THEORY AND INTERPRETATION OF NARRATIVE
James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, Series Editors
The Rhetoric of Fictionality

Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction

Richard Walsh
To Jacques Berthoud
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My attempts to write this book began long, long ago, when I was still the Keasbey Research Fellow at Selwyn College, Cambridge. It’s been a slow process, but not a painful one thanks in large part to the interest and support of the many people who have become involved, in one way or another, along the way. The first I’d like to mention, from those early days, is Manuela Tecușan, whose enthusiasm always made me smile. Soon afterwards my colleagues at the University of York became important, both for their contributions to the supportive research environment in which I’ve worked ever since, and for their indulgence of my occasional contributions to it. In particular, I’m grateful to Jacques Berthoud, without whom this work would probably have never seen the light of day. I am hugely indebted to him for his belief in the merit of my work and his instrumental support of my career (in fact, his creation of the possibility of my career). I’d also like to thank Stephen Minta and Derek Attridge, both of whom have provided invaluable advice and encouragement.

My experience of my fellow narrative theorists, both on and off the page, has been overwhelmingly positive, and the few people I can mention by name must also stand in part as representatives of a scholarly community I think is notable for its intellectual generosity. I owe special thanks to those who took an early interest in my work, and indeed sought me out because of it: notably Meir Sternberg, Monika Fludernik, and Emma Kafalenos. Among the many more who have contributed to the work in progress via questions, conversations, or correspondence, I’d like to mention Gerald Prince, Brian Richardson, Jan Baetens, Jonathan Culler, Alan Palmer, David Herman, Ruth Page, and Frederick Aldama. The three people whose influence has been greatest on the final form of the book,
though, are James Phelan, Peter Rabinowitz, and Brian McHale: their
detailed comments and suggestions in response to the draft manuscript
were a crucial aid at the point when my own sense of it was numbed by
proximity. Jim and Peter, in fact, have been formative influences upon my
thinking at several prior stages, as editors of the Blackwell Companion to
Narrative Theory and (in Jim’s case) as editor of Narrative, in which some
of my earliest work appeared. As editors of the Theory and Interpretation
of Narrative Series they have engaged with the detail of my argument and
its articulation with far greater care than an author has a right to expect,
and I would have produced a lesser book without them. The production of
the book is also indebted, of course, to the efforts of the staff at The Ohio
State University Press, and among these I’d like to give particular thanks
to Sandy Crooms and Maggie Diehl for their very helpful and solicitous
approach.

I’ve already alluded to some of the intermediate stages in the realiza-
tion of this project, and there are several institutional acknowledgments
due in relation to that process. Two British Academy Overseas Conference
Grants, in 2003 and 2005, allowed me to air preliminary versions of argu-
ments included here. Many of those arguments have also appeared in print
in earlier or shorter form, as follows: part of chapter one in the Blackwell
Companion to Narrative Theory (2005); chapter two as “Fictionality and
Mimesis: Between Narrativity and Fictional Worlds,” Narrative 11.1 (2003);
chapter three in Style 35.4 (2001); chapter four as “Who Is the Narrator?”
Poetics Today 18.4 (1997); half of chapter six as “The Narrative Imagina-
tion across Media,” Modern Fiction Studies 52.4 (2006); chapter seven as
“The Novelist as Medium,” Neophilologus 84.3 (2000); and chapter eight
as “Why We Wept for Little Nell: Character and Emotional Involvement,”
Narrative 5.3 (1997).

My last and most personal thanks, though, go to Duncan, Frances,
Alex, Ryan, and Marcia, for making the whole thing that much harder.
In the course of writing this book, I have found occasion to challenge many of the core concepts of narrative theory. Every chapter exhibits, to a greater or lesser extent, an attitude of sceptical reconsideration towards some prevalent theoretical view: the most prominent targets of this critique are fictional worlds theory (chapters one, two, four, and eight); speech act approaches to fiction (chapters one and four); the logical priority of fabula over sujet, or story over discourse (chapter three); the concepts of the narrator and implied author (chapter four); the metaphor of voice in narrative mediacy (chapter five); the notion of narrative’s medium independence (chapter six); the communication model of narrative authorship (chapter seven); and mimetic and formalist approaches to character (chapter eight). The same revisionist stance also manifests itself in a number of attempts to vindicate rather old-fashioned ideas in new terms, such as the discussions of mimesis (chapter two), the novelist’s inspiration (chapter seven), and emotional involvement with fictions (chapter eight). In all these instances my arguments have a dissenting air, and viewed in this light, the book as a whole might appear to be an extended provocation to fellow narrative theorists. Well, I hope it is that in part, but its real purpose is rather different and has a more positive character.

These wide-ranging re-evaluations are all straightforward consequences of the approach I have taken to my topic, narrative fictionality. The distinctiveness of fiction is usually taken to be a quality of the discursive product (a fictional representation) or a quality of the discursive act (a nonserious or otherwise framed assertion), whereas I conceive of fictionality as a distinctive rhetorical resource, functioning directly as part of the pragmatics of serious communication. I argue the possibility of such a view of fiction
in chapter one, drawing upon, and extrapolating from, the pragmatic theory of relevance advanced by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. What follows in the rest of the book is an inquiry into the manifold implications of this view for narrative theory. Each chapter is an exploration of the way such a perspective upon fictionality cuts across core theoretical issues in the field, not primarily for the sake of what it does to received narratological opinion on those issues, but for the sake of the light it sheds on the idea of a rhetorical concept of fictionality. The overarching perspective I advocate and assume throughout these explorations is thrown into relief by the critique of familiar concepts that it enables. This process of theoretical refiguring also generates a number of suggestive specific claims, such as the view of fiction as a kind of exercise of narrative understanding in chapter two; the discrimination between instance, idiom and interpellation in chapter five; the conception of narrative as a cognitive faculty, and dreams as protofictions, in chapter six; the notion of narrative “rightness” as the benchmark of the fictive imagination in chapter seven; or the discursive model of affective engagement in chapter eight.

The perspective on fictionality adopted here is in part a response to the changing scope and purpose of narrative theoretical inquiry. Narrative theory has always had grandly expansionist ambitions, but in recent years the pace of that expansion has tended to outstrip the range and adaptability of the available theoretical paradigms. Literary narrative, and literary fiction in particular, has been the test bed for most of the conceptual apparatus of narrative theory, but many of the basic assumptions entailed by that heritage, about both the nature of its object of inquiry and the appropriate disciplinary methodologies and objectives, look increasingly inappropriate and parochial. The burden of interest in narrative has shifted significantly towards other media, towards nonfictional forms, and towards disciplines beyond the English department, or indeed the humanities and social sciences. Narrative theory now finds itself addressing an object of study that may be as relevant to legal studies, medicine, computer science, artificial intelligence, or psychology as it is to literature. Theoretical discussion in any particular context (and my own bias in this book is avowedly literary) is always at risk of overgeneralization from its particulars, and consequently under a certain pressure of abstraction in order to accommodate the sheer range of narrative. Similarly, the scope of fictionality, and hence the nature of theoretical inquiry about it, has come to seem greater than it once did, and further removed from the particulars of any corpus of fictions. So although for me the question of fictionality arises in a literary context, it is necessarily implicated in ideas about much more inclusive
frames of reference: about communication in general, about cognition, about the faculty of imagination. The point of theorizing fictionality is not, for me, primarily to inform or enable the interpretation of fictional texts, or to refine the apparatus of literary study (though I think it does do both of these things); it is a more abstract inquiry into the conditions of significance that make these activities conceivable and worthwhile.

My perspective on fictionality is both grounded in the pragmatics of discursive process and pragmatist in its theoretical orientation, and this is a fundamental respect in which it cuts across the received model of narrative theory as a field of inquiry, at least insofar as this still bears the mark of its structuralist origins. Structuralism was the theoretical paradigm that made possible the elaboration of narrative theory as we know it today, and I feel as intellectually indebted to it, I’m sure, as most people working in the field. Of course, a great deal of the most important work on narrative over the last twenty years has sought to qualify, reconfigure, hybridize, or otherwise move beyond classical structuralist narratology, but in some fundamental respects this effort can be understood, in the main, as convergent with the paradigm established in that classical phase. Structuralism was about nothing if not the hegemony of systems as the precondition for any meaning, or meaningful action, whatsoever; the scientific mind-set of structuralist theory is very much about the project of exhaustive description and refinement such a view of a system invites, along with the demonstration of its explanatory power across the range of instances within the system’s compass; that is to say, the project of filling out the paradigm. There is much in a pragmatist view that sits uncomfortably with such a model of the field of inquiry: it tends to introduce elements of irreducible contingency, an awareness of analytical horizons, and scepticism towards the possibility (or utility) of exactly the kind of synoptic, systematic mastery that is the prime directive of structuralist-inspired narratology. My arguments in this book will often seem unhelpful, contrary, and counter-productive in just this kind of way if they are taken as straightforward been, and still is, for many scholars. But to retain the model of scientific inquiry, and to invoke Thomas Kuhn for a moment (without, I hope, too much of either presumption or irony), I would suggest that the perspective adopted in this book is symptomatic of a growing sense of paradigm shift in the air.

One way to clarify my own take on this state of affairs, and hence the sense of theoretical purpose driving the discussions in this book, is to draw attention to a move that features, in different ways, in several of the arguments I put forward. In essence, this move involves granting partial
or provisional legitimacy to a concept that I also claim is theoretically unsound. Some such double perspective informs my comments on fabula or story, narrative voice, character, fictional world, and Genette’s typology of narration, for example—as well as some more glancing observations on concepts such as representation and event. The inference from these various accommodations would seem to be that I am trading off analytical rigour against practical utility: these terms are just too well embedded in critical discourse to be jettisoned. But such an approach would be something of a slight to theory, which is not at all my intention; I’m a theorist, after all, and I spend far more time in these chapters tracing the complex web of assumptions behind these concepts and distinctions than I do affirming their critical value. This would be odd if my objective in doing so were the pursuit of a purer, more coherent, yet less useful theoretical nomenclature. In fact, the reader of this book need not fear a barrage of new terminology (narrative theory has more than enough already), because my method throughout is not based upon an assumed tension between theoretical rigour and practical exigency in the analysis of narrative, but on their necessary and complementary coexistence. This is a consequence of an approach to narrative theory grounded in pragmatism as a methodological and philosophical orientation, as distinct from a more directly pragmatic approach to narrative interpretation. Pragmatism assumes that every conceptual framework is provisional and to be valued according to its outcomes, and reciprocally, that the value of any particular interpretation is contingent upon the legitimizing authority of some conceptual framework. So, narrative theory must be accountable to the general experience of narrative and the creative and interpretative processes it entails, but at the same time such experience cannot be considered theoretically Edenic: it is informed and shaped by the very language in which it is articulated. Every narrative theoretical concept is caught in this double bind to precisely the extent that it has currency. For me, the response this situation demands is a double one: to begin and end with the terms in which the experience of narrative is articulated (within whatever historical or demagogic frame of reference), but also to pursue the theoretical logic of those terms, according to their own premises, with analytical rigour. The focus of interest is always how these reciprocal poles bear on the idea of the narrative encounter in process, with its horizons and its tendentiousness, rather than a systemic overview of the permutations of narrative phenomena in and of themselves. The ultimate objective is not, of course—cannot be—to instate a superior model of an object of study (narrative), but to characterize the parameters of the communicative process of narrative creation and reception, or more particularly the fictive aspect of it.
My title inevitably calls to mind a seminal work in narrative theory, Wayne Booth’s classic study *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, first published in 1961, and there are two premises of Booth’s argument to which this book connects, even if it dissents from much in his own elaboration of those premises. One of them is at stake in the term “rhetoric,” the other in “fiction”—or for me, “fictionality”—so that the titular echo is sufficiently accounted for by the two of them together. A rhetorical perspective implies a concern with communicative acts, which in Booth’s terms meant the “glorious meeting” of authors and readers in texts (403). This translated into a critical project which was centrally concerned with, among other things, issues of authorial intention (under the banner of the “implied author”) and of the moral dimension of fiction—the values implicated in or invoked by such acts of communication. The contemporary critical environment provides fertile ground for a rhetorical mode of criticism in which the values being negotiated by that rhetoric are of primary concern, and my own allegiance to rhetoric begins here; it leads me back to the author (not merely the implied author) and the authorial communicative act, and if the terms in which it does so are different from Booth’s, I nonetheless think it worth registering the affinity underlying the differences. Among these would be that my emphasis, in talking of the act of fiction, falls on contextuality rather than intention; that I assume the act to be marked by the specificity of its occasion; and that my sense of the authorial role is somewhat refigured. But the authorial communicative act, for me, is a vital focus for the interpretation of fiction, and though I profess a view of authorship as less heroic, of the encounter between author and reader as less glorious, than Booth would have it, I do not mean to diminish their importance.

Almost the first gesture of Booth’s 1983 afterword to the second edition of his book was one of repentance for the hubris of calling it “The Rhetoric of Fiction”: the subject is huge, and even such a wide-ranging and substantial volume as his could hardly claim to be definitive. I contemplated using the indefinite article in the title of this book, or even no article at all, thereby transforming “rhetoric” from a count noun to a mass noun (“some” rhetoric, if you will). But in fact what is needed is a distinction between two possible interpretations of my title (and Booth’s), one of which I want to disown. *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* might be a book about the rhetorical function of fictionality, or it might be a treatise on, or taxonomy of, the body of rules, principles, or devices that constitute fictionality: that is, either fictionality’s rhetoric, or my *Rhetoric*. Needless to add, I intend the former sense: the book is about the rhetoric of fictionality, it does not constitute it.
As far as the term “fiction” is concerned, a crucial implication of a rhetorical approach to fiction in particular is, for my purposes in this book, that it requires a renegotiation of the complex relations between narration (whether authorial or not) and fictional representation. Booth’s study was largely driven by an argument with the tendency of contemporary novel criticism to neglect the “telling” in favour of the “told,” in the name of a realist aesthetic he saw hardening into dogma. The bias of criticism in the decades that followed was, if anything, on the opposite side: narrative theory elaborated on questions of narration with enthusiasm, while more general antireferential and textualist critical orientations tended to eclipse the representational assumptions with which Booth had worked. In fact, in the retrospective light of his afterword, he found it more necessary to defend the opposite flank: “I would still differ strongly from those analysts who see fiction as made of language; they are made (at least for our purposes here) of characters-in-action, told about in language” (409). The nature and logic of that duality remains a live issue in narrative theory—it is worth noting that Booth’s commitment to studying the rhetoric of fiction as the art of “imposing fictional worlds” upon readers (419) has since gained considerable theoretical sophistication in the work of critics interested in issues of fictional reference. My concern is to establish the importance of a larger rhetorical perspective by insisting on the centrality of the idea of “fictionality,” as something akin to a master-trope of fictional narrative, and to demonstrate the capacity of such a perspective to account for the effects of representation which dominate the experience of reading fiction. My premise is that a properly rhetorical account of fiction ought to be answerable to the nature of such reading experiences, but that it should at the same time resist the temptation to lapse from explaining the rhetoric of fictionality into a kind of critical collaboration with it. “The rhetoric of fiction,” in Booth’s usage, encompassed two senses of the relation between its terms: he distinguished between the rhetoric in fiction (as overt appeal, most notably in the form of authorial commentary), and fiction as rhetoric (the whole art of storytelling as an act of communication). Both senses, however, are bounded by the occasion of storytelling, dedicated to that goal of imposing fictional worlds, and eliciting the reader’s moral engagement with them. I am interested in the attempt to see fiction from outside that frame, to understand the principles of its relation to the contexts within which it is produced. While Booth’s two senses both placed rhetoric at the service of representation, I would like to invert that hierarchy by proposing a third rhetorical perspective in which fiction is understood as a particular way of meaning, a particular kind of contribution to cultural discourse at large, the distinguishing features of which are grounded in
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the rhetorical potential generated by its fictionality as such. The rhetoric of fiction in this sense constitutes a bridge between extrinsic and intrinsic criticism, between ideology and formalism, or between the text as symptom and the text as oracle.

Booth rightly objected in his afterword to the tendency of some critics to treat all narratives as fictional (although his motives, which relate to Peter Rabinowitz’s distinction between “authorial” and “narrative” audiences, are not mine); there remains much to be said, under the general auspices of narrative theory, about the specific rhetoric of fictionality. Fictionality (as a rhetorical rather than ontological quality) is almost inherently narrative, but it is not coextensive with narrativity, and still less with textuality in general. Not that fictionality should be equated simply with “fiction,” as a category or genre of narrative: it is a communicative strategy, and as such it is apparent on some scale within many nonfictional narratives, in forms ranging from something like an ironic aside, through various forms of conjecture or imaginative supplementation, to full-blown counterfactual narrative examples. Conversely, much fiction serves communicative functions, of both non-narrative (essayistic) and narrative (documentary) kinds, which do not exclusively belong to the rhetoric of fictionality: think of the generalizing moral commentary of George Eliot, or the historical contextualizations of Scott. But the generic marker of all fictional narrative, literary or cinematic, is that the rhetoric of fictionality is the dominant framework for the communicative gesture being made, and therefore defines the terms in which it solicits interpretation.

To reiterate, then, the approach I adopt in the following chapters is to re-examine fundamental questions in narrative theory through the prism of a new conception of the rhetorical nature of fictionality, both to throw into relief the implications of that conception and to demonstrate its salience and value in negotiation with currently prevalent assumptions. The case for the cogency of such a view of fictionality is made in chapter one. The chapters that follow adopt that view and confront the major issues that arise at the point of intersection between narrative theory and fictionality, progressing from the abstract to the concrete. That is to say, while the earlier chapters (chapters two to five) wrestle directly with core concepts of narrative theory in their own terms, the later chapters (chapters six to eight) negotiate with theory through more extensive examples to give a fuller sense of the bearing of fictionality, as I conceive it, upon instantiated questions.

Chapter one begins by posing the question of fictionality and suggesting that the range of theoretical responses to date share a tendency to displace the issue rather than resolve it. I propose that fictionality should
not be viewed as a problem of truth, but of relevance, and I show how relevance is a crucial concept in two distinct theoretical domains: fictional worlds theory and speech act theory. By teasing out the function of relevance within each of these conceptual frameworks in turn, I demonstrate that neither does enough to pursue the full implications of the concept for communication in general, or for fictive discourse in particular. For a better understanding of the importance of relevance, I turn to the context within which it has been given the fullest treatment, which is relevance theory. My exposition of this model of communication shows its crucial intervention in speech act theory, and the work of H. P. Grice in particular, and how it provides a theoretical perspective within which the criterion of relevance ceases to be subordinate to truth. I then show how the implications of such a perspective for our understanding of fictionality have not yet been recognized, and I put forward my own view of what these implications are, and the pragmatic rhetoric of fictionality that I think emerges. To illustrate the argument, I offer a detailed analysis of how a relevance theory perspective can explain the communicative efficacy of fiction in relation to the opening sentence of *The Trial*, before outlining the merits of a pragmatic model of fictionality and its significance for narrative theory.

In chapter two I situate fictionality in relation to the interdisciplinary ambitions of narrative theory, which have tended to conflate fictionality with nonfictional narrativity, and in relation to fictional worlds theory, which has disarmed fictionality by literalizing fictional reference. I argue that our understanding of fictionality as a rhetorical resource is equally impoverished by both approaches, and I locate the crux of the problem in their treatment of mimesis, which is either redeployed to cover the whole domain of narrative representation or disappears entirely. The difficulty in reserving mimesis for fictional narrative is already apparent in the work of both the preeminent twentieth-century champions of mimesis, Georg Lukács and Erich Auerbach, for whom it ultimately transcends any opposition between fiction and history. This is also the case with Paul Ricoeur’s work, in which mimesis is closely related to poststructuralist narrativity. But Ricoeur introduces a new emphasis on mimesis as a process, “configuration,” and in this respect the fictional and nonfictional instances are not symmetrical: in fiction, mimesis has no data on which to act except what it proposes to itself, and so it lacks the direct purpose of nonfictional narrative understanding. I suggest that the required element of indirectness is best articulated by the term “exercise,” which means both “use” and “development” and is both playful and purposeful. Fiction is, in this sense, the exercise of our narrative understanding, and fictionality is the regime that provides its cultural rationale.
In chapter three I take a rhetorical view of the concept of fabula and defend its pragmatic value, and its particular relevance to fiction, once it has been extricated from the various misconceptions to which it is peculiarly subject. The concept has long been a staple of narrative theory, and some of the problems attending it go back quite directly to its Russian Formalist roots, though others have arisen through its structuralist mediation, in the guise of distinctions between such terms as “story” and “discourse.” I demonstrate the inadequacies of these models by pursuing the argument through fabula’s relationship to event, chronology, temporality, causality, perspective, medium, and the genesis of narrative. The sense in which the concept remains valuable, I suggest, is in respect to its role in the process of interpretation, especially in the case of fictional narrative. The significant point, however, is that the rhetorical basis of this view of fabula and its relation to sujet effectively overturns the logical hierarchy of previous representational models.

Chapter four exposes the way in which the concept of the narrator as a distinct and inherent agent of fictional narrative has served to frame and contain the issue of fictionality. I address myself to Gérard Genette’s typology of narrators, and I show that all homodiegetic and intradiegetic narrators are equally represented and therefore characters. I then confront the extradiegetic heterodiegetic case, examining the implications of omnisience and external focalization, and dismissing the claim that distinct narrators are needed in such cases so that the fictional information may be presented as known rather than as imagined. This argument leads to a discussion of the author’s accountability for fictional statements with reference to speech act theory, in which I show why the conventional pretence model of fiction is unsatisfactory. Some possible objections to my position are then considered: the implications of unreliability, ideas about local and covert narrators, and the issue of the implied author are all taken into account. I then draw out the argument’s consequences for an understanding of fiction in rhetorical rather than representational terms.

In chapter five I begin to address the implications of a communicative model of fictional as a rhetoric of representation capable of semiotic articulation in various media, by considering one of the most linguistically marked concepts of narrative theory—voice—from a transmedia perspective. I distribute the senses of “voice” under three headings, in which the term is considered as “instance,” as “idiom,” and as “interpellation.” These categories correspond to applications of the concept in which the emphasis falls, respectively, on the representational act, an object of representation, and a representational subject position. Represented narrative idiom, on this view, is confined to second-degree narrative representation: I contrast
the order of mimesis, or second-degree narration, as an object of representation, and hence rhetorical effect, with that of diegesis (first-degree narration) as a rhetorical means. I go on to distinguish between the inference of a subject and of a subject position, in relation to free indirect discourse and internal focalization, and explore analogues for such effects in non-linguistic media. In the final section, I advance a view of focalization as a form of (voice as) interpellation, in which the rhetorical effect is one of alignment with a subject position rather than objectification of a representational subject. This discussion touches on second-person address as a strategy of focalization, and it concludes by pursuing the issue of voice beyond discourse, and perspective, to ideology, to show how usage of the term in such contexts as Bakhtinian dialogics and feminist narratology may be incorporated within this conceptual framework.

Chapter six continues the focus on issues of media by contesting the strong presumption that narrative, capable as it is of expression in several different media, is constituted by a medium-independent content, and advocating instead a rhetorical model of its medium-contingency. I begin by considering the nature of the medium in narrative, as a vehicle of transmission or a means of articulation, and unpack the relation between narrative media and the foundational narrative concept of the event, which figures (misleadingly) in most definitions of minimal narrative, to arrive at a view of narrative as a cognitive faculty. The chapter addresses two examples, one from the medium of comics and one from early film. My comics example, Neil Gaiman’s Sandman, relates this cognitive sense of media to the narrative quality of dreams. I examine the place of self-consciousness and homodiegesis in dreams, and confront the question they pose about the ambiguity between narrative and experience at a cognitive level. I address this issue in terms of the relation between representation and illusion in film, in the context of the long history of parables of mimetic illusion. My second example, The Countryman and the Cinematograph, is an early cinematic version of such a parable, and it provides for reflection on several key aspects of the semiotic understanding of (moving) images, all of which is mediated by the self-reflexive fictionality of the film’s representation of the institution, machinery, and reception of early cinema. I unfold the implications of the film in relation to scale, perspective, and framing, which I present as three increasingly inclusive ways of conceiving the rhetorical articulation of the moving image and the semiotic role of the medium. This discussion allows me to return to the subject of dreams and advance a view of the narrative dream as a protofiction, in which fictionality is a specific “direction-of-fit” rhetoric, and the dream is a paradigm for a rhetoric-driven (rather than reference-driven) model of narrative.
Chapter seven considers fictive communication in terms of the metaphor of the novelist as medium (in the transmissive sense discarded in chapter six). I suggest that this metaphor avoids treating narrative creativity as the symbolic articulation of authorial intentions, without reducing novelistic discourse to the communication of fictional narrative as literal information. The chapter examines certain kinds of experience, common among novelists, in which creativity is equated with a loss of narrative control. I elaborate on the senses in which such narrative obligations situate the novelist as a “medium” negotiating between the narrative and its readers. The argument centres on novelists’ own accounts of their experiences of creativity, with particular reference to Alice Walker, Charlotte Brontë, Sir Walter Scott, Anthony Trollope, Elizabeth Bowen, Henry James, and Donald Barthelme. I establish the common features of novelistic mediation, and I distinguish between accounts that invoke obligations to higher discursive authorities and those that appeal to representational imperatives. The latter are pursued in more detail, first in relation to the ubiquitous notion of novelists’ deference to the demands of their characters, and then in relation to the autonomy of story itself. Throughout, I trace the recurrence, in these novelists’ reflections, of an association between the nebulous issue of creativity and practical considerations about their professional authority and accountability to a readership, and ultimately I situate these concerns within a view of the narrative imagination’s deference to rhetorical imperatives.

In chapter eight, I turn to the reception of fiction and consider the extremes of response to the notorious death of Little Nell (the intense emotional involvement she elicited on first publication, and her subsequent decline into an icon of vulgar sentimentality). I use this problematic case to argue that emotional involvement is the recognition of values inherent in the discursive information given by a narrative, rather than in the actuality of the characters this information generates. Whereas the mimetic model of character is founded on the assumed priority of objective fact to evaluative response, my approach regards discursive information as already value laden, and hence rhetorically charged in the offering; fictional being does not precede, but follows from, the evaluative, emotional dynamics of fictional narrative. My example serves to historicize both the theoretical issues involved and certain underlying assumptions about readers’ literary competence. I go on to show how a rhetorical perspective allows a more sympathetic response to Dickens’s achievement in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

My perspective on the rhetoric of fictionality, then, offers a vantage point from which many of the core issues of narrative theory look rather
different. This book pursues that difference, from its conceptual premises to its tangible implications, in a sequence that runs from the abstract to the (relatively) concrete. The trajectory of my argument situates the rhetoric of fictionality first in relation to current views about its discursive and ontological distinctiveness (chapter two), then to the consensus models of narrative structure (chapter three) and narrative transmission (chapter four). The balance between abstract and instantiated issues begins to shift in chapter five, where I apply the logic of my approach to the several aspects of voice and narrative mediacy, from which point I go on to address its implications for fictions across media and for narrative cognition (chapter six), for narrative creativity (chapter seven), and for the reception of fictions (chapter eight). Throughout, the argument looks both ways: if you hypothesize a rhetorical model of fictionality, these are the consequences; if these consequences make sense, it makes sense to speak of the rhetoric of fictionality. I think it does, obviously.
Josef K., the protagonist of Kafka’s *The Trial*, finds himself in a situation in which his efforts to establish his innocence, to explain himself, have no focus and no boundaries: he can only envisage a plea in the form of a narrative of his entire life. Our own efforts to make sense of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding K.’s envisaged narrative act are crucially related to a distinctive fact about Kafka’s: while K. contemplates autobiography, Kafka engages in fiction. Fiction is usually understood to have a second-order relation to the real world, via the mimetic logic of fictional representation: it represents events, or imitates discourses, that we assimilate through nonfictional modes of narrative understanding. So even where (as here) the fiction is in some respects unrealistic, it is comprehensible in terms of its relation to familiar types of narrative: not only the accused person’s effort of self-justification and the discourse of moral autobiography, but also psychological narratives of guilt and the several kinds of legal narrative that inform the global frame of reference of *The Trial*.

On the other hand, the place of narrative in nonfictional contexts such as legal studies has itself attracted a lot of attention in recent years. H. Porter Abbott’s *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* devotes a whole chapter to “narrative contestation,” for which his paradigm case is the competing narrative efforts of the prosecution and defence in the notorious 1893 trial of Lizzie Borden, accused (and acquitted) of murdering her father and
stepmother (138–55). Abbott emphasizes the way in which the prosecution and defence, in this as in all trials, strive to establish narrative credibility by aligning their representation of events with rhetorically advantageous “masterplots,” by which he means familiar skeletal narratives with an established cultural authority. So Lizzie Borden’s apparent “lack of affect” in the face of the murders is narrativized by one side as the shock of a virtuous daughter, by the other as the cold-blooded viciousness of a Lady Macbeth (147–49). In a legal context, the issue of narrative truth is especially pointed (Lizzie Borden, after all, stood in jeopardy of the death penalty). Yet the explanatory power of narrative here depends less on its relation to fact than its relation to other narratives, and it is in these terms that both sides make their case. Indeed, they can do no other, even in those self-reflexive moments when they accuse each other of doing so.

The general point here is that all narrative, fictional and nonfictional, is artifice. Narratives are constructs, and their meanings are internal to the system of narrative. For some theorists, this general quality of narrativity subsumes the concept of fictionality entirely: if all narratives derive their meaning from their relation to other narratives, rather than any direct purchase on reality, then it no longer makes sense to use this second-order kind of relation specifically to characterize fiction. Yet the awkward fact remains that the narratives elaborated by prosecution and defence in the Lizzie Borden trial made truth claims that Kafka’s novel does not make, and accordingly these two cultural modes of narrative invoke quite different interpretative assumptions. In this respect the rise of the general concept of narrativity, far from superseding the issue of fictionality, has actually exposed it as a theoretical problem. If the logic of narrative representation does not provide for a defensible distinction between fiction and nonfiction, then the focus of theoretical attention is necessarily displaced from the substance of fictional narrative to the act of fictive narration, from the product to the production of fiction. How are we to understand fictive narration as a referential act, or as an act of communication? It is in this context that I want to advocate a pragmatic approach to the issue of fictionality, one that draws on philosophical and linguistic fields of inquiry into the communicative use of language, and in particular invokes the conceptual framework of relevance theory.

Modern accounts of fictionality generally turn on one or more of a small repertoire of theoretical gambits, which can be collectively understood as gestures of disavowal, achieved through several kinds of displacement. That is to say, these accounts variously respond to the problem of fictionality as a problem of truthfulness and resolve it by detaching the
fictive act from the domain of truth, that is, language. The kinds of theoretical move I have in mind are: the institution of a narrator as the source of the fictive discourse; the redescriptions of fictional artifacts as props in a game of make-believe; the notion of pretended speech acts; and the recuperation of fictional reference as actual reference to fictional worlds. The first two moves place the language of fiction itself within the fictional frame; the third move disqualifies it, as nonserious language, from communicative accountability; and the fourth move allows the language of fiction to be literal and serious but not exactly fictive (that is, to the extent that fictive language does not make referential commitments), since fictionality has been redefined as a matter of ontological modality. The nub of fictionality always turns out to be elsewhere; it is as if fictionality were not a problem except in relation to language. This is odd, given that language, I take it, is what makes fiction possible—and by a language here I mean broadly any codified system of representation (fictions in any medium are equally dependent upon a language, a representational code, and not merely upon cognitive illusion).

Fictionality, I want to suggest, functions within a communicative framework: it resides in a way of using a language, and its distinctiveness consists in the recognizably distinct rhetorical set invoked by that use. I assume that narrative fictionality is worth distinguishing from narrativity in general. That is to say, I want to grant full force to the claim that all narrative is artifice, and in that very restricted sense fictive, but I maintain nonetheless that fictional narrative has a coherently distinct cultural role, and that a distinct concept of fictionality is required to account for this role. It is best explained in functional and rhetorical terms, rather than in formal terms: true, there are formal qualities strongly associated with fiction, but they do not supply necessary or sufficient conditions of fictionality. To say instead that fictionality is a functional attribute is to say that it is a use of language; to say that it is rhetorical is to say that this use is distinguished by the kind of appeal it makes to the reader’s (or the audience’s) interpretative attention. No model that treats fictive discourse as framed by formal, intentional, or ontological disavowal can meet these criteria for a concept of fictionality. If fictionality consists in a distinct way of using language, it is not explained by attaching its distinctiveness to some quarantine mechanism conceived precisely to maintain its conformity with nonfictional usage, at the cost of detaching it, in one way or another, from its actual communicative context. The rhetorical distinctiveness of fiction, then, is consistent with a communicative continuity between fictional and nonfictional uses of language. Fictionality is a
rhetorical resource integral to the direct and serious use of language within a real-world communicative framework.

I want to reformulate the age-old problem of fiction’s claim upon our attention, the challenge that has prompted various defences of poesy, or expulsions from republics, down through the centuries, as the problem of reconciling fictionality with relevance. The concept of relevance appears, in several quite specific senses, within two distinct, well-demarcated theoretical domains that have been important to recent discussions of fictionality: one is fictional worlds theory, which focuses on the referential act; the other is speech act theory, especially those accounts that engage with Gricean “conversational implicature” (Grice 1989), where the focus is on the communicative act. Relevance theory itself is a related approach to communication from the perspective of pragmatics and cognitive linguistics, and although this field of research has not included any detailed consideration of fictionality, I shall argue that it provides an invaluable conceptual basis for a pragmatic theory of fiction founded upon the principle of relevance rather than truth.

Relevance and Fictional Worlds

The issue of relevance arises in fictional worlds theories in two respects: the first and narrowest is internal to a given fictional world and relates to the problem of incompleteness, and the second is external and concerns the global pertinence of fictional worlds to the reader. Incompleteness is a problem for fictional worlds theory because the text of a fiction cannot be expected to fully specify a world, nor even provide a sufficient basis for a comprehensive inferential process. There are always going to be gaps and indeterminacies in the interpretative construction of fictional worlds, which is a significant divergence from the philosophical model of possible worlds upon which fictional worlds theory is based, since it is axiomatic that possible worlds are logically complete. The theoretical response has been to invoke two complementary recuperative strategies. The first, proposed by Marie-Laure Ryan, is to bring fictional worlds into line with the logical framework of possible worlds theory by assuming a “principle of minimal departure.” The principle of minimal departure dictates that the world of the text is to be understood as complete and identical to the actual world, except for the respects in which it deviates from that model, either explicitly or implicitly, both in its own right and by virtue of any genre conventions it invokes (1991: 51). In this case, then, the fictional world
itself is complete after all, even if the reader’s actualization of it in interpretation of the text is not.

I want to distinguish between two functions of Ryan’s principle, only one of which really concerns me here. In one sense, it has an integral role in the interpretation of fiction, as when she says, “minimal departure explains the very possibility of making truth-functional statements about fiction” (56). This statement seems to invoke an indispensable premise for understanding fiction: we cannot begin to evaluate even the most explicit and literal level of fictional discourse without assuming that the world we know is its context, however much that assumption may be qualified in certain particulars. In another sense, it is a kind of supplement, to address the problem of incompleteness. She says, “It is by virtue of the principle of minimal departure that readers are able to form reasonably comprehensive representations of the foreign worlds created through discourse, even though the verbal representation of these worlds is always incomplete” (52). This is the sense I find problematic. If the problem really is logical incompleteness, the principle of minimal departure cannot help. There are indeterminacies in relation to the narrative particulars of any fiction for which the model of the actual world offers no decisive guidance (exactly how many times did K. consider the idea of preparing a short account of his life?). On the other hand, if the principle of minimal departure is assumed just to provide for a “reasonably comprehensive” world, it raises a question: how far does the reader pursue the gap-filling process it licences? What criterion limits that interpretative pursuit? However we may choose to define the goals of interpretation, the criterion required is one of relevance to those goals.

