 may qualify as a case of narrativized description, Mary's story is a prototypical instance of the category "narrative." For its part, because text 1 does not set up a concrete, particularized situation, there is no background against which a tellably disruptive event might be set off.

(iii) Again, however, whereas disruptive events may constitute a necessary condition for narrative, they do not suffice to make a text, discourse, or other artifact a story. For narrative to obtain, there must not only be a temporal sequence into which events are slotted in a particular way, and not only a dynamic of canonicity and breach, but also a foregrounding of human experientiality, to use Monika Fludernik's term.[25] Narrative prototypically roots itself in the lived, felt experience of human or human-like agents interacting in an ongoing way with their cohorts and surrounding environment. To put the same point another way, unless a text or 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.

As an analysis or explanation, text 1 is void of experientiality of this sort. And note the contrast between texts 2 and 3 on this score. Whereas Mary uses emotion discourse to highlight what it was like to experience the frightening events she reports, the closest we get to experientiality in text 3 is the fifth little piggy's cry of "Wee! Wee! Wee!" all the way home.

At this point, readers may wish to turn to the next chapter, where Ryan develops her own proposal for defining narrative and offers a more extensive overview of previous definitions by other narrative scholars. Or, before moving on to chapter 2, readers can continue with my next two sections, where I provide a sketch of recent trends in narrative research and offer a few suggestions about how to take advantage of the distinctive features of this volume.

What are some of the major trends in recent scholarship on narrative?

One way to map out recent developments in narrative inquiry is to draw a distinction between "classical" and "postclassical" approaches to the study