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The Narrative Construction of Reality

Jerome Bruner

I

Surely since the Enlightenment, if not before, the study of mind has centered principally on how man achieves a “true” knowledge of the world. Emphasis in this pursuit has varied, of course: empiricists have concentrated on the mind’s interplay with an external world of nature, hoping to find the key in the association of sensations and ideas, while rationalists have looked inward to the powers of mind itself for the principles of right reason. The objective, in either case, has been to discover how we achieve “reality,” that is to say, how we get a reliable fix on the world, a world that is, as it were, assumed to be immutable and, as it were, “there to be observed.”

This quest has, of course, had a profound effect on the development of psychology, and the empiricist and rationalist traditions have dominated our conceptions of how the mind grows and how it gets its grasp on the “real world.” Indeed, at midcentury Gestalt theory represented the rationalist wing of this enterprise and American learning theory the empiricist. Both gave accounts of mental development as proceeding in some more or less linear and uniform fashion from an initial incompetence in grasping reality to a final competence, in one case attributing it to the working out of internal processes or mental organization, and in the other to some unspecified principle of reflection by which—whether through reinforcement, association, or conditioning—we came to respond to the world “as it is.” There have always been dissidents who

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I

challenged these views, but conjectures about human mental development have been influenced far more by majoritarian rationalism and empiricism than by these dissident voices.

In more recent times, Piaget became the spokesman for the classic rationalist tradition by arguing the universality of a series of invariant developmental stages, each with its own set of inherent logical operations that successively and inexorably led the child to construct a mental representation of the real world akin to that of the detached, dispassionate scientist. While he did not quite drive the empiricist learning theorists from the field (they have begun to revive through their formulation of “connectionist” computer simulations of learning), his views dominated the three decades following the Second World War.

Now there is mounting criticism of his views. The growth of knowledge of “reality” or of the mental powers that enable this growth to occur, the critics argue, is neither unilinear, strictly derivational in a logical sense, nor is it, as it were, “across the board.” Mastery of one task does not assure mastery of other tasks that, in a formal sense, are governed by the same principles. Knowledge and skill, rather, are domain specific and, consequently, uneven in their accretion. Principles and procedures learned in one domain do not automatically transfer to other domains. Such findings were not simply a “failure to confirm” Piaget or the rational premise generally.¹ Rather, if the acquisition of knowledge and of mental powers is indeed domain specific and not automatically transferable, this surely implies that a domain, so called, is a set of principles and procedures, rather like a prosthetic device, that permits intelligence to be used in certain ways, but not in others. Each particular way of using intelligence develops an integrity of its own—a kind of knowledge-plus-skill-plus-tool integrity—that fits it to a particular range of applicability. It is a little “reality” of its own that is constituted by the principles and procedures that we use within it.

These domains, looked at in another way, constitute something like a culture’s treasury of tool kits. Few people ever master the whole range of tool kits: we grow clever in certain spheres and remain incompetent in others in which, as it were, we do not become “hitched” to the relevant tool kit. Indeed, one can go even further and argue, as some have, that

1. See *Thinking and Learning Skills*, ed. Judith W. Segal, Susan F. Chipman, and Robert Glaser (Hillsdale, N. J., 1985).

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such cultural tool kits (if I may so designate the principles and procedures involved in domain-specific growth) may in fact have exerted selection pressures on the evolution of human capacities. It may be, for example, that the several forms of intelligence proposed by Howard Gardner (which he attempts to validate by the joint evidence of neuropathology, genius, and cultural specialization) may be outcomes of such evolutionary selection.² The attraction of this view is, of course, that it links man and his knowledge-gaining and knowledge-using capabilities to the culture of which he and his ancestors were active members. But it brings profoundly into question not only the universality of knowledge from one domain to another, but the universal translatability of knowledge from one culture to another. For in this dispensation, knowledge is never "point-of-viewless."

This view is very compatible with another trend that has arisen in the analysis of human intelligence and of "reality construction." It is not a new view, but it has taken on new life in a new guise. Originally introduced by Vygotsky and championed by his widening circle of admirers, the new position is that cultural products, like language and other symbolic systems, mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality.³ In its latest version, it takes the name, after John Seely Brown and Allan Collins, of "distributed intelligence."⁴ An individual's working intelligence is never "solo." It cannot be understood without taking into account his or her reference books, notes, computer programs and data bases, or most important of all, the network of friends, colleagues, or mentors on whom one leans for help and advice. Your chance of winning a Nobel Prize, Harriet Zuckerman once told me, increases immeasurably if you have worked in the laboratory of somebody who has already won one, not because of pull but because of access to the ideas and criticisms of those who know better.

2

Once one takes such views as seriously as they deserve, there are some interesting and not so obvious consequences. The first is that there are probably a fair number of important domains supported by cultural tool

2. See Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligence* (New York, 1983).

3. See Michael Cole's forthcoming book on culture and mind; L. S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, trans. and ed. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), and *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. Cole (Cambridge, Mass., 1978); and *Cultural Psychology: Essays on Comparative Human Development*, ed. James W. Stigler, Richard A. Shweder, and Gilbert Herdt (Chicago, 1989).

4. See John Seely Brown, Allan Collins, and Paul Duguid, "Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning," *Educational Researcher* 18 (Jan.-Feb. 1989): 32-42.

kits and distributional networks. A second is that the domains are probably differentially integrated in different cultures, as anthropologists have been insisting for some years now.⁵ And a third is that many domains are not organized by logical principles or associative connections, particularly those that have to do with man's knowledge of himself, his social world, his culture. Indeed, most of our knowledge about human knowledge-getting and reality-constructing is drawn from studies of how people come to know the natural or physical world rather than the human or symbolic world. For many historical reasons, including the practical power inherent in the use of logic, mathematics, and empirical science, we have concentrated on the child's growth as "little scientist," "little logician," "little mathematician." These are typically Enlightenment-inspired studies. It is curious how little effort has gone into discovering how humans come to construct the social world and the things that transpire therein. Surely, such challenging recent works as E. E. Jones's magisterial *Interpersonal Perception* make it clear that we do not achieve our mastery of social reality by growing up as "little scientists," "little logicians," or "little mathematicians."⁶ So while we have learned a great deal indeed about how we come eventually to construct and "explain" a world of nature in terms of causes, probabilities, space-time manifolds, and so on, we know altogether too little about how we go about constructing and representing the rich and messy domain of human interaction.