Ryan’s answer to the problem of incompleteness in fictional worlds is cited by Thomas Pavel, whose alternative solution is to conceive them as worlds of various sizes, determined by the texts from which they are constructed and open to extratextual information provided for by the principle of minimal departure, without being “maximal” (1986: 107–8). So, we might just conceivably infer that K. has an appendix, in the absence of any textual information to the contrary, but neglect to infer that his maternal great-grandfather had an appendix—although the latter inference would be better founded, on the basis of minimal departure, since an appendectomy would not then have been available. Pavel asks, “Should we distinguish between what is ‘in fact’ part of a fictional world and the parts of it that are of interest to the reader? Or should we rather assume that fictional worlds, as internal models, must limit themselves to what is of concern to the reader? Obviously, if the latter course is chosen, we do
not want fictional worlds to be maximal, since we are not interested in what lurks behind a limited circle of light and the penumbra surrounding it” (95). His response introduces the crucial notion of relevance: “Some form of gradual opacity to inference, some increasing resistance to maximal structures, must be at work in most fictional worlds, keeping them from expanding indefinitely along irrelevant lines” (95). Once the idea of relevance is admitted, however, it entirely supersedes that of completeness. It makes no practical difference whether the “facts” of a fictional world are understood maximally, independent of textual interpretation, or contingently, on the basis of what it is possible to infer from the text, because in either case the scope of inference is, in principle, non-finite. The horizon of the reader’s encounter with a fiction is determined not by what it is possible to infer, but by what is worth inferring. The reader will not pursue inferential reasoning beyond the point at which it ceases to seem relevant to the particulars of the narrative, in a specific context of interpretation. This is a pragmatic limit, but only such a limit can provide for the fact that fictional representations do not merely exist (in whatever qualified sense) but are communicated.

Such considerations invoke the other sense in which the notion of relevance arises in fictional worlds theory. Pavel declares a “principle of relevance” as one of only two fundamental principles of fictional reference (145), but the kind of relevance he has in mind here is quite distinct from the internal relevance presupposed by the discussion so far. Instead, it articulates an external, global relation, the sense, as he says, that “literary artifacts often are not projected into fictional distance just to be neutrally beheld but that they vividly bear upon the beholder’s world” (145). Pavel allows that the relation between worlds may take different forms, from the illustration of logical conclusions or moral generalizations to the mimetic report of information on unfamiliar periods or cultures, as well as a modern kind of ironized relevance consisting in the pointed refusal of any easy conclusions, moral or otherwise (146). What is striking is that all these manifestations of relevance are contingent upon the reader’s realization of the fictional world. Yet as we have already seen, that realization itself must be contingent upon relevance criteria of a quite different order, if it is not to be an endless project. This relation between worlds, then, is a strangely cumbersome reprise of the reader’s supposed original effort of world construction, which (under the rubric of “minimal departure”) was to be pursued precisely in terms of difference. Are these two kinds of relevance, internal and external, ultimately distinct? Or do they, under closer scrutiny, collapse into each other, in the process extinguishing the
concept that intervenes between them, which is the concept of fictional worlds itself?

Even if the kind of relevance I have been pursuing is understood as internal to the frame of fiction, it nonetheless necessarily implies an interpretative focus other than the construction of the referential world of the fiction per se. For Ryan, this something is narrative point, within which she distinguishes two broad categories, internal and external, just as Pavel distinguishes between two kinds of relevance. That is to say, the point of a narrative may be understood globally and externally, as a unitary communicative purpose, or it may be understood locally and internally, as an innate quality of certain narrative events. Narrative point, for Ryan, is understood to mean any quality that meets the relevance criterion of tellability, and tellability itself is understood in opposition to a concept of performance, which is to say that it concerns potential narrative appeal, which may or may not be realized in a particular telling. And from this description it is clear, as Ryan notes, that the relation between tellability and performance is derived from the opposition between story and discourse (1991: 149).

I shall argue in chapter three that this concept of story cannot be understood in referential terms: it is an irreducibly interpretative concept, which makes sense only as a way of identifying the salience of discourse. Ryan treats the story/discourse opposition unproblematically throughout the main body of her book, but she addresses it directly in her conclusion, where she arrives at a view broadly comparable with the interpretative emphasis I have just described, thus: “the concept variably labeled story, plot, fabula, or narrative structure becomes a mental representation functioning . . . as a ‘form of human comprehension.’ As such it is distinct from both the material signs that communicate it, and the world it is supposed to represent. In this perspective, plot is . . . an interpretive model built by the mind as it tries to understand events—whether real or imaginary” (264). Ryan’s re-evaluation of story is an important step towards understanding fictional narrative in communicative terms, but her last clause ultimately subordinates that possibility once more to a referential model, by assuming that fictional events in some sense exist independently of their narrative representation, just as real events do. While I would argue that the concept of story is evaluative in relation to discourse, Ryan sees it as evaluative in relation to events and so removes those events from their dependence upon the communicative act. In Ryan’s version, story (and therefore tellability; and therefore relevance) remains contingent upon an a priori referential world, whereas my argument has been that criteria of
relevance necessarily inform the definition of that world. Tellability, on this view, is never intrinsic to a “configuration of facts,” as Ryan allows (148), because it is an aspect of narrative communication: it is the basis upon which those facts are thus configured. Ryan emphasizes the sense of potential implicit in the “-ability” suffix of tellability, but this has to be understood as a communicative consideration, an anticipation of the interpreter’s interests, rather than as an objective baseline for the teller’s performance. Tellability implies accessibility to interpretation rather than any innate, prediscursive suitability for narration.

In fictional worlds theory, the concept of relevance is bounded by two assumptions that I want to resist: one is that the “facts” of fiction are meaningfully independent of considerations of relevance; the other is the idea that relevance can be internal to the fictional world, that it can ever mean something independently of the communicative act. My counterclaim is that the reader’s interpretative agenda cannot be understood within the bounds of a fictional world, or indeed in relation to its fictional existence rather than its actual communication, and that relevance, even when it is described internally as relevance to story, is always, reciprocally, relevance to the reader.

Relevance and Speech Acts

The issue of communication, of course, is central to the relation between fictionality and speech act theory. The standard speech act account of literary discourse, as first elaborated by Richard Ohmann (1971) and John Searle (“Logical Status” 1975), is the imitation speech act model, in which the authorial speech act is not seriously made, but pretended, which effectively suspends the appropriateness conditions (or felicity conditions) normally attaching to the performance of that speech act. But the imitative model is undermined by the fact that third-person novels routinely deviate from the norms of any nonfictional, real-world speech act, for instance in such ordinary narrative strategies as omniscient narration. The pretended speech act frame does not account for fictionality, because the rhetoric of fictionality often inhabits the narration itself. The first sentence of my quote from *The Trial*, for example, resists recuperation as a pretended nonfictional speech act in both content (access to the thoughts of another) and form (the dual temporal perspective of internal focalization, manifested in the otherwise anomalous “now”).

A more promising alternative, advanced by Mary Louise Pratt (1977),
looks instead to H. P. Grice’s model of conversational implicature. Grice argued that the appropriateness conditions applicable to speech acts were best understood not as attaching to the semantics of specific sentences, but in relation to a few general maxims. These maxims together constitute a Cooperative Principle, which is the foundation of successful communication. The crucial ones for my purposes are the Maxim of Relation, “be relevant,” and the first Maxim of Quality, “do not say what you believe to be false” (1989: 27). Grice’s approach allows a great deal of flexibility in the interpretation of speech acts, because what is actually said may be supplemented by inferences, or implicatures, to maintain the shared assumption that the Cooperative Principle is in place. Pratt proposes that one way in which speech acts may be relevant is by being “tellable,” by which she means of intrinsic interest or worthy of display. A tellable speech act constitutes an invitation to contemplate, to interpret, to evaluate. She argues that the appropriateness conditions for tellability may apply to discourses many sentences long, rather than just to individual sentences: this move allows her to propose a distinct category of speech act called “narrative display text,” which embraces both fictional narratives and the nonfictional “natural narratives” she cites from the sociolinguistic studies of William Labov (132–36). These texts can be classed along with single-sentence exclamations as speech acts that adhere to Grice’s Maxim of Relation, and fulfill the appropriateness conditions of relevance, not by being informative, but by being exhibitive—by being tellable.

Pratt, however, stops short of addressing the issue of fictionality itself and does not inquire into the hierarchical relation between Grice’s maxims of Quality and Relation, truthfulness and relevance. To accommodate fiction, Pratt ultimately falls back upon the standard speech-act account she had originally rejected and concedes that fictive discourse is, on the author’s part, an imitation display text, attributed to a narrator within the frame of fiction (173, 207–8). Pratt’s relevance criterion of tellability is suggestive, but because in her account it is ultimately subordinated to the pretence model, it collapses back within the frame of fiction and forgoes any explanatory force it may have in relation to fictionality. This is equally the case with an alternative approach, offered by Michael Kearns (1999, 2001), which uses Pratt’s concept of narrative display text in conjunction with a general model of narrativity, in which fictionality is not categorically differentiated. Such a move would make it possible to dispense with the framed, imitation speech act model of fiction, but at the price of having nothing to say about the specificity of the fictional case. Kearns is notable, however, for having recognized that in the development
of this position, a rhetorical account of narrative, if not of fiction, may have much to gain from relevance theory.

One other suggestive lead arising from the context of Gricean implicature comes from Gérard Genette, who proposes to supplement the pretence model of fiction with an appeal to the notion of indirect speech acts. His aim is to synthesize the standard speech act model with a fictional worlds perspective, and the indirect speech acts he has in mind belong in the category of “declarative illocutions with an institutive function,” in this case the function of establishing the existence of the fictional world (“Pragmatic Status” 64). This invocation of indirect speech acts is important in a broader context, though, because it highlights the fact that the literal sense of an utterance may flout Grice’s maxims—it may be conspicuously false, it may be conspicuously irrelevant—and yet the utterance may remain felicitous because these flagrant violations draw our interpretative attention to appropriate implicatures. Genette gets no further for two reasons. One is that his reliance on the pretence model actually forestalls any possibility of indirect speech acts. If the fictive speech act is nonserious, then its appropriateness conditions, and Grice’s maxims, are suspended, and therefore cannot be flouted, in which case there is no occasion to generate implicatures and derive an indirect speech act. The second reason is that the indirect speech acts envisaged by Genette, declarative acts instituting the fictional world, contribute nothing more to the external relevance of fictive discourse and indeed leave their own status (inside or outside the fictional frame) radically ambiguous. The fictional worlds model itself admits of two different approaches to the status of the narrative discourse. Ryan accommodates the imitation speech act model by attributing fictional narrative to an intrafictional narrator. For her it is axiomatic that “the implied speaker of the text is always located in TRW [the textual reference world]” (1991: 25). Pavel, on the other hand, is much more resistant to the dissociating frame of imitation speech acts, preferring to embrace a modal ontology that provides for the possibility that real world discourse may directly refer to fictional worlds. Genette’s proposal equivocates between the two, in that imitation speech acts imply an intrafictional narrator, yet a narrator within the fictional world cannot be said to institute it (I shall have more to say about the relation between Genette’s proposal and the concept of the narrator in chapter four).

Both Pratt and Genette might have offered accounts of fictive discourse independent of the pretence model. An indirect speech act approach would actually need a serious authorial speech act in order to be operative at all; but Genette doesn’t consider the possible value of indirect relevance
to an account of the authorial speech act in fiction, because he is more concerned to provide for referential truth within the fictional frame. Pratt does have a plausible basis for the relevance of the authorial speech act in the notion of tellability, and in the process of distinguishing between this and informative relevance, with its consequent dependence on the maxims of quality, she comes very close to seeing tellability as sufficient for a felicitous authorial speech act irrespective of truth criteria. In short, both make progress with the aspects of the Gricean model that emphasize relevance but are blocked by their assumption that the issue of relevance is ultimately secondary to that of truthfulness, which precludes any direct authorial model of fictive discourse. This assumption is fully justified by Grice’s own subordination of the contextual, pragmatic, and inferential mechanisms of implicature to a gold standard of literal, propositional truth. Grice’s view is apparent in the privileged status that he accorded to the first maxim of Quality, “do not say what you believe to be false,” which he hesitated to place alongside the others in the general class of maxims: “it might be felt that the importance of at least the first maxim of Quality is such that it should not be included in a scheme of the kind I am constructing; other maxims come into operation only on the assumption that this maxim of Quality is satisfied” (27). The latent hierarchy in Grice’s view of the maxims was consolidated by the way his model was absorbed into the general framework of speech act theory: whereas for Grice the role of inference was fundamental to communication, in speech act theory generally it was subordinated to literal meaning. The notion of indirect speech acts is itself an example: implicature is incorporated within a code model of communication, so that its function is reduced to that of a mechanism for translating the literal locution of problematic speech acts into a felicitous propositional form.

Relevance Theory

This impasse leads me to relevance theory, which I want to introduce in relation to Grice. Grice’s model of “conversational implicature” was developed in recognition of the fact that the code model of language was often not sufficient to account for communication and needed to be supplemented by an inferential model. The innovation of relevance theory, as expounded by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, is to argue that inference is not a supplementary component of communication, but its core. They argue for a general model of human communication as “ostensive-
inferential communication,” that is, ostensive from the point of view of the communicator, and inferential from the point of view of the audience (1995: 54). “Ostension,” or “ostensive behaviour,” means behaviour that “makes manifest an intention to make something manifest” (49). Something is manifest if it is available to perception or inference (39), and the set of facts or assumptions manifest to an individual at a given time constitutes that individual’s cognitive environment (39). For communication to be possible, the communicator and the audience must have some shared cognitive environment, and the fact that this environment is shared must itself be manifest. In other words, every manifest assumption in the shared cognitive environment is understood to be “mutually manifest” (41–42). Sperber and Wilson define ostensive-inferential communication, then, as a process whereby “the communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions {I}” (63). Communication, in this model, is a layered process providing for the recognition both of certain information and of a certain intent to inform; or, as formulated by Sperber and Wilson, communication involves an informative intention, “to inform the audience of something,” and a communicative intention, “to inform the audience of one’s informative intention” (29). The communicative intention is fulfilled once the informative intention is recognized as such.

Up to this point, the relevance theory model of communication depends entirely on inferential processes, rather than decoding processes; the code model of language has not been invoked at all. Sperber and Wilson do not dispense with the code model of language entirely, but they do insist that it is neither necessary nor sufficient for communication. Grice’s model of conversational implicature was developed in recognition of the fact that the code model was often not sufficient, but he retained the assumption that the role of implicature was supplemental and served only to redeem, where necessary, the functional limitations of explicit language, or “what is said,” and so maintain the Cooperative Principle. In the ostensive-inferential model, however, communication does not bear directly upon the thoughts of the audience, but upon their cognitive environment, and therefore it embraces a continuum of cases from “showing” to “saying that” (53). Cases of “showing” may be communicative without benefit of any coded element at all; and even at the furthest limit of “saying,” explicit language is not categorically privileged; nor, in fact, is it categorically distinct. Sperber and Wilson argue that the distinction between the explicit and implicit “content” of an utterance, conventionally understood as a
distinction between decoded assumptions and inferred assumptions, actually has an irreducibly relative aspect. Their claim is “that no assumption is simply decoded, and that the recovery of any assumption requires an element of inference” (182). Accordingly, their distinction between explication and implicature cuts across the conventional distinction between the explicit and the implicit: “a communicated assumption is either an explication or an implicature, but an explication is explicit to a greater or lesser degree” (182).

Inference, then, is not just confined to the derivation of implicatures: it is irreducibly part of explication, not just in disambiguating the linguistic code through reference resolution, but also, in a much broader sense, enriching and fine-tuning the coded meaning by evaluating such relative qualities as the looseness of word use, or the scope of comparative terms. Such a view has important consequences for the concept of relevance, because under these circumstances it is not possible to comprehend relevance under a conventional maxim, as in Grice’s model. For Grice, an utterance may adhere to the Maxim of Relation by being literally relevant, or it may flout the maxim in order to generate implicatures. Relevance can have no such double role when inference is an integral part of all utterance comprehension, nor can relevance be encapsulated in a maxim or conventional norm that communicator and audience must know in order to communicate effectively. According to Sperber and Wilson, the principle of relevance operates at a much more automatic and fundamental level than our commonsense notion of a relevant utterance might suggest: “Communicators and audience need no more know the principle of relevance to communicate than they need to know the principle of genetics to reproduce. Communicators do not ‘follow’ the principle of relevance; and they could not violate it even if they wanted to. The principle of relevance applies without exception” (162).

The principle of relevance—or more strictly, the second (communicative) principle of relevance—is defined as follows: “Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance” (158). The degree of relevance is presumed to be optimal in the sense that it achieves the best possible balance between the communicator’s interests and the audience’s interests: this granted, the audience’s interests will be to maximize the relevance of the information being processed. On the basis of this view of relevance, Sperber and Wilson argue that the order of events in the conventional understanding of comprehension should be reversed: “It is not that first the context is determined, and then relevance is assessed. On the contrary, people hope that the assumption being
processed is relevant (or else they would not bother to process it at all), and 
they try to select a context which will justify that hope: a context which 
will maximize relevance” (142). To clarify some of this slightly technical 
terminology, a context, here, is a set of assumptions adopted by an indi 
vidual, a subset of the individual’s cognitive environment, which in turn 
consists of all the assumptions manifest—available to perception or infer 
ence—at a given time (15, 39). An assumption is a thought (a conceptual 
representation) treated by the individual as true of the actual world (2). 
The relevance of a new assumption to an individual is maximized when 
its processing achieves an optimal balance between the effort involved 
and the contextual effects (or more strictly, the positive cognitive effects) 
derived (144, 265). A contextual effect is a modification of the context aris 
ing from the interaction between old assumptions and new assumptions; 
it is a positive cognitive effect if it benefits an individual’s cognitive func 
tions or goals (109, 265). To illustrate, albeit simplistically, consider a situ 
ation in which Dan tells Deirdre that the kettle is on. Deirdre’s cognitive 
environment at the time includes all the perceptible physical phenomena 
of the office in which she is writing an article, the knowledge of relevance 
theory that she is bringing to bear upon the article, the understanding she 
has gleaned from past experience about the uses of kettles, her evaluation 
of Dan’s friendly disposition and his knowledge of her beverage prefer 
ences, and so on, as well as the new assumptions made manifest by the 
words he has just spoken (that he is talking to her, that he is informing 
her that he has put the kettle on, and so forth). She draws upon a subset 
of her old assumptions (kettles are used to make tea; Dan knows she likes 
tea, milk but no sugar, etc.) as a context within which to process the impli 
cations of these new assumptions (Dan is making tea for her; he expects 
er her to join him in the kitchen, etc.). To maximize the relevance of these 
new assumptions, she strikes a balance between the effort required to 
draw those implications (and retrieve old assumptions) and the cognitive 
benefits of doing so. She may not bother to draw some inferences (Dan is 
within earshot, Dan speaks English) even though they are strongly mani 
fest, and so easily available, because they have little or no cognitive effect 
(she already knew this). On the other hand, she may find it a worthwhile 
effort to draw some weakly manifest inferences (Dan is belittling her intel 
lectual staying power) because the cognitive effects are large (he is not so 
friendly after all). She remains tapping away at her keyboard. 

The most important consequence of relevance theory, for my purposes, 
is the new relation it proposes between the functions of relevance and 
truthfulness in communication. Wilson and Sperber have articulated this
with direct reference to Grice, declaring, “One of our aims is to show that
the function Grice attributes to the Quality maxims—ensuring the quality
of the speaker’s overall contribution—can be more effectively achieved in
a framework with no maxim of truthfulness at all” (Wilson and Sperber
2002: 585–86). Relevance theory advances the idea that, for the purposes
of communication, the propositional criterion of truth is a subordinate con-
sideration to the contextual, pragmatic criterion of relevance. This is not to
say that the truth or falsehood of assumptions is a matter of indifference,
or even that there are circumstances where it is a matter of indifference
(as one might be tempted to say, precipitously, is the case with fiction):
rather, it is decisively to detach those criteria with regard to assumptions
from any necessary direct relation with the encoded form of an utterance.
So, when Grice reiterates, in the retrospective epilogue to Studies in the
Way of Words (1989), his view of the privileged status of the Maxim of
Quality, it meets with this reply from Wilson and Sperber: “We agree with
Grice that ‘false information is not an inferior kind of information; it just
is not information.’ So, yes, hearers expect to be provided with true infor-
mation. But there is an infinite supply of true information which is not
worth attending to. Actual expectations are of relevant information, which
(because it is information) is also true. However, we have argued that there
just is no expectation that the true information communicated by an utter-
ance should be literally or conventionally expressed, as opposed to being
explicated or implicated in the sense we have discussed” (627–28). For
relevance theory, then, literalness is not a norm but a limit case; the notion
of literal meaning is detached from any presumption of literalness in com-
munication (1990: 143). An utterance, as an interpretative expression of
a speaker’s thought, is defined as literal if it has the same propositional
form as that thought; but “there is no reason to think that the optimally
relevant interpretive expression of a thought is always the most literal one.
The speaker is presumed to aim at optimal relevance, not at literal truth”
(1995: 233). An assumption, to be an assumption at all, must be taken as
true. But all assumptions are, to a greater or lesser extent, the products of
inference, which is a pragmatic, relevance-driven process, and the truth
of an assumption need not depend upon the truth of the encoded form of
an utterance, or its literal meaning. Sperber and Wilson offer an extended
account of metaphor and irony, which shares with speech act accounts the
assumption that successful communication in such instances is dependent
upon an inferential search for contextual relevance. It does not, however,
present this search as a process resulting in a dichotomy between the literal
sense of “what is said,” which is false, and a recovered implicit meaning,
which is true (242). From a relevance theory perspective, the comprehension of figurative language (as all language) is understood as an inferential process of filling out the linguistic code until maximal relevance is achieved (that is, up to the point at which the cost in processing effort exceeds the benefit in contextual effect, for the reader concerned). Criteria of truth enter into this process only to the extent that truthfulness is a condition of the particular contextual effects involved, and they apply only in relation to the assumptions producing those effects, which need not include the literal utterance, or any translation of it, as a proposition.

Sperber and Wilson understand comprehension in general to be a process of identifying the communicator’s informative intention, which bears upon the mutual cognitive environment of the parties to the communication. Accordingly, as they say, “linguistic decoding is not so much a part of the comprehension process as something that precedes the real work of understanding, something that merely provides an input to the main part of the comprehension process” (177). Truth criteria are applicable to successful communication only in the sense that the output of the inferential process, its cognitive effects, must qualify as information. Relevance to an individual is, definitionally, a measure of cognitive benefit, which Sperber and Wilson generally interpret as an “improvement in knowledge” (Wilson and Sperber 2002: 601), although they do expressly want to leave open the possibility of taking into account other kinds of benefit to cognitive functioning: they instance the reorganization of existing knowledge, and the elaboration of rational desires (1995: 266). Even within the compass of improvement in knowledge, though, they include various possible kinds of benefit (improvements in memory, or in imagination, for example), which they see as, in themselves, indirect improvements in knowledge.

In a more specific way, too, the notion of “improvement in knowledge” can embrace a wide range of cognitive effects. For instance, Sperber and Wilson explain the possibility of communicating an impression, by describing this kind of effect as “a noticeable change in one’s cognitive environment, a change resulting from relatively small alterations in the manifestness of many assumptions, rather than from the fact that a single assumption or a few new assumptions have all of a sudden become very manifest” (59). They describe the general category of cognitive changes of this kind as “poetic effects.” The label is slightly misleading from a literary point of view, but its explanation greatly increases the subtlety of the relevance theory model. An utterance has poetic effects, in their sense, if it achieves most of its relevance through a wide array of weak implicatures (222). Poetic effects do not affect the mutual cognitive environment of
communicator and audience by adding new, strongly manifest assumptions. Rather, “they marginally increase the manifestness of a great many weakly manifest assumptions. In other words, poetic effects create common impressions rather than common knowledge. Utterances with poetic effects can be used precisely to create this sense of apparently affective rather than cognitive mutuality. What we are suggesting is that, if you look at these affective effects through the microscope of relevance theory, you see a wide array of minute cognitive effects” (224). So, the improvement in knowledge required for a positive cognitive effect, and therefore relevance, may be the cumulative product of many minute cognitive effects, many weakly manifest assumptions, all of which are outcomes of the process of comprehension, and none of which is necessarily dependent upon the propositional truth of the input to that process.

The Relevance of Fictions

Turning now to the question of fictionality, let me first of all quote Sperber and Wilson on the subject. Their most elaborated account of fiction, as far as I am aware, is the following: “When you hear a parable, or read War and Peace, you may gain insight, through some form of analogical thinking, into yourself, your life, and the world as they are. If only true inputs were relevant, we would have to say that such fictions were irrelevant. If truth of the output is what matters, then fictions can be relevant after all” (265). The main thrust of this remark is to reinforce the claim that relevance depends only upon the truth status of outputs of the communicative process. However, it appears to treat the fictional text globally, as a single input to cognitive processing. In this respect it doesn’t add a great deal to fictional worlds approaches to the relevance of fictions. The story as a whole is channeled through the rather vague notion of “some form of analogical thinking,” and so translated, en bloc, into the cognitive benefit of an increase in understanding.

The limited terms of engagement with fictionality here are at least partly confirmed by another reference to fiction from a quite different context, which goes like this: “some stimuli are of little intrinsic relevance but, by being presented at the right time, increase the relevance of subsequent stimuli so that a greater degree of overall relevance is achieved with them than without them. This is generally true of the first sentence in a novel: though of limited relevance in itself, it helps create a context in which subsequent sentences will be more relevant. It is thus relevant
enough to be worth the reader’s attention” (160–61). One interpretation of this remark is quite unproblematic: narrative, after all, is built upon such principles of delayed resolution, so it is appropriate for stories to be processed in the expectation of a substantial overall or ultimate relevance. But this is a quality of narrative rather than fiction. The more particular consequence of fictionality here seems to emerge in the assumption that fictional sentences are of “little intrinsic relevance,” in other words, that virtually the whole burden of relevance is transferred to an overall interpretative procedure along the lines of the “analogical thinking” of the previous quote. If this were all that relevance theory could bring to the issue of fictionality, it would hardly have been worth the effort of processing the protracted exposition to which I have just subjected you. Fictional sentences are just not very relevant because they are not very informative, except in relation to the narrative or world they produce, which may itself ultimately prove to have some indirect global relevance.

I want to suggest that relevance theory has more to offer than this. Most fundamentally, it allows me to say that the problem of fictionality is not, after all, a problem of truthfulness, but a problem of relevance. It is the presumption of relevance, not any expectation of literal truthfulness, that drives the reader’s search for an appropriate interpretative context. Relevance theory allows for inference, and the generation of implicatures, to proceed from an utterance that is clearly false in the same direct way as for one that is taken as true: evaluations of truth only come into play in consequence of that process. So the fictionality of a narrative only compromises the relevance of those assumptions that are contingent upon its literal truth. The relevance theory model allows for a view of fiction in which fictionality is not a frame separating fictive discourse from ordinary or “serious” communication, but a contextual assumption: that is to say, in the comprehension of a fictive utterance, the assumption that it is fictive is itself manifest. The main contextual effect of this assumption is to subordinate implicatures that depend upon literal truthfulness to those that achieve relevance in more diffuse and cumulative ways. Fiction does not achieve relevance globally, at one remove, through some form of analogical thinking, but incrementally, through the implication of various cognitive interests or values that are not contingent upon accepting the propositional truth of the utterance itself and upon the deployment, investment, and working through of those interests in narrative form.

There is, certainly, a global, retrospective sense in which narrative can be understood as the suspension of relevance along the line of action, and in which narrative closure figures less as the resolution of plot in itself
(though it is an effect usually achieved in terms of plot), than as the resolution of suspended evaluations of relevance. In this straightforward sense, irrespective of questions of fictionality, narrative form in itself responds to certain expectations of relevance. K.’s death at the end of *The Trial* is not just a very emphatic terminal plot event, but also the “answer” to several kinds of questions raised by the narrative, and in that respect it occasions a range of possible overall assessments of relevance from the reader (relating, for example, to K.’s moral deserts and models of justice, whether legal, cosmic, or poetic; to the balance of power between state and individual, or between structure and agency; to the psychological mechanisms of guilt, and the authority of the superego; and so on). Such global, thematic relevance is by no means the only kind offered by narratives, nor is it necessarily the most important; though in fiction, such interpretative logic is likely to dominate over the kind of factual enrichment of the reader’s cognitive environment for which nonfictional narratives are better suited. Still, the investment of interpretative effort in the process of reading a fiction requires an ongoing sense of relevance. There are limits to everyone’s tolerance of delayed gratification, and no ultimate resolution alone could plausibly justify the effort of reading Proust’s *Recherche*, or *War and Peace*, or *Clarissa*. The narrative force of fiction depends upon assumptions carried forward, enriched, modified, reappraised, overturned in the process of reading; even in fiction, narrative development is only possible on the basis of an established sense of relevance.

Relevant information, in fiction, is supplied by assumptions with the capacity to inform a cognitive environment that includes the assumption of fictionality itself, as well as a set of general assumptions that might be collectively labelled “narrative understanding” (which would include logical, evaluative, and affective subsets), and more specific assumptions relating to, for instance, generic expectations of the text in hand and the particulars of its subject matter. In this cognitive environment, the contextual effects that constitute relevance may be produced by new assumptions informing the project of narrative understanding in general (and the further kinds of understanding this may facilitate), or by assumptions enabling further inferences from the narrative particulars, which will themselves contribute to an ongoing, cumulative experience of relevance (such cumulative effects being analogous to those that Sperber and Wilson term “poetic effects” in their discussion of how impressions may be communicated). So, a reader of *The Trial* may find relevance in constructing some of the subtle hypotheses about psychological motivation needed to comprehend K.’s behaviour; or such comprehension may contribute to an emotional investment of
Interest, for which K. becomes the vehicle. In either case, the narrative coherence that provides for these effects rests upon more manifest assumptions, of a sort that relates to the familiar idea of what is “true in the fiction.” Such assumptions have the status of information irrespective of the literal truth value of the utterance, because their validity, their “aboutness,” is contextual, not referential (though this is not to exclude the possibility that some of the assumptions made available by fictive discourse may indeed be referential: as, for instance, in the case of a roman à clef, or a historical novel, or the many modern forms of documentary fiction).

The notion of truth “in the fiction” does not imply an ontological frame, but a contextual qualification: assumptions of this kind provide information relative to a context of prior assumptions. We do not generally attempt to resolve the reference of fictive utterances because we know in advance that, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, their literal truth value will probably be of too little relevance to be worth determining. But this does not compromise the narrative coherence of fictions, because successful reference resolution is not necessary for co-reference to occur (think of algebra: we do not need to know the value of \(x\) to know that, in \(x^2 = 2xy\), each \(x\) refers to the same value, which is also twice the value of \(y\)). The communicative efficacy of multiple references to fictional characters, places, and events is a pragmatic matter, not a semantic one. As a fictional narrative progresses, further assumptions become manifest not because earlier assumptions have projected a fictional world within which the fictional truth of new assumptions can be established, but because the achieved relevance of the earlier assumptions itself becomes a contextual basis for maximizing the relevance of subsequent related assumptions.

A relevance-driven, pragmatic account of inference in fiction does not need to proceed by way of a referential world beyond the discourse, or a denotative, “de re” semantics beyond the attributive, “de dicto” relations between referring expressions. Everything we can explain by conceiving of fictions as referential constructs projecting fictional worlds, we can explain as well, without cumbersome detour, restrictive norms, paradox, or redundancy, by understanding fiction as the serious use of a language’s representational capacity for fictive—imaginary, not literally assertive—purposes (and it goes without saying that relevance theory’s inclusive model of communication as ostensive behaviour provides a way to embrace fictions in nonlinguistic media without difficulty). The communicative criterion of relevance is primary rather than deferred or indirect, and unitary rather than internal or external to a fictional frame. We need to think in terms of the pragmatics rather than the semantics of fictionality.
The First Sentence of *The Trial*

A more developed example from Kafka's novel might help to clarify the view of fictionality I am proposing. In what follows, however, I am not advancing a critical methodology, only illustrating a theoretical model. Relevance theory can help explain the principles underlying the experience of fictive communication, but it doesn’t lend itself to the eloquent articulation of sophisticated instances of such experience, and still less to the production of striking new interpretations. In my Penguin Classics edition, the first sentence of *The Trial* is translated as follows: “Someone must have made a false accusation against Josef K., for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong” (1994: 1). In elaborating the inferential processes invited by this sentence, I shall deal only with possible assumptions relating to K., who is clearly its focus, if not its subject. Without any pretension to analytic precision or completeness, then, these four possible assumptions immediately present themselves:

1. Josef K. existed
2. Josef K. was arrested
3. Josef K. had not done anything wrong
4. Someone had made a false accusation against him

The contextual assumption of fictionality also informs the processing of this sentence (because we found the book in the fiction section of the bookshop, or we are reading it for a course on the modern novel, or we have a prior general knowledge of Kafka). How does that affect our processing of these assumptions?

Firstly, it diminishes the relevance of assumption (1). This is an existential assumption, contingent upon the possibility of resolving the reference of “Josef K.” in the real world. The assumption of fictionality doesn’t rule this out, but it does create a presumption that it is of negligible relevance, and therefore, within the economy of effort and effect that drives the process of comprehension, it is not worth processing. Note that this is a quite different matter from that of K.’s “existence” in his world, which is either a fictional worlds concept, or (in its more general, looser usage) a form of participatory collaboration between critical discourse and fictive discourse. An existential assumption adds nothing to the latter perspective, because (following Kant) existence is not a predicate: it is not in itself a quality of any concept (here, the concept “K.”). There are other kinds of characters, of course, for whom the existential assumption would indeed be relevant:
it would be an impoverished reading of *War and Peace* that failed to recognize any reference to a historical figure in the character of Napoleon. Assumptions (2) to (4) fare differently, because they provide information about K. presupposing rather than asserting the proposition in assumption (1); their coherence is provided for by co-reference, not reference resolution, and so they are not in direct conflict with the assumption of fictionality. Clearly, though, they cannot achieve relevance merely as information about K.; but they can help to flesh out several possible narrative schemata, each of which is a potential explanatory framework for information of this kind. Processing these assumptions in accordance with our assessments of their relative strength, and in relation to such schemata, involves the testing and development of our narrative understanding; in those terms alone it offers a degree of relevance that we may well find worth the effort involved.

This prospect is enhanced by another effect of the assumption of fictionality, which is to license imaginary extensions of the scope of knowledge—specifically, here, in the form of internal focalization. The representation of another’s mental perspective is not in itself a categorical indicator of fictionality, but it is certainly a possibility that the assumption of fictionality makes much more readily available to interpretation. So here, “somebody must have . . .” is, in a fiction, unnecessarily conjectural unless it reflects K.’s perspective (or it is the voice of a represented narrator—but no other evidence emerges to support that inference). This is enough to make manifest the further assumptions

(5) Josef K. thought that someone had made a false accusation against him

And, on the same basis,

(6) Josef K. did not think he had done anything wrong.

The interpretative basis for assumption (6) is more explicit in the original German than in this translation, but it is available here nonetheless (and there is further confirmation of internal focalization in the following sentence, in which the cook who normally brought K. his breakfast did not come “this time”—the deictic focus conveying K.’s experiential perspective rather than that of the narration).

These assumptions qualify the manifestness of assumptions (3) and (4) and introduce a fundamental ambiguity. Internal focalization belongs
within the class of utterances that Sperber and Wilson term “echoic,”
utterances that interpret another person’s thought or speech (this class also
includes direct speech and first-person narration). They achieve relevance
not only by providing information about what that thought was, as in
assumptions (5) and (6), but also by taking an attitude towards it (1995:
238). But what attitude? Internal focalization embraces many shades of
irony and sympathy, and under different interpretations, this particular
echoic utterance may allow either of the following assumptions to be
inferred:

(7) Josef K. was the victim of an injustice
(8) Josef K. was ignorant of the law to which he was subject

And of course, further assumptions become manifest in the light of the
reader’s evaluation of these two: that K. had been framed, or was a para-
noid victim (7); or that he had been justly reported, or was a paranoid and
ignorant offender (8). The evaluative nature of these inferences involves
an affective investment of some degree, ranging from judgmental detach-
ment to sympathetic involvement, which will be informed by the reader’s
emotional and ideological predispositions towards the relation between
the individual, self, or subject and the law, with all its connotations. Given
that the ambiguity of the case inhibits a decisive preference for any one
subset of the available competing assumptions, the affective investment
(in any nonreductive interpretation) will be complex. This, of course, is
fundamental to the effect of the narrative to come, not least because K.’s
own attitude towards his predicament is complex. In a wonderful passage
a few pages later, Kafka has him “trying to see it from his own point of
view” (7). There is a nice equilibrium between evaluative detachment and
imaginative involvement here: the reader’s uncertainty in relation to the
evaluative import of the internal focalization has an effect of detachment,
yet its congruence with K.’s own anxiety about his standing before the law
also invests it with the quality of affective involvement.

As the inaugural sentence of a fiction, this one achieves its effects
within a relatively simple context. Nonetheless, the inferences available here
already (necessarily) tend to extrapolate narratively from the utterance
itself, and the subsequent narrative development will carry forward the
investment of interpretative effort already made, along with the effects
that secured a sense of relevance from the process, so that the context for
subsequent utterances will furnish many more possible inferences of all
kinds. The inferences actually drawn will vary from reading to reading,
according to cognitive environment and interpretative agenda, because these contextual factors will qualify the specific expectations of relevance in each case. But in all cases, the satisfaction of those expectations will require some prioritizing of lines of inference: the pragmatic nature of the process of comprehension dictates that it is hardly ever exhaustively logical. The goal of relevance does not require it, which is as well, not because it allows for the assumption of fictionality (that, indeed, secures the logic of fictive utterance), but because it renders inconsequential the many possible inferences from most fictional narratives that would throw their representational logic into disarray.

In contrast with extant accounts, a pragmatic theory of fictionality does not require any detachment of fictive discourse from its real-world context. There is no need for a principle of minimal departure to supply a background for the narrative particulars, because this role is filled by contextual assumptions. These are not part of a fictional world, but of the communicative situation. In this respect as in others, the point is that fictionality is best understood as a communicative resource, rather than as an ontological category. Fictionality is neither a boundary between worlds, nor a frame dissociating the author from the discourse, but a contextual assumption by the reader, prompted by the manifest information that the authorial discourse is offered as fiction. This contextual assumption is a preliminary move in the reader’s effort to maximize relevance. It amounts to a rhetorical orientation, an expectation that the relevance of the discourse will be most profitably pursued, not by deriving strongly informative implicatures that depend upon successful reference resolution, but by deriving a large array of weaker implicatures. These weaker implicatures cumulatively produce affective and evaluative effects, which are not vitiated by any degree of literal reference failure, but which do indeed, ultimately, constitute a cognitive benefit, and an improvement in knowledge. Nothing in this model excludes the possibility of gaining factual information from fiction: fictionality does not admit of degree as a rhetorical set, but fictions do as representations. This distinction, between mutually exclusive communicative intentions (the fictive and the assertive) and the relativity of informative intentions, can accommodate the range of borderline cases that vex definitions of fiction: historical novel, roman à clef, fictionalized memoir, historiographic metafiction, hoax. The knowledge offered by fiction, however, is not primarily specific knowledge of what is (or was), but of how human affairs work, or, more strictly, of how to make sense of them—logically, evaluatively, emotionally. It is knowledge of the ways in which such matters may be brought within the compass of the imagination, and in that sense understood. A pragmatic theory of
fictionality does not *confine* the value of fiction to an improvement in knowledge, even in the broadest senses I have suggested; but it claims that fictions do offer directly communicated cognitive benefits, foregrounded by the contextual assumption of fictionality itself.

There is room for dispute about the scope of the properly cognitive in our experience of fictions, but I am not seeking to characterize that experience, or its value, in wholly cognitive terms. Nor do I think that the cognitive view of communication here implies a restrictive view of authorial intention in fiction (the perspective upon authorial creativity I outline in chapter seven would readily accommodate a relevance theory account). My argument is specifically directed against the entrenched idea that fictive discourse entails a formal, intentional, or ontological frame. All current approaches to fictionality invoke some such frame, and literary criticism negotiates with the fact by a kind of equivocation, doublethink, or fudge: that is, even while its raison d’être is arguably to bridge the gulf between fiction and reality, it actually tends to oscillate between views from either side. It collaborates with, participates in, the fiction, or else it detaches itself, in the process often opening up a gap between the enlightened critic and the naïve, deluded reader. The first, inside view dominates in most close reading and representationally oriented criticism (by which I mean criticism focussed on the narrative particulars); the second, outside view is often apparent in formalist and reader-response critical orientations (at least insofar as they project stories of reading), and symptomatic modes of criticism that bring to bear (for example) Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytical, queer, or postcolonial perspectives upon the text. Although I do not think there is anything fundamentally wrong with either approach, neither actually explains what is going on in fictive discourse. The first takes it for granted that we are already familiar with fiction (which of course we are), and the second tends to bracket fictionality in pursuit of other interests for which the fictional text provides occasion. By refusing this inside/outside dualism, a pragmatic approach to fictionality identifies the issue it effaces. It does not, and should not, conflict with what we currently do as readers and critics, but it identifies something we are not doing that I suggest would be worthwhile. It challenges us to explain the force and effect of fictionality itself in our experience and understanding of fiction.
The concept of fictionality has been undermined by developments in two distinct areas of research in recent years. On the one hand, the interdisciplinary ambitions of narrative theory have tended to conflate fictionality with a general notion of narrativity that encompasses nonfictional narrative; on the other hand, fictional worlds theory, in response to philosophical and linguistic concerns, has sought to disarm fictionality by literalizing fictional reference (so, *Brave New World* actually refers to a fictional world, the text itself standing guarantor for that world’s modal existence). Dorrit Cohn, in *The Distinction of Fiction*, has made a case against the former tendency in the interest of her own reassertion of a generic focus upon fiction as “nonreferential narrative,” although this involves no confrontation with fictional worlds theory, which does not contest the generic integrity of fiction (1999: 12). My concern in this chapter is somewhat different, in two respects. I want to allow a little more force to those narratological perspectives that tend to merge the concept of fictionality with that of narrativity, and I want to distinguish more sharply between my own understanding of fictionality and the way it is framed by the philosophical and linguistic perspectives of fictional worlds theories. These differences arise because in my view the concept at stake is not fiction as a generic category, but fictionality as a rhetorical resource. By identifying what is excluded by the perspectives of a generalized narrativity and fictional worlds theory, I hope to make some progress towards a fuller characterization of the rhetorical nature of fictionality. This undertaking will lead me to a reconsideration of the concept of mimesis in relation to narrative fictions, from which vantage point I want to draw an analogy.
between “fiction” and “exercise” that I think captures something of the distinctiveness of the fictional use of narrative.

Narrativity

The idea that fictionality and narrativity are coextensive is perhaps most strongly associated with a historian, Hayden White, although similar views are widespread among narrative theorists for whom fiction itself is the primary concern.¹ Such views have more abstract and more fundamental implications than the mere questioning of the generic borders between (for instance) fiction and history. The force of the equation between narrativity and fictionality derives from the attendant claim, which I find persuasive, that very little of the meaningfulness of narrative can be seen as independent of the artifice of narrativization. The significance of narrative is not latent in the data of experience, or of imagination, but fabricated in the process of subjecting that data to the elemental rhetoric of the narrative form itself. The argument that follows is that the categorical difference between real and imagined events is overwhelmed by the artificiality of narrative representation in either case: all narrativity, from this point of view, shares in the properties of fictionality. The ontological status of the events themselves (and hence, according to Cohn, the generic basis for reserving a distinct concept of fictionality) comes to seem of marginal interest at best. The theoretical fusion of narrativity and fictionality is formal and rhetorical rather than referential, so a referentially based generic distinction such as Cohn’s does not gain much purchase upon it.

Referential criteria are irrelevant to this line of argument because its horizons are discursive. Its appeal is to that characteristic poststructuralist impulse to subvert dualistic hierarchies, by overturning fiction’s supposed parasitic dependence on nonfictional narrative discourses. It allows nonfictional narrative genres to be reconceived as restricted modes of narrativity (or fictionality), constrained by rules of authentication (documentation, testimony), and negatively defined against the ideal plenitude of fictional genres. The Platonic hierarchy is overthrown: fictions are not twice removed from the realm of ideal truth because, at least with regard to the forms of narrative, they generically define it. Fiction is no longer seen as narrative with certain rules (of reference) in abeyance. Rather, nonfictional narrative is seen as narrative under certain supplementary constraints (connoting historicity, objectivity, etc.) that serve to establish a rhetoric of veracity.
Nonetheless, if the distinctiveness of nonfictional narrative genres is rhetorical, this process of rhetorical self-definition, precisely because of its oppositional character, must project and renounce a rhetoric that is specific to fiction’s cultural role. Whether or not the distinction between fiction and nonfiction can be grounded upon referential criteria, this difference in the rhetorical ends or effects projected by the two regimes itself demands a distinct concept of fictionality. Moreover, the concept of fictionality is not, from a rhetorical perspective, merely the negative foil for nonfictional narrative’s claim to referential authority (a view which says nothing about fiction’s own purposes). It is a concept that articulates the positive cultural role nonfiction must renounce in making such referential claims, and which fiction plays by virtue of its fictional status.

The important categorical distinction, then, is rhetorical rather than generic. It is the quality of fictionality rather than the genre of fiction that provides for the distinction’s theoretical integrity, which is the integrity of a functional orientation rather than any categorical set of features. With this in mind, it is not difficult to address those arguments that conflate fictionality and narrativity by appealing to the various kinds of narrative, especially recent narrative, that blur generic borders. There are indeed many specific texts, or generic hybrids, from nonfiction novel to fictional memoir, in which the rhetorical scope of fictionality is curtailed. Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* confines its use of the rhetoric of fictionality to certain stylistic and narratorial liberties; Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* uses fictionality primarily as an exemption from the factual accountability that an autobiographical contract would entail. Arguments that take such texts as evidence of an undifferentiated continuum of narrative kinds, however, treat the conceptual distinctiveness of fictionality as if it were a matter of empirical taxonomy. The literary marketability of these kinds of writing can certainly be seen as symptomatic of the intellectual currency of a broad sense of narrative artifice, but the diminished role of fictionality here in no way compromises the specificity of its rhetorical regime; nor, in fact, are the full resources of fictionality likely to be invoked by any genre or text, or any interpretation of a given text.

Closer attention is due to another kind of argument, which works in something like the opposite direction by treating fictional texts as if they were a kind of embodied theory. The form of contemporary fiction that has attracted most interest from theoretical enthusiasts of narrativity now generally goes under the name of “historiographic metafiction,” and in contrast to the hybrid forms I have already mentioned, it is not a case of atrophied fictionality, but of fictionality redoubled: as metafiction, it not only
invokes a rhetoric of fictionality, but invokes it (in part) to address the operation of just that rhetoric at one discursive remove. *Historiographic* metafiction has a special relevance to the issue of narrativity which is, of course, thematic. The self-consciousness of such texts about the artifice inherent in all narrative invites a general, symptomatic reading in which historical scepticism, relativism, or revisionism is advanced via the exploration of historiography’s narrativity. But readings that thematicize metafictional self-reference in order to understand these works generically, as subversive of the distinction between history and fiction, do so at the expense of the specific effects of a given text, beyond any such generic theme. The focus of attention moves prematurely to a level of thematic abstraction at which a novel like Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, for example, is read as itself a contribution to theoretical arguments about historiography, precisely inasmuch as it can be classified as a historiographic metafiction. Such interpretations somewhat recklessly pass over the possibility that Rushdie might be more interestingly engaged with India and the experience of Partition in particular, and that his means of doing that are integral to the novel’s rhetoric of fictionality, which encompasses and inflects its narrative self-consciousness as well as its story. One of Linda Hutcheon’s comments on the novel provides what I take to be a representative instance:

Rushdie’s paradoxically anti-totalizing totalised image for his historiographic metafictive process is the “chutnification of history” (Rushdie 459). Each chapter of the novel, we are told, is like a pickle jar that shapes its contents by its very form. The cliché with which Saleem is clearly playing is that to understand him and his nation, we “have to swallow a world” and swallow too his literally preposterous story. But chutnification is also an image of preserving: “my chutneys and kasaundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribblings. . . . Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks” (38). In both processes, however, he acknowledges inevitable distortions: raw materials are transformed, given “shape and form—that is to say, meaning” (461). This is as true of history-writing as it is of novel-writing. (1989: 65)

Two kinds of elision occur in this passage: firstly, the status and rhetorical stance of the author, Rushdie, is elided with that of his fictional narrator, Saleem Sinai (so that the “novel-writing” of one is elided with the fictional autobiography of the other); secondly, fictionality itself (which
surfaces unassimilably in “his literally preposterous story”) is reduced to the “inevitable distortions” of narrativity. What is lost is any sense of the specifically fictional nature of the novel’s engagement. In a subsequent passage, Hutcheon compounds this reductiveness:

Saleem parodies the historiographical drive toward causality and motivation through his reductive, megalomaniacal exaggeration: “This reason or that or the other? To simplify matters, I present two of my own: the war happened because I dreamed Kashmir into the fantasies of our rulers; furthermore, I remained impure, and the war was to separate me from my sins” (Rushdie 339).

Such a perspective may be the only possible response left to a world where “[n]othing was real; nothing certain” (340). (75)

Saleem doesn’t parody here, Rushie does. Nor does this reading take any account of Saleem’s figurative significance as the archetypal “midnight’s child,” born at the moment of India’s independence, whose life is a particular embodiment of the abstract nation’s subsequent fortunes. In general, self-consciousness in fiction is awareness of narrative artifice (insistence upon it, celebration of it, perhaps ironic despair at it), but beyond that it is also necessarily the incorporation of such artifice within the purview of its own rhetoric, as grist to its own mill. Metafictions invite particular attention to fiction’s imaginative scope for wide-ranging purposes, yet they are collapsed into homogeneity by a reductive thematics that contrives to understand metafictionality only as a knowing double negative (“this fiction is not not historiography”) rather than as fictionality raised to a higher degree. There remains, after all, a meaningful distinction between the rhetorical stance of a novelist’s historiographic metafiction and that of a historian’s hypothetical counterpart (“metafictional historiography”?), and this distinction cannot be captured by the concept of narrativity.

**Fictional Worlds**

The need for a distinct concept of fictionality does not, however, lead inexorably in the direction of fictional worlds theories. It is certainly the case that, while poststructuralist accounts of narrativity have blurred the concept of fictionality, fictional worlds theories have insisted on a categorical opposition between fictional and nonfictional discourses. But because the basis of this opposition is ontological and referential, it defers
any consideration of the rhetorical force of fictionality. The distinctive rhetorical set of fictionality may have been carelessly appropriated and diffused in the name of poststructuralist narrativity, but in the context of fictional worlds theory it has been almost entirely ignored.

Fictional worlds approaches to fictionality emerged in reaction against structuralist accounts of language on the one hand and mimetic theories of fictional representation on the other. Their primary concern has been the linguistic and ontological problem of fictional reference, a problem evaded by the bracketing of reference in the structuralist tradition, and obfuscated, at least, by the mimetic view of narrative fiction as one of the imitative arts. The solution is elegant and simple: fictional worlds, literally understood as non-actual other worlds, rather than as imitations of this one, resolve the problem by providing for literal reference in fictional texts. The world to which a fictional narrative refers is a textual construct, to be extrapolated from the sentences of the text itself in the broad context of our knowledge and understanding of the real world, supplemented by a framework of inference rules and qualified by generic and specific deviations from real-world norms (Pavel 1986). A fictional world is dependent on a text’s language and its interpretative context, but that does not compromise the theoretical objective: reference actually occurs, and the use of language in fiction is shown to be continuous with its use elsewhere.

While the appeal of this in logical and referential terms is clear enough, though, its value in explaining the rhetorical relation between fictions and our understanding of life is not. The reaction against mimetic accounts of this relation is understandable—mimesis is undoubtedly a problematic concept; but if it has proven durable nonetheless, this is testament to the need for some explanation of the relevance of fictions. The concept of mimesis is, if nothing else, a cipher for the purposeful relation between fiction and the real, or the already known. From a literary critical perspective, fictional worlds theories need to do more than address philosophical and linguistic concerns about reference: they must also offer an alternative account of the rhetorical use of fiction. Readers cannot be content merely to construct fictional worlds, as if this in itself were endlessly satisfying; they must also be concerned to evaluate them, to bring them into relation with the larger context of their own experience and understanding. But as I argued in chapter one, fictional worlds accounts of the process of interpretative mediation between fictions and life seem to be tautologous. The immediate objective of interpretation, in the fictional worlds model, is to extrapolate the fictional world to which the text refers, and which becomes available to evaluative scrutiny insofar as such reference is achieved.
The representational function for which mimesis has traditionally been invoked is reconceived as an exercise in comparison between worlds. Yet every aspect of narrative understanding to be derived by contemplating the emergent fictional world in relation to the real one has necessarily been presupposed in the interpretative process of constructing that world. If the reader sets the world of the text beside the real world and observes points of correspondence and divergence, this merely unpicks the work this reader has already undertaken in defining the fictional world against real-world default assumptions in the first place. True, fictional worlds theories need not insist upon this model of evaluative response: it is not necessary to an account of fictional reference. But by the same token, it should be recognized that the redundancy inherent in such a model is only the reflex of the redundancy of fictional reference itself to the issue of fiction’s rhetorical efficacy.

**Fiction and Fictionality:**
**Generic and Pragmatic Categories**

By speaking of the quality of fictionality, I am framing the argument at one remove from the generic distinction between fiction and nonfiction per se, but fictionality is certainly an attribute of all fictions in that sense, since it is applicable to all narratives deemed fictional (as distinct from false). As such, it is an interpretative frame that inflects and transforms the entire process of narrative comprehension. In saying so, I am claiming that fictionality is not contingent upon ontological-referential criteria and cannot be adequately accounted for by reference failure or reference to fictional worlds; nor does it necessarily follow from any set of textual criteria for genre membership. A rhetorical definition of fictionality is pragmatic, in that its criteria are not ultimately inherent in the narrative itself, but are contextual. The rhetoric of fictionality is brought into play whenever a narrative is offered or taken as fiction, regardless of issues of form, style, or reference. Of course it is the case that most fictions do in fact exhibit characteristics indicative of their fictional status, in the form of transgressive narratorial situations such as omniscient narration or internal focalization, but these are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions of fictionality. This is not just because of the historically variable status of such indicators, although some have indeed been accepted in past ages as conventional marks of historicity; for example, certain effects of narratorial omniscience, such as the unwitnessed monologue,
were accepted manifestations of authority in heroic history (Scholes and Kellogg 1966: 266). Even within terms of the familiar, modern fictional contract, though, fictionality has no determinate relation to features of the text itself. For example, fiction may very well do without the representation of thoughts; and nonfiction (a biography, say) may resort to it. The representation of mental discourse in a nonfictional narrative will probably strike contemporary readers as a liberty, but this does not make the text a fiction (in fact, it confirms their interpretative orientation towards it as nonfiction). For the same reason, the dissociation of fictionality, in principle, from any textual indicators may be extended to matters of reference. If a narrative offered as historical is shown to be inconsistent with documented evidence, even to the point of reference failure (if it had interpolated a nonexistent character into the narrative, for instance), then precisely because this error or subterfuge is held accountable to criteria of historical falsifiability, it confirms that the text in question is not fiction, but compromised historiography.

The categorical distinctiveness of fictionality does not imply an all-or-nothing view of a narrative’s relation to verifiable fact. Fictions are often not entirely fictional, and in principle may not be fictional at all. There are various circumstances in which nonfictional material, whether avowed (the historical novel), surreptitious (the roman à clef), or entirely adventitious, may inhabit a fictional narrative. But these circumstances, and the compound motives implied by the first two, are consistent with a narrative’s final claim to be received and interpreted under the regime of fictionality. Similarly, a pragmatic approach to fictionality does not tie the categorical absolute to any ahistorical essence: not only are the conventional forms of fiction subject to change, but the rhetorical scope and import of fictionality itself are both historically and culturally variable.

Fictionality is the product of a narrative’s frame of presentation, of the various possible elements of what Gérard Genette has described as the paratext (1997). The distinction between fiction and nonfiction rests upon the rhetorical use to which a narrative is put, which is to say, the kind of interpretative response it invites in being presented as one or the other. And the distinction is categorical, not because there are any defining attributes inherent to either, but because the interpretative operations applicable to a narrative text are globally transformed, one way or the other, by the extrinsic matter of the contextual frame within which it is received. This does not make fictionality dependent on such uncertain or inscrutable contingencies as authorial intention or reader response; rather, it depends on the concrete evidence of the several kinds of ancillary text,
proximate and remote, that mediate between a narrative and its cultural context. This is evidence to be interpreted, of course, and some of it may itself be fictional or deceptive, but if the text is to work as fiction, there must be some frame that situates it as such, beyond any fictional paratext or behind any deceptive paratext (for some readership, if not for all).

**Mimesis: Lukács, Auerbach, Ricoeur**

In general, a rhetoric of fictionality depends for its cultural currency upon its functional distinctiveness from nonfictional narrativity. It must be possible to articulate the specific role of such a rhetoric in a way that both distinguishes it from and situates it in relation to the nonfictional narrative regime. But as I've already indicated, the concept traditionally invoked for such a task—mimesis—has been compromised by recent theory. Mimesis is unacceptable to fictional worlds theories because it offers no satisfactory answer to philosophical and linguistic questions about the reference of fictional texts, but it has also been dismissed from its once central place in theories of fiction by poststructuralist accounts of narrativity, despite their relative indifference to concerns over reference. In fact the displacement of mimesis from its role in fictional representation had already occurred in structuralist narratology, and indeed this state of affairs was a precondition for the theoretical collapse of fictionality into narrativity. Narrative mimesis, or the imitation of action (in Aristotle’s formula), was incompatible with the terminology through which the structuralist tradition had redescribed the discursive logic of narrative representation. Structuralist vraisemblance, and the interpretative mechanisms of naturalization, did not address the relation between a fictional narrative and the world of action, but that between the fictional text and the various nonfictional discourses it echoed or invoked. But this was equally true of the operations by which the logic of nonfictional narrative was made intelligible, since both fictional and nonfictional narrative comprehend action within the same network of discourses and doxa. The “imitation of action,” then, could no longer stand in any meaningful opposition to the report of action.

To the extent that the term mimesis itself survives in this context, it survives not as a specific function of fictionality, but under a new guise as the interpretative basis of narrativity in general. It reaches fruition in the work of Paul Ricoeur, who makes mimesis in this sense central to his account of narrative. Ricoeur glosses the term as “configuration” rather
than as imitation; as such, it is the structural foundation of all narrative, irrespective of criteria of reference. And although he offers this term “configuration” in explicit preference to the contemporary broad sense of “fiction” that makes fictionality synonymous with narrativity, he acknowledges that the meaning and scope of mimesis in his definition coincide with such usage (1984–88: 1:64; 1:267n1).

Whether in relation to fictional worlds and reference or to general narrativity, mimesis has lost its specific role in accounting for the fictionality of fiction. The concept either disappears entirely or is redeployed to cover the whole domain of narrative representation. In this respect, it has been a collateral casualty of the literalization or diffusion of fictionality in recent theory. If fictionality nonetheless remains a necessary concept, then this link invites a reconsideration of mimesis as the instrument of its distinct rhetorical purpose. The inevitable starting point for such a task is Aristotle’s formulation of the difference between history and fiction: the former is confined to contingent particulars; the latter deals (through the mechanism of mimesis) with general truths. This neat opposition breaks down badly in the modern critical history of mimesis, however. It is true that both the preeminent twentieth-century champions of mimesis, Erich Auerbach and Georg Lukács, