

# *The Riches of Narrative Per Se*

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ABSTRACT. I first show that even minimalist narratives (in any formulation of minimalism that can encompass the views of Lamarque, Carroll, Currie and Jureidini, and Velleman) there are sufficient resources both for generating a basic level literature and for sustaining serious philosophical inquiry. However, I do not adopt (*pace*, for example, Mag Uidhir and many others) a "fiction-first" strategy, in which we learn the lessons about narrative *per se* from studying fictional narratives first, and only then apply those lessons to non-fictional narratives. Accordingly, I adopt a different methodological strategy in which I assume, for argument, that no narratives were ever offered as fictional, and that instead all the narratives that ever were are believed to be attempts to accurately record or order the facts and are assessed both as to their narrative structure and effects and as to their truth or falsity. On that assumption, our task is to determine what mental mechanisms, if any, would be involved in grasping and projecting narratives. The mental states that even minimal narratives can induce have two aspects that make them of interest: first, they belong to a broad class of anticipatory states – including apprehension, anxiety and suspense – that include both cognitive and emotive elements; and second, they are often induced subdoxastically. I argue that recognizing this pair of facts has three interesting and useful payoffs for further research.

This paper is frankly exploratory. The approaches I take in it are novel, I believe; but I also am only guardedly optimistic about its conclusions.

I begin by noting a distinction between two ways we can ask the question I wish to engage with here. The first goes like this: What is the difference between the narration of a sequence of events and a description of

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the same sequence? You may recognize that a classical question of narratology. But I wish to avoid that question. Instead, I want to ask something somewhat different, namely: What is the minimum necessary that must be presented to someone for her to be positioned to tell a story, as a way of demonstrating she has understood what was presented to her? The difference is that the first question is metaphysical, aiming at discovering what makes a representation into a story, while the second is epistemological, aiming at discovering when someone is justified in narrating the events presented in the prompt. Another way of putting the latter question is this: What sort of evidence must someone have in order to make a certain kind of judgment, namely, that whatever it is that someone has encountered is appropriately “narratable” (Goldie, 2003)?

Some of the same kinds of issues are raised in answering these two questions. It is because my focus is on the latter question that I do not feel compelled to enter the debate between those who, in taking up the minimalist strategy, think of themselves as providing minimal criteria for the existence of a story and those who, like Gregory Currie, think of *narrativity* as a graded property, as something that comes in degrees and is specifiable by reference first to features of “richer” or “successful” narratives (Currie & Juriedini, 2004. Currie, 2010; Goldie’s 2011 review of Currie 2010, seems to endorse this view).

My use of the minimalist strategy is not aimed at determining when we actually have a narrative; it is rather to determine when a spectator in the theater, for example, is justified in telling a story rather than, or in addition to, describing the events or images she has witnessed. But I confess the picture I am about to draw looks initially a lot like minimalist metaphysics. Indeed, I openly help myself to some of that material because it is where the discussion helpful to answering my question has taken place. I only ask for patience.

### ***I. “Narrative Per Se”***

Consider some variations on this famous pair of sentences.

- (1) The king died and then the queen died.
- (2) The king died and then the queen died of grief.

According to E.M. Forster, the first is a story, the second a plot (1927, p 130). The first answers the question, “and then?” while the second answers the question “why?”

Velleman (2003, n. 3) declares that he uses “story” to mean what Forster calls “plot.” On Noël Carroll’s influential view (canvassed below) probably only the second is a story (Carroll, 2001). And I shall use (2) as a model in what follows. I do not thereby endorse either Velleman’s or Carroll’s theories about minimal narratives. My point, instead, is to simply get to a minimum that all would agree to. And (2) offers a sufficient model. Taking up the indisputably smaller (if not the indisputably smallest) will do for present purposes.

Peter Lamarque (2004) claims that “narratives can be identified from formal features alone of individual sentences or sentence strings and no implications about reference, truth, subject matter or discursive ends, can be drawn from such formal identification” (2004, p 394). There is surely something right about this. For some sentence or string of sentences to be a narrative, all that seems required is that (A) at least two events or states must be depicted, (B) the relation between the events or states must be depicted as temporal, and (C) there must be some loose “non-logical” connection depicted between them (393).