It is with just this domain that I want now to concern myself. Like the domains of logical-scientific reality construction, it is well buttressed by principles and procedures. It has an available cultural tool kit or tradition on which its procedures are modelled, and its distributional reach is as wide and as active as gossip itself. Its form is so familiar and ubiquitous that it is likely to be overlooked, in much the same way as we suppose that the fish will be the last to discover water. As I have argued extensively elsewhere, we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on. Narrative is a conventional form, transmitted culturally and constrained by each individual's level of mastery and by his conglomerate of prosthetic devices, colleagues, and mentors. Unlike the constructions generated by logical and scientific procedures that can be weeded out by falsification, narrative constructions can only achieve "verisimilitude." Narratives, then, are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and "narrative necessity" rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness,

5. See Thomas Gladwin, *East Is a Big Bird* (Cambridge, Mass. 1970); Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston, 1989); Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpreting Anthropology* (New York, 1983); and Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

6. See E. E. Jones, *Interpersonal Perception* (New York, 1990).

although ironically we have no compunction about calling stories true or false.⁷

I propose now to sketch out ten features of narrative, rather in the spirit of constructing an armature on which a more systematic account might be constructed. As with all accounts of forms of representation of the world, I shall have a great difficulty in distinguishing what may be called the narrative mode of *thought* from the forms of narrative *discourse*. As with all prosthetic devices, each enables and gives form to the other, just as the structure of language and the structure of thought eventually become inextricable. Eventually it becomes a vain enterprise to say which is the more basic—the mental process or the discourse form that expresses it—for, just as our experience of the natural world tends to imitate the categories of familiar science, so our experience of human affairs comes to take the form of the narratives we use in telling about them.

Much of what I have to say will not be at all new to those who have been working in the vineyards of narratology or who have concerned themselves with critical studies of narrative forms. Indeed, the ancestry of many of the ideas that will concern me can be traced back directly to the debates that have been going on among literary theorists over the last decade or two. My comments are echoes of those debates now reverberating in the human sciences—not only in psychology, anthropology, and linguistics, but also in the philosophy of language. For once the “cognitive revolution” in the human sciences brought to the fore the issue of how “reality” is represented in the act of knowing, it became apparent that it did not suffice to equate representations with images, with propositions, with lexical networks, or even with more temporally extended vehicles such as sentences. It was perhaps a decade ago that psychologists became alive to the possibility of narrative as a form not only of representing but of constituting reality, a matter of which I shall have more to say presently. At that point cognitively inclined psychologists and anthropologists began to discover that their colleagues in literary theory and historiography were deeply immersed in asking comparable questions about textually situated narrative. I think one can even date the “paradigm shift” to the appearance of a collection of essays drawn from this journal in 1981—*On Narrative*.⁸

If some of what I have to say about the features of narrative, then, seems old hat to the literary theorist, let him or her bear in mind that the object is different. The central concern is not how narrative as text is con-

7. For a fuller, more discursive account of the nature and products of narrative thought, see my *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), and *Acts of Meaning*. See also Theodore R. Sarbin, *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (New York, 1986).

8. See *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago, 1981).

structed, but rather how it operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality. And now to the ten features of narrative.

3

1. *Narrative diachronicity.* A narrative is an account of events occurring over time. It is irreducibly durative. It may be characterizable in seemingly nontemporal terms (as a *tragedy* or a *farce*), but such terms only summarize what are quintessentially patterns of events occurring over time. The time involved, moreover, as Paul Ricoeur has noted, is “human time” rather than abstract or “clock” time.⁹ It is time whose significance is given by the meaning assigned to events within its compass. William Labov, one of the greatest students of narrative, also regards temporal sequence as essential to narrative, but he locates this temporality in the meaning-preserving sequence of clauses in narrative *discourse* itself.¹⁰ While this is a useful aid to linguistic analysis, it nonetheless obscures an important aspect of narrative representation. For there are many conventions for expressing the sequenced durativity of narrative even in discourse, like flashbacks and flash-forwards, temporal synecdoche, and so on. As Nelson Goodman warns, narrative comprises an ensemble of ways of constructing and representing the sequential, diachronic order of human events, of which the sequencing of clauses in spoken or written “stories” is only one device.¹¹ Even nonverbal media have conventions of narrative diachronicity, as in the “left-to-right” and “top-to-bottom” conventions of cartoon strips and cathedral windows. What underlies all these forms for representing narrative is a “mental model” whose defining property is its unique pattern of events over time. And to that we shall come presently.

2. *Particularity.* Narratives take as their ostensive reference particular happenings. But this is, as it were, their vehicle rather than their destination. For stories plainly fall into more general types: boy-woos-girl, bully-gets-his-comeuppance, and so on. In this sense the particulars of narratives are tokens of broader types. Where the boy-woos-girl script calls for the giving of a gift, for example, the gift can equally well be flowers, perfume, or even an endless golden thread. Any of these may serve as an

9. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1984–88), vol. 1.

10. See William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, “Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience,” in *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts*, ed. June Helm (Seattle, 1967), pp. 12–44; Labov, “Speech Actions and Reactions in Personal Narrative,” in *Georgetown Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1981*, ed. Deborah Tannen (Washington, D. C., 1982), pp. 219–47.

11. See Nelson Goodman, “Twisted Tales; or, Story, Study, and Symphony,” in *On Narrative*, pp. 99–115.

appropriate token or emblem of a gift. Particularity achieves its emblematic status by its embeddedness in a story that is in some sense generic. And, indeed, it is by virtue of this embeddedness in genre, to look ahead, that narrative particulars can be “filled in” when they are missing from an account. The “suggestiveness” of a story lies, then, in the emblematic nature of its particulars, its relevance to a more inclusive narrative type. But for all that, a narrative cannot be realized save through particular embodiment.

3. *Intentional state entailment.* Narratives are about people acting in a setting, and the happenings that befall them must be relevant to their intentional states while so engaged—to their beliefs, desires, theories, values, and so on. When animals or nonagentive objects are cast as narrative protagonists, they must be endowed with intentional states for the purpose, like the Little Red Engine in the children’s story. Physical events play a role in stories chiefly by affecting the intentional states of their protagonists. The narrator can only agree with Baudelaire that the first business of an artist is to substitute man for nature.

But intentional states in narrative never fully determine the course of events, since a character with a particular intentional state might end up *doing* practically anything. For some measure of agency is always present in narrative, and agency presupposes choice—some element of “freedom.” If people can predict anything from a character’s intentional states, it is only how he will feel or how he will have perceived the situation. The loose link between intentional states and subsequent action is the reason why narrative accounts cannot provide causal explanations. What they supply instead is the basis for *interpreting* why a character acted as he or she did. Interpretation is concerned with “reasons” for things happening, rather than strictly with their “causes,” a matter to which we turn next.

4. *Hermeneutic compositability.* A preliminary word of explanation is needed here. The word *hermeneutic* implies that there is a text or a text analogue *through* which somebody has been trying to express a meaning and *from* which somebody is trying to extract a meaning. This in turn implies that there is a difference between what is *expressed* in the text and what the text might *mean*, and furthermore that there is no unique solution to the task of determining *the* meaning for *this* expression. Such hermeneutic interpretation is required when there is neither a *rational* method of assuring the “truth” of a meaning assigned to the text as a whole, nor an *empirical* method for determining the verifiability of the constituent elements that make up the text. In effect, the best hope of hermeneutic analysis is to provide an intuitively convincing account of the meaning of the text as a whole in the light of the constituent parts that make it up. This leads to the dilemma of the so-called hermeneutic circle—in which we try to justify the “rightness” of one reading of a text in terms of other readings rather than by, say, rational deduction or empirical proof. The most concrete way of explicating this dilemma or “circle” is

by reference to the relations between the meanings assigned the whole of a text (say a story) and its constituent parts. As Charles Taylor puts it, “we are trying to establish a reading for the whole text, and for this we appeal to readings of its partial expressions; and yet because we are dealing with meaning, with making sense, where expressions only make sense or not in relation to others, the readings of partial expressions depend on those of others, and ultimately of the whole.”¹²

This is probably nowhere better illustrated than in narrative. The accounts of protagonists and events that constitute a narrative are selected and shaped in terms of a putative story or plot that then “contains” them. At the same time, the “whole” (the mentally represented putative story) is dependent for its formation on a supply of possible constituent parts. In this sense, as we have already noted, parts and wholes in a narrative rely on each other for their viability.¹³ In Vladímir Propp’s terms, the parts of a narrative serve as “functions” of the narrative structure as a whole.¹⁴ But that whole cannot be constructed without reference to such appropriate parts. This puzzling part-whole textual interdependence in narrative is, of course, an illustration of the defining property of the hermeneutic circle. For a story can only be “realized” when its parts and whole can, as it were, be made to live together.

This hermeneutic property marks narrative both in its construction and in its comprehension. For narratives do not exist, as it were, in some real world, waiting there patiently and eternally to be veridically mirrored in a text. The act of constructing a narrative, moreover, is considerably more than “selecting” events either from real life, from memory, or from fantasy and then placing them in an appropriate order. The events themselves need to be *constituted* in the light of the overall narrative—in Propp’s terms, to be made “functions” of the story. This is a matter to which we will return later.

Now let me return to “hermeneutic composability.” The telling of a story and its comprehension *as a story* depend on the human capacity to process knowledge in this interpretive way. It is a way of processing that, in the main, has been grossly neglected by students of mind raised either in the rationalist or in the empiricist traditions. The former have been concerned with mind as an instrument of right reasoning, with the means we employ for establishing the necessary truth inherent in a set of connected propositions. Piaget was a striking example of this rational tradition. Empiricists, for their part, rested their claims on a mind capable of veri-

12. Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” in *Interpretative Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley, 1979), p. 28.

13. See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1.

14. See Vladímir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott, ed. Louis Wagner, 2d. ed. (1928; Austin, Tex., 1968); see also his *Theory and History of Folklore*, trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin, ed. Anatoly Liberman (Minneapolis, 1984).

fying the constituent “atomic propositions” that comprised a text. But neither of these procedures, right reason or verification, suffice for explicating how a narrative is either put together by a speaker or interpreted by a hearer. This is the more surprising since there is compelling evidence to indicate that narrative comprehension is among the earliest powers of mind to appear in the young child and among the most widely used forms of organizing human experience.¹⁵

Many literary theorists and philosophers of mind have argued that the act of interpreting in this way is forced on us only when a text of the world to which it presumes to refer is in some way “confused, incomplete, cloudy.”¹⁶ Doubtless we are more aware of our interpretive efforts when faced with textual or referential ambiguities. But I would take strong exception to the general claim that interpretation is forced on us only by a surfeit of ambiguity. The illusion created by skilful narrative that this is not the case, that a story “is as it is” and needs no interpretation, is produced by two quite different processes. The first should probably be called “narrative seduction.” Great storytellers have the artifices of narrative reality construction so well mastered that their telling pre-empted momentarily the possibility of any but a single interpretation—however bizarre it may be. The famous episode of a Martian invasion in Orson Welles’s broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* provides a striking example.¹⁷ Its brilliant exploitation of the devices of text, context, and mis-en-scène predisposed its hearers to one and only one interpretation, however bizarre it seemed to them in retrospect. It created “narrative necessity,” a matter we understand much less well than its logical counterpart, logical necessity. The other route to making a story seem self-evident and not in need of interpretation is via “narrative banalization.” That is, we can take a narrative as so socially conventional, so well known, so in keeping with the canon, that we can assign it to some well-rehearsed and virtually automatic interpretive routine. These constitute what Roland Barthes called “readerly” texts, in contrast to “writerly” ones that challenge the listener or reader into unrehearsed interpretive activity.¹⁸

In a word, then, it is not textual or referential ambiguity that compels interpretive activity in narrative comprehension, but narrative itself. Narrative seduction or narrative banalization may produce restricted or routine interpretive activity, but this does not alter the point. Readerly story interpretation or hack story constructions can be altered by surprisingly

15. See, for example, *Narratives from the Crib*, ed. Katherine Nelson (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), and Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*.

16. Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” p. 25.

17. See Hadley Cantril, *The Invasion from Mars* (Princeton, N. J., 1940).

18. See Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation* (New York, 1985).

little instruction.¹⁹ And the moment a hearer is made suspicious of the “facts” of a story or the ulterior motives of a narrator, he or she immediately becomes hermeneutically alert. If I may use an outrageous metaphor, automatized interpretations of narratives are comparable to the default settings of a computer: an economical, time- and effort-saving way of dealing with knowledge—or, as it has been called, a form of “mindlessness.”²⁰

Interpretation has a long history in biblical exegesis and in jurisprudence. It is studded with problems that will become more familiar shortly, problems that have to do more with context than text, with the conditions on telling rather than with what is told. Let me tag two of them better to identify them for subsequent discussion. The first is the issue of *intention*: “why” the story is told how and when it is, and interpreted as it is by interlocutors caught in different intentional stances themselves. Narratives are not, to use Roy Harris’s felicitous phrase, “unsponsored texts” to be taken as existing unintentionally as if cast by fate on a printed page.²¹ Even when the reader takes them in the most readerly way, he usually attributes them (following convention) as emanating from an omniscient narrator. But this condition is itself not to be overlooked as uninteresting. It probably derives from a set of social conditions that give special status to the written word in a society where literacy is a minoritarian prerogative.

A second contextual issue is the question of *background knowledge*—of both the storyteller and the listener, and how each interprets the background knowledge of the other. The philosopher Hilary Putnam, in a quite different context, proposes two principles: the first is a “Principle of Benefit of Doubt,” the second a “Principle of Reasonable Ignorance”: the first “forbids us to assume that . . . experts are factually omniscient,” the second that “any speakers are philosophically omniscient (even unconsciously).”²² We judge their accounts accordingly. At the other extreme, we are charitable toward ignorance and forgive children and neophytes their incomplete knowledge, “filling in” for them as necessary. Or Dan Sperber and Dierdre Wilson, in their well-known discussion of “relevance,” argue that in dialogue we typically presuppose that what an interlocutor says in replying to us is topic-relevant and that we most often assign an interpretation to it accordingly in order to make it so, thereby easing our task in understanding Other Minds.²³ We also take for granted, indeed we institutionalize situations in which it is taken for granted, that

19. See, for example, Peter Elbow, *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* (New York, 1986).

20. See Ellen J. Langer, *Mindfulness* (Reading, Mass., 1989).

21. See Roy Harris, “How Does Writing Restructure Thought?” *Language and Communication* 9, no. 2/3 (1989): 99–106.

22. Hilary Putnam, *Mind, Language, and Reality* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 278.

23. See Dan Sperber and Dierdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).

the “knowledge register” in which a story is told is different from the one in which it is taken up, as when the client tells the lawyer his story in “life talk” and is listened to in “law talk” so that the lawyer can advise about litigation (rather than life). The analyst and the analysand in therapy are comparable to the lawyer and client in legal consultation.²⁴

Both these contextual domains, intention attribution and background knowledge, provide not only bases for interpretation but, of course, important grounds for negotiating how a story shall be taken—or, indeed, how it should be told, a matter better reserved for later.

5. *Canonicity and breach.* To begin with, not every sequence of events recounted constitutes a narrative, even when it is diachronic, particular, and organized around intentional states. Some happenings do not warrant telling about and accounts of them are said to be “pointless” rather than storylike. A Schank-Abelson script is one such case: it is a prescription for canonical behavior in a culturally defined situation—how to behave in a restaurant, say.²⁵ Narratives require such scripts as necessary background, but they do not constitute narrativity itself. For 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 what Hayden White calls the “legitimacy” of the canonical script.²⁶ This usually involves what Labov calls a “precipitating event,” a concept that Barbara Herrnstein Smith puts to good use in her exploration of literary narrative.²⁷

24. See Donald P. Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1982). An unwillingness on the part of a patient to accept the psychoanalyst’s version or interpretation of a narrative is likely to lead to an examination and reformulation by the latter of the former’s story as having to do with the patient’s “resistance.” The patient’s version is made to conform to the psychiatrist’s version as a price for the therapy’s continuation. While lawyers, typically, in translating the client’s personal “story” into a legal narrative, offer the client options in how the “facts of the case” shall be legally framed—whether things “add up” to a narrative about contracts, torts, or rights to due process, say—the final legal story is, nonetheless, forced into a “canonical” narrative that conforms to prevailing biases in the society while also corresponding to some precedent in the law. So, for example, in recent American jurisprudence, the “facts of the case” of *Bowers v. Hardwick* are interpreted as a violation of sodomy statutes of the State of Georgia rather than as an instance of the exercise of the individual’s rights to privacy as guaranteed by the Fourth Amendment to the United States Constitution. The “fact” that a homosexual act is, in this case, between consenting adults is thereby ruled by the Court as “irrelevant” to the legal story. For a discussion of the effects of imposing “official” jurisprudential story forms on everyday narratives, see Kim Lane Scheppele, “Telling Stories,” foreword to “Legal Storytelling,” a special issue of *Michigan Law Review* 87 (Aug. 1989): 2073–98.

25. See Robert C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson, *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures* (Hillsdale, N. J., 1977).

26. See Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *On Narrative*, pp. 1–23.

27. See Labov and Waletzky, “Narrative Analysis,” and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (Chicago, 1978).

Breaches of the canonical, like the scripts breached, are often highly conventional and are strongly influenced by narrative traditions. Such breaches are readily recognizable as familiar human plights—the betrayed wife, the cuckolded husband, the fleeced innocent, and so on. Again, they are conventional plights of readerly narratives. But both scripts and their breaches also provide rich grounds for innovation—as witness the contemporary literary-journalistic invention of the “yuppy” script or the formulation of the white-collar criminal’s breach. And this is, perhaps, what makes the innovative storyteller such a powerful figure in a culture. He may go beyond the conventional scripts, leading people to see human happenings in a fresh way, indeed, in a way they had never before “noticed” or even dreamed. The shift from Hesiod to Homer, the advent of “inner adventure” in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, the advent of Flaubert’s perspectivalism, or Joyce’s epiphanizing of banalities—these are all innovations that probably shaped our narrative versions of everyday reality as well as changed the course of literary history, the two perhaps being not that different.

It is to Labov’s great credit to have recognized and provided a linguistic account of narrative structure in terms of two components—what happened and why it is worth telling.²⁸ It was for the first of these that he proposed his notion of irreducible clausal sequences. The second captures the element of breach in canonicity and involves the use of what he calls *evaluation* for warranting a story’s “tellability” as evidencing something unusual. From initial orientation to final coda, the language of evaluation is made to contrast with the language of clausal sequence—in tense, aspect, or other marking. It has even been remarked that in sign languages, the signing of sequence and of evaluation are done in different places in the course of telling a story, the former at the center of the body, the latter off to the side.

The “breach” component of a narrative can be created by linguistic means as well as by the use of a putatively delegitimizing precipitating event in the plot. Let me explain. The Russian formalists distinguished between the “plot” of a narrative, its *fabula*, and its mode of telling, what they called its *sjuzhet*. Just as there are linearization problems in converting a thought into a sentence, so there are problems in, so to speak, representing a *fabula* in its enabling *sjuzhet*.²⁹ The literary linguist Tzvetan Todorov whose ideas we shall visit again later, argues that the function of inventive narrative is not so much to “fabulate” new plots as to render previously familiar ones uncertain or problematical, challenging a reader into fresh

28. See Labov and Waletzky, “Narrative Analysis.”

29. For a discussion of uses of this distinction by the Russian formalists, see Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*.

interpretive activity—echoing Roman Jakobson's famous definition of the artist's task, "to make the ordinary strange."³⁰

6. *Referentiality.* The acceptability of a narrative obviously cannot depend on its correctly referring to reality, else there would be no fiction. Realism in fiction must then indeed be a literary convention rather than a matter of correct reference. Narrative "truth" is judged by its verisimilitude rather than its verifiability. There seems indeed to be some sense in which narrative, rather than referring to "reality," may in fact create or constitute it, as when "fiction" creates a "world" of its own—Joyce's "Dublin" where places like St. Stephen's Green or Grafton Street, for all that they bear familiar labels, are no less real or imaginary than the characters he invents to inhabit them. In a perhaps deeper sense, indeed, it may be that the plights and the intentional states depicted in "successful" fiction sensitize us to experience our own lives in ways to match: Which suggests, of course, that the distinction between narrative fiction and narrative truth is nowhere nearly as obvious as common sense and usage would have us believe. *Why* common sense insists on such a sharp distinction being drawn is quite another problem, perhaps related to the requirement of "bearing witness." But that lies beyond the scope of this essay.

What does concern us, rather, is why the distinction is intrinsically difficult to make and sustain. Surely one reason lies in what I earlier called the hermeneutic composability of narrative itself. For such composability creates problems for the conventional distinction between "sense" and "reference." That is, the "sense" of a story as a whole may alter the reference and even the referentiality of its component parts. For a story's components, insofar as they become its "functions" or captives, lose their status as singular and definite referring expressions. St. Stephen's Green becomes, as it were, a type rather than a token, a class of locales including the locus so named in Dublin. It is an invented referent not entirely free of the meanings imparted by the real place, just as a story that requires a

30. See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, N. Y., 1977). Jakobson's dictum dates, I believe, from his Prague years and reflects his admiration for the Russian formalists. The expression itself (often repeated by Jakobson in his Harvard lectures) probably derives from the formalist theoretician Victor Shklovsky. The pithiest justification of the principle is given in Jakobson's playful exegesis of the Armenian riddle in a 1920 essay on realism: "It hangs in the drawing room and is green; what is it?" the answer to which is "a herring." Ultimately one asks, "But why is the herring painted green?" And the only answer can be, "It makes it harder to guess" (Roman Jakobson, "On Realism in Art," *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy [Cambridge, Mass., 1987], pp. 25–26; see also his essays "Futurism," pp. 28–33, and "Dada," pp. 34–40). But the full depth of its theoretical derivation can be found in Jakobson's famous distinction between the *marked* and the *unmarked*, a distinction present at every level of linguistic organization from the phonological through the semantic, marking being the means for signalling the unusual and increasingly fresh interpretive activity in the hearer. Discussions of this distinction are scattered throughout his *Selected Writings*, 8 vols. (The Hague, 1971–88).

“betrayal” as one of its constituent functions can convert an ordinarily mundane event into something that seems compellingly like a betrayal. And this, of course, is what makes circumstantial evidence so deadly and so often inadmissible in courts of law. Given hermeneutic composability, referring expressions within narrative are always problematic, never free of the narrative as a whole. What is meant by the “narrative as a whole”? This leads us to the so-called law of genres, to which we turn next.

7. *Genericness.* We all know that there are recognizable “kinds” of narrative: farce, black comedy, tragedy, the *Bildungsroman*, romance, satire, travel saga, and so on. But as Alastair Fowler so nicely puts it, “genre is much less of a pigeonhole than a pigeon.”³¹ That is to say, we can speak of genre both as a property of a text and as a way of comprehending narrative. Mary McCarthy wrote short stories in several literary genres. She later gathered some of them together in an order of the increasing age of the chief female protagonist, added some interstitial “evaluation” sections, and published the lot as an autobiography entitled *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*.³² Thereafter (and doubtless to her dismay) readers interpreted her new stories as further installments of autobiography. Genres seem to provide both writer and reader with commodious and conventional “models” for limiting the hermeneutic task of making sense of human happenings—ones we narrate to ourselves as well as ones we hear others tell.

What are genres, viewed psychologically? Merely conventionalized representations of human plights? There are surely such plights in all human cultures: conflicts of family loyalty, the vagaries of human trust, the vicissitudes of romance, and so on. And it might even seem that they are universal, given that the classics can be done in modern dress and the tales of exotic peoples be locally translated. But I think that emphasis on plights and on their putative universality may obscure a deeper issue. For plight is only the plot form of a genre, its *fabula*. But genre is also a form of telling, its *sjuzet*. Even if genres specialize in conventionalized human plights, they achieve their effects by using language in a particular way. And to translate the “way of telling” of a genre into another language or culture where it does not exist requires a fresh literary-linguistic invention.³³ The invention may, of course, be culturally out of reach. Language, after all, is contained within its uses. It is not just a syntax and a lexicon. The so-called inward turn of narrative in Western literature, for example, may have depended on the rise of silent reading, which is a

31. Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 37.

32. See Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (New York, 1957).

33. See *On Translation*, ed. Rueben Brower (Cambridge, Mass., 1959). It contains critical essays on the task of translating fiction and nonfiction into English by some of the great practitioners of the craft.

rather recent invention. If the reflectiveness produced by silent reading was then intensified by the creation of new genres—the so-called modern and postmodern novels—we might well expect that such genres would not be easily accessible to the Western nonreader and even less so to a member of a nonliterate culture.

While genres, thus, may indeed be loose but conventional ways of representing human plights, they are also ways of telling that predispose us to use our minds and sensibilities in particular ways. In a word, while they may be representations of social ontology, they are also invitations to a particular style of epistemology. As such, they may have quite as powerful an influence in shaping our modes of thought as they have in creating the realities that their plots depict.³⁴ So, for example, we celebrate innovations in genre as changing not only the content of imagination but its *modus operandi*: Flaubert for introducing a perspectival relativism that dethroned both the omniscient narrator and the singular “true” story, Joyce for slyly substituting free association to break the constraints of semantic and even syntactic conventionalism, Beckett for shredding the narrative continuities we had come to take for granted in storytelling, Calvino for converting postmodern antifoundationalism into classic mythic forms, and so on.

Narrative genre, in this dispensation, can be thought of not only as a way of constructing human plights but as providing a guide for using mind, insofar as the use of mind is guided by the use of an enabling language.

8. *Normativeness.* Because its “tellability” as a form of discourse rests on a breach of conventional expectation, narrative is necessarily normative. A breach presupposes a norm. This founding condition of narrative has led students of the subject, from Hayden White and Victor Turner to Paul Ricoeur, to propose that narrative is centrally concerned with cultural legitimacy.³⁵ A new generation of legal scholars, not surprisingly, has even begun to explore the implicit norms inherent in legal testimony, which, of course, is principally narrative in form.³⁶

While everybody from Aristotle to the so-called narrative grammarians all agree that a story pivots on a breach in legitimacy, the differences in

34. See Shirley Brice Heath, *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (Cambridge, 1983); Elinor Ochs and Bambi B. Schieffelin, *Acquiring Conversational Competence* (London, 1983); Ochs, Carolyn Taylor, Dina Rudolph, and Ruth Smith, “Narrative Activity as a Medium for Theory-Building” (paper delivered at the University of Southern California, 1989); and Carol Fleisher Feldman, “Monologue as Problem-Solving Narrative,” in *Narratives from the Crib*, pp. 98–119.

35. See especially White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), and Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, 1982).

36. See the articles forming the special issue “Legal Storytelling” of *Michigan Law Review*.

how the notion of breach is conceived are themselves revealing of differing cultural emphases. Take Kenneth Burke's celebrated account of the dramatic "pentad."³⁷ The pentad consists of an Agent, an Act, a Scene, a Purpose, and an Agency, the appropriate balance among these elements being defined as a "ratio" determined by cultural convention. When this "ratio" becomes unbalanced, when conventional expectation is breached, Trouble ensues. And it is Trouble that provides the engine of drama, Trouble as an imbalance between any and all of the five elements of the pentad: Nora in *A Doll's House*, for example, is a rebellious Agent in an inappropriately bourgeois Scene, and so on. Precipitating events are, as it were, emblems of the imbalance. Burke's principal emphasis is on plight, *fabula*. It is, as it were, concerned ontologically with the cultural world and its arrangements, with norms as they "exist."

In the second half of our century, as the apparatus of skepticism comes to be applied not only to doubting the legitimacy of received social realities but also to questioning the very ways in which we come to know or construct reality, the normative program of narrative (both literary and popular) changes with it. "Trouble" becomes epistemic: Julian Barnes writes a stunning narrative on the *episteme* of Flaubert's perspectivalism, *Flaubert's Parrot*; or Italo Calvino produces a novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, in which the issue is what is text and what context; and theories of poetics change accordingly. They, too, take an "epistemic turn." And so Todorov sees the poetics of narrative as inhering in its very language, in a reliance on the use of linguistic transformations that render any and all accounts of human action more subjunctive, less certain, and subject withal to doubt about their construal. It is not simply that "text" becomes dominant but that the world to which it putatively refers is, as it were, the creature of the text.³⁸

The normativeness of narrative, in a word, is not historically or culturally terminal. Its form changes with the preoccupations of the age and the circumstances surrounding its production. Nor is it required of narrative, by the way, that the Trouble with which it deals be resolved. Narrative, I believe, is designed to contain uncanniness rather than to resolve it. It does not have to come out on the "right side." What Frank Kermode calls the "consoling plot" is not the comfort of a happy ending but the comprehension of plight that, by being made interpretable, becomes bearable.³⁹

9. *Context sensitivity and negotiability.* This is a topic whose complexities we have already visited in an earlier discussion of "hermeneutic com-

37. See Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (1942; Berkeley, 1969).

38. See, for example, *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, N. J., 1980).

39. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford, 1967), p. 31. See also his discussion of this point in "Secrets and Narrative Sequence," in *On Narrative*.

posability” and the interpretability of narrative. In considering context, the familiar issues of narrative intention and of background knowledge arise again. With respect to the first of these, much of literary theory has abandoned Coleridge’s dictum that the reader should suspend disbelief and stand, as it were, naked before the text. Today we have reader-response theory and books entitled *The Reader in the Text*.⁴⁰ Indeed, the prevailing view is that the notion of totally suspending disbelief is at best an idealization of the reader and, at worst, a distortion of what the process of narrative comprehension involves. Inevitably, we assimilate narrative on our own terms, however much (in Wolfgang Iser’s account) we treat the occasion of a narrative recital as a specialized speech act.⁴¹ We inevitably take the teller’s intentions into account and do so in terms of our background knowledge (and, indeed, in the light of our presuppositions about the teller’s background knowledge).

I have a strong hunch, which may at first seem counterintuitive, that it is this very context sensitivity that makes narrative discourse in everyday life such a viable instrument for cultural negotiation. You tell your version, I tell mine, and we rarely need legal confrontation to settle the difference. Principles of charity and presumptions of relevance are balanced against principles of sufficient ignorance and sufficient doubt to a degree one would not expect where criteria of consistency and verification prevailed. We seem to be able to take competing versions of a story with a perspectival grain of salt, much more so than in the case of arguments or proofs. Judy Dunn’s remarkable book on the beginning of social understanding in children makes it plain that this type of negotiation of different narrative versions starts early and is deeply imbedded in such practical social actions as the offering of excuses, not merely in storytelling per se.⁴² I think it is precisely this interplay of perspectives in arriving at “narrative truth” that has led philosophers like Richard Rorty to abandon univocally verificationist views of truth in favor of pragmatic ones.⁴³ Nor is it surprising that anthropologists have increasingly turned away from positivist descriptions of cultures toward an interpretive one in which not objective categories but “meanings” are sought for, not meanings imposed *ex hypothesi* by an outsider, the anthropologist, but ones arrived at by indigenous participants immersed in the culture’s own processes for negotiating meaning.⁴⁴

40. See Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, 1989), and *The Reader in the Text*.

41. See Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore, 1974).

42. See Judy Dunn, *The Beginnings of Social Understanding* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).

43. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N. J., 1979). See also Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass. 1989).

44. See particularly Geertz’s essay on “thick interpretation” in his *Local Knowledge*. For a sampling of views on this approach to culture, see also *Interpretive Social Science*, ed.

On this view, it is the very context dependence of narrative accounts that permits cultural negotiation which, when successful, makes possible such coherence and interdependence as a culture can achieve.

10. *Narrative accrual.* How do we cobble stories together to make them into a whole of some sort? Sciences achieve their accrual by derivation from general principles, by relating particular findings to central paradigms, by couching empirical findings in a form that makes them subsumable under altering paradigms, and by countless other procedures for making science, as the saying goes, “cumulative.” This is vastly aided, of course, by procedures for assuring verification, though, as we know, verificationist criteria have limited applicability where human intentional states are concerned, which leaves psychology rather on the fringe.

Narrative accrual is not foundational in the scientist’s sense. Yet narratives do accrue, and, as anthropologists insist, the accruals eventually create something variously called a “culture” or a “history” or, more loosely, a “tradition.” Even our own homely accounts of happenings in our own lives are eventually converted into more or less coherent autobiographies centered around a Self acting more or less purposefully in a social world.⁴⁵ Families similarly create a corpus of connected and shared tales and Elinor Ochs’s studies in progress on family dinner-table talk begin to shed light on how this is accomplished.⁴⁶ Institutions, too, as we know from the innovative work of Eric Hobsbawm, “invent” traditions out of previously ordinary happenings and then endow them with privileged status.⁴⁷ And there are principles of jurisprudence, like *stare decisis*, that guarantee a tradition by assuring that once a “case” has been interpreted in one way, future cases that are “similar” shall be interpreted and decided equivalently. Insofar as the law insists on such accrual of cases as “precedents,” and insofar as “cases” are narratives, the legal system imposes an orderly process of narrative accrual.

There has been surprisingly little work done on this fascinating subject, although there are stirrings among anthropologists (influenced principally by Clifford Geertz) and among historiographers (prodded by Michel Foucault’s ground-breaking *Archeology of Knowledge*).⁴⁸ What kinds

Rabinow and Sullivan, and *Cultural Psychology*.

45. See, for example, Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, chap. 4.

46. I am greatly indebted to Elinor Ochs for letting a group of us into an informal seminar at the University of California, Los Angeles, winter term 1990, to view her tapes of these sessions and share her views on the processes involved.

47. See *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983).

48. See Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, Calif., 1988); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); and Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972).

of strategies might guide the accrual of narratives into larger scale cultures or traditions or “world versions”? Surely one of them must be through the imposition of bogus *historical-causal entailment*: for example, the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand is seen as “causing” the outbreak of the First World War, or Pope Leo III’s coronation of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day in 800 is offered as “a first step on the way toward” or as a precursor of the enactment of the European Community in 1992. There is a vast literature of caution against such simplicities by both philosophers and historians, but it has not in the least diminished our passion for converting post hoc into propter hoc.

Another strategy might be called, for lack of a better expression, *coherence by contemporaneity*: the belief that things happening at the same time must be connected. I made the wry discovery, writing my own intellectual autobiography several years ago, that once I had discovered in the *New York Times Index* what else had been happening at the time of some personal event, I could scarcely resist connecting the lot into one coherent whole—connecting, not subsuming, not creating historical-causal entailments, but winding it into story. My first scientific paper (on maturing sexual receptivity in the female rat), for example, was published about the time Chamberlain had been duped by Hitler at Munich. My original story before consulting the *Times Index* was vaguely about a nineteen-year-old’s first discovery, rather like a *Bildungsroman*. The post-*Index* story, with Munich now included, was an exercise in irony: young Nero fiddling with rats while Rome burned! And by the same compelling process, we invent the Dark Ages, making everything all of a piece until, finally, the diversity becomes too great and then we invent the Renaissance.

Once shared culturally—distributed in the sense discussed earlier—narrative accruals achieve, like Émile Durkheim’s collective representation, “exteriority” and the power of constraint.⁴⁹ The Dark Ages come to exist, and we come to cluck with wonder at the “exceptionality” of any nontraditional philosopher or deviant theologian who lived in its shadows. I am told that the ex-President and Nancy Reagan sent a letter of sympathy to a nationally known soap opera character who had just gone blind—not the actor, but the character. But that is not unusual: culture always reconstitutes itself by swallowing its own narrative tail—Dutch boys with fingers in the dike, Columbus Christianizing Indians, the Queen’s honors list, the Europhilia that dates from Charlemagne.

What creates a culture, surely, must be a “local” capacity for accruing stories of happenings of the past into some sort of diachronic structure

49. See Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (1915; New York, 1965). For a more psychological account of this process, referred to by the author as “ontic dumping,” see Feldman, “Thought from Language: The Linguistic Construction of Cognitive Representations,” in *Making Sense: The Child’s Construction of the World*, ed. Bruner and Helen Haste (New York, 1987), pp. 131–46.

that permits a continuity into the present—in short, to construct a history, a tradition, a legal system, instruments assuring historical continuity if not legitimacy. I want to end my list of narrative properties on this rather “obvious” point for a particular reason. The perpetual construction and reconstruction of the past provide precisely the forms of canonicity that permit us to recognize when a breach has occurred and how it might be interpreted. The philosopher W. T. Stace proposed two philosophical generations ago that the only recourse we have against solipsism (the unassailable view that argues that we cannot prove the existence of a real world, since all we can know is our own experience) is that human minds are alike and, more important, that they “labor in common together.”⁵⁰ One of the principal ways in which we work “mentally” in common, I would want to argue, is by the process of joint narrative accrual. Even our individual autobiographies, as I have argued elsewhere, depend on being placed within a continuity provided by a constructed and shared social history in which we locate our Selves and our individual continuities.⁵¹ It is a sense of belonging to this canonical past that permits us to form our own narratives of deviation while maintaining complicity with the canon. Perhaps Stace was too concerned with metaphysics when he invoked this process as a defense against solipsism. We would more likely say today that it must surely be a major prophylactic against alienation.

4

Let me return now to the original premise—that there are specific domains of human knowledge and skill and that they are supported and organized by cultural tool kits. If we accept this view, a first conclusion would be that in understanding the nature and growth of mind in any setting, we cannot take as our unit of analysis the isolated individual operating “inside his or her own skin” in a cultural vacuum. Rather, we must accept the view that the human mind cannot express its nascent powers without the enablement of the symbolic systems of culture. While many of these systems are relatively autonomous in a given culture—the skills of shamanism, of specialized trades, and the like—some relate to domains of skill that must be shared by virtually all members of a culture if the culture is to be effective. The division of labor within a society goes only so far. Everybody within a culture must in some measure, for example, be able to enter into the exchange of the linguistic community, even granted that this community may be divided by idiolects and registers. Another domain that must be widely (though roughly) shared for a culture to operate with requisite effectiveness is the domain of social beliefs and

50. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Walter Terence Stace.”

51. See Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, chap. 4.

procedures—what we think people are like and how they must get on with each other, what elsewhere I have called folk psychology and what Harold Garfinkel has called ethnosociology.⁵² These are domains that are, in the main, organized narratively.

What I have tried to do in this paper is to describe some of the properties of a world of “reality” constructed according to narrative principles. In doing so, I have gone back and forth between describing narrative mental “powers” and the symbolic systems of narrative discourse that make the expression of these powers possible. It is only a beginning. My objective has been merely to lay out the ground plan of narrative realities. The daunting task that remains now is to show in detail how, in particular instances, narrative organizes the structure of human experience—how, in a word, “life” comes to imitate “art” and vice versa.

52. See Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1967).