Lamarque’s (C) is, however, too loose, at least as it stands. Some similarity constraint has to be imposed on the depiction of the events so as to avoid the result that the depiction of just any two events whatever, no matter how distanced from each other historically, thematically, causally, or emotionally could count as a narrative depiction. I think Lamarque wants to rule this out by specifying there be some sort of “non-logical connection.” But both being-depicted-side-by-side and being-depicted-one-after-the-other are instances of “non-logical connections.” Neither, however, takes us beyond the satisfaction of (A) and (B). So we need something stronger. Let us call what Lamarque offers us “(C-LOOSE). How should tighten up Lamarque’s (C-LOOSE) so that the “non-logical” connection between the events/states is still “loose” in some sense while we also remain “minimalists”? Consider the following candidates:

(C-INUS): the connection between the events/states must be an insufficient but necessary part of an unnecessary but sufficient con-

dition; (Carroll 2001, pp 123-124); as Carroll makes clear, the INUS conception of causal connection was first articulated in (Mackie 1965).

(C-EMOTION): the connection between the events/states must be such that the pair of events/states sets up and resolves or “completes” an “emotional cadence” in the audience for the story (Velleman 2003, p 6).

(C-AGENT): the events/states are the intentional doings or non-doings of one or more ‘agents,’ understood broadly as “planning mechanisms” (Hamilton 2007, pp 65-68).

(C-CONTROL): the “cumulative end point [of the temporally ordered chain of events/states] is in a position to control what came before it” (Kreiwirth 2000, p 299).

Setting these forth disjunctively might suggest they are mutually exclusive alternatives. But do we have to choose among these? I do not think we need to do so as a general matter, so long as we think of them as different, but equally plausible, ways of specifying the similarity constraints needed to make a narrative in a particular case. That is another way to take the disjunctive presentation. Accordingly, which particular constraints are chosen will depend upon the context and point of the narrative and which possibilities are to be regarded as properly ignored, given the context and purpose of the narrative. I model this thought on David Lewis’s (1996) contextualism about knowledge. It is also supported by Currie’s contextualist approach to the question when to determine whether one telling is narrative. It is, he argues convincingly, a matter of what you are comparing that particular case of telling to (2010: 35-36).

As a general matter, then, we can say a depiction is a narrative if it satisfies (A) and (B) and (C-LOOSE), so long as it adopts one of the foregoing formulations (or some other good alternative) for specifying the similarity constraint.

A final note on this point. The list of candidates this is not intended to be exhaustive. Nor am I committed to the distinctness of each of these. In fact I suspect that (C-CONTROL) is not significantly different from (C-EMOTE). It will suffice if the formula for specifying the similarity constraint yields a fair and approximate understanding of narrative *per se*.

## **2. Narratives Per Se as Bearers of Basic Aesthetic Predicates**

So, consider again the model of a minimal narrative.

- (2) The king died and then the queen died of grief.

Now consider these variations.

- (4) The king died and then the queen died of laughter.  
 (5) The king died and then the queen died of boredom.  
 (6) The king died and then, after a very very very long time, the queen died of laughter.  
 (7) The king died, the king died, the king died, the king died, and then the queen died of boredom.  
 (8) The king died after the queen had died of grief.  
 (9) The king died violently soon after the queen had been poisoned.  
 (10) The king died, and soon the queen shall die of grief.  
 (11) The king died, and I shall soon die of grief.  
 (12) The queen declared she had died long before the king had died.

Each of these satisfies the minimal criteria. Each also allows us to consider features Gérard Genette (1990) suggests can be present in any narrative: order of presentation, speed of presentation (acceleration, deceleration, ellipsis, pauses), frequency (iterative narratives), mode (direct access to mental life of characters: indices, internal monologues, free indirect discourse), and voice (author-narrator relationship).

Consider now some syntactical features of these minimal stories. Most introduce a prepositional phrase modifying the second event. Some introduce adverbial modifiers for the verbs indicating the manner in which the first of the events occurred.

And now consider some semantic features of these stories. Some involve forecast. Some involve metaphorical uses of terms referring to events. Some introduce possibilities for causal explanation that must be – and usually are – supplied from outside what is depicted. Some require

explicit recognition of a narrator. Some introduce first-person utterances in which the author and the narrator appear to be the same individual.

In addition to these individually specifiable features, plausibly some of these stories can be paired in terms of whether they recount the same story events. In setting the pairs beside each other, one might be prompted to think that some drive home the emotional point of the same story events more effectively than do their counterparts.

Those that strike us as employing metaphors may employ the same metaphor as well as recount the same event. But our interest in those tellings may be different. One might leave out something of interest that we would like to have filled in. One might be more mundane than the others. And one, if it is a first person narrative, might be taken to be more compelling than the others, perhaps for precisely that reason.

Without enriching the budget very much, if at all, one can see how to go on, staying with the indisputably smaller cases and yet developing story variants that have different tones, express different moods, demand different qualitative assessments. Among those could easily be stories that are dull, rambling, labored, episodic, disjointed, elegant, or graceful. Listing them out together, moreover, brings out the fact they could also bear relational predicates to one another, predicates such as brash, tacky, edgy, innovative.

I don't have a horse in this race, at least at the level of the particular analysis of the effects of these stories. Indeed, I think there are empirical questions about some of those effects, and I don't have any data to help sort those out.

But, finally, notice that the features I have just adduced as attaching to some narratives just because they are narratively structured in particular ways are classic instances of aesthetic features. So, I think I've shown we have no reason to simply rule it out *a priori* that the same story events cannot be presented in different ways each carrying different aesthetic interests and different *foci* of aesthetic interest.

Let us acknowledge that some people are seriously worried about whether we should speak of aesthetic features at all. Some of those worries have to do with whether there are properties at all but only predicates. Some are to do with whether there are distinctively aesthetic properties/predicates or rather whether they only supervene on genuine prop-

erties/predicates. None of those worries are germane to the present discussion. So, with apologies to the metaphysicians among us, I ignore that issue altogether.

### **3. Richer Predicates**

How far can we take this? I should think we would want to be able to show that certain special predicates can apply to narratives *per se* before we were ready to pronounce that they are capable of bearing sufficient aesthetic interest to be the basis of literature. Otherwise, we might have to concede there are distinctively literary predicates that are the center of our interests in literature and that they are not derived, nor even derivable, from narrative or narrativity, *per se*.

I am not ready to make that concession, at least not just yet.

However, I see the point. One might reasonably think that, in addition to the basic aesthetic features I have defended as attaching to narratives *per se*, at least three further literary predicates need to be discussed, namely “suspenseful,” “ironic,” and “tragic.” A literature that did not allow these predicates to be applicable to at least core instances of narratives would be – by our lights at least – a much diminished example of the kind.

But, as I stated earlier, it is not part of my project to defend a minimalist metaphysics of narration. Instead I now turn to another feature of the stories adduced so far that gives room to the discussion I do wish to encourage.

### **4. An Explanation**

By being structured in any of the ways listed above, narratives *per se* allow for certain possibilities of presentation that make them interesting. The possibilities are *first* that what is narratable can be presented with a different temporal ordering than the ordering of (or at least retrievable from) the events presented (Carroll 2001, p 126) and *second* that what is narratable may induce recognition of what Carroll calls “retrospective significance” – the significance of one depicted event is often evident only upon the depiction of another (2001, pp 125 & 127). Both fall out explicitly from

Carroll's (C-INUS), but they are available from any of the other ways of filling in the connection indicated in Lamarque's (C-LOOSE).

These same two possibilities are also available on another and a different kind of account, a "scaler account" of "narrativity," found in work by Gregory Currie and Jon Juriedini (2004). This account allows that "we know [any given depicted event] happens in the story for a purpose, though it may not be clear yet what the purpose is, or that this purpose connect this event with much else the story contains." (2004: 419) And this fact enables the account to include the same features about narratives *per se* that we have just adduced, namely the distinction between narrative and 'real' time and the possibility of "retrospective significance."

Any account of narrative that allows narratives to make room for, indeed to prompt, anticipatory readiness also provides both authors and their audiences opportunities for narrative play and pleasure in that play.

### ***5. Anticipation and Narratability***

Consider the following stories on the previous list:

- (6) The king died and then, after a very very very long time, the queen died of laughter.
- (7) The king died, the king died, the king died, the king died, and then the queen died of boredom.
- (8) The king died after the queen had died of grief.
- (9) The king died violently soon after the queen had been poisoned.

These, pretty obviously, are sufficient for triggering at least some level of suspense. How is that? Partly it is to do with the waiting occasioned in (6) and (7). But mostly it is to do with the facts that in all the cases (a) recognition of the event depicted first does not tell you what will happen next nor what has just happened before, and (b) recognition something has gone before or will come after is likely to be triggered by the adverbial phrases that follow the depiction of the first event. Recognition of the phenomena first depicted is sufficient for inducing uncertainty regarding what comes next,

even when the uncertainty itself goes unrecognized. And, on a wide (or “eliminativist”) notion of “suspense” (Mag Uidhir 2010), this is sufficient for its production. This is especially true if we accept, as I think we ought, that the initiation of a sense of uncertainty here is automatic, quick, and occurs below the level of awareness.

### **6. *Three Nice Payoffs***

If we take suspense to be a collection of *anticipatory* states and we emphasize the element that sub-personal awareness plays in setting up these anticipatory states, we are able to clear up several key questions concerning whether uncertainty is necessary for suspense, whether knowledge of a narrative's outcome makes uncertainty impossible, and whether we feel suspense on repeated exposures to the same narrative. These are the three items that have been thought to generate the so-called “paradox of suspense” (Carroll 1996). For example, the view makes room for the thought that while uncertainty may be necessary for suspense, the awareness one is uncertain need not be. In this way, it also allows for a compatibilist approach to the apparent paradox. I do not pursue this thought here.

Second, the fact one may anticipate an outcome without knowing it even is an outcome will be important to first and perhaps many initial encounters with a narrative. Upon repeated encounters, as one might expect, one's knowledge of the outcome will ordinarily kick in and interfere with anticipatory setups. However, the fact our initiating states are so frequently induced sub-doxastically means they can also be manipulated in much the same way, and even blocked. So, for example, Gerrig (1989) reports on experiments in which suspense is maintained because a reader's certain knowledge of outcome is actually undermined by a kind of conceptual priming effect generated by bits of information that reader does not realize are defeaters of what she knows. Gerrig does not use the term “conceptual priming effect” in his essay; but the experiments he describes can be re-described in these terms without loss of content. And, for a second example, Cheong and Young (2008) show that by determining what story elements to tell and which to hide they are able to manipulate the level of suspense created by computer generated narratives by affecting

readers' plan-based reasoning, much of which takes place below the level of consciousness.

A third payoff of this analysis, even though it has been offered as an explanation of explicitly verbal narratives, is that the same kinds of anticipatory states that underwrite or trigger the reactions of readers also underwrite the reactions of theatrical spectators. Notice the analysis has focused upon the reactions of readers rather than the intentions of authors. As such it is consistent with at least this much of the phenomena Goldie has explored by employing the notion of *narratability*: insofar as a thinker can take on and think through a sequence of events or images present to mind and "is able to grasp coherence and meaningfulness... and is able to evaluate and respond emotionally to what happened," then the object of the thinker's reflection is "narratable." Goldie also holds that, in the case of an individual reflecting on his own life, that the sequence is narratable "does not imply the existence of a narrator as such, or of an audience" (2003, 310).

### **7. Concluding Remarks**

I began thinking about these issues by asking what predicates, usually associated with the contents of narrative theatrical performances, might also be born by performances themselves? My initial guess was that a moment in performances should be capable of being, for example, suspenseful, independently of any suspenseful moment occurring in the content of the performance. After all, if what we sometimes feel just before the diver leaves the board can be called "suspense," then suspense – whatever it is – should also be something which can be induced, and perhaps is induced routinely, by the physical and vocal actions of performers. The importance of that fact is that it can become an aesthetic or critical issue of some importance in particular cases whether, say, performance suspense lines up with, precedes, trails, or is otherwise juxtaposed to suspenseful moments within the performance's content.

But its importance here is that in that same example we can also see how to answer the question that is to be the focus of this paper: what is the minimum necessary that must be presented to someone for her to

be positioned to tell a story? What triggers her ability to tell a story, to narrate, is the same sort of thing that enables her later to explain her reaction to the diver, the performer dropping a penny, or to the image of a character that a performer displays or the way she displays her character's verbal behavior. Consider just the case in which a spectator grasps that her recognition of one event depicted first does not tell her what will happen next nor what has just happened before. As such, even assuming she knows nothing more than that something else will happen, she is enabled by her own recognition of the event depicted in its context, to grasp its coherence with other depicted events and its sense in relation to them, and to invest it with emotional import. Thereby, she is ready to tell a story.

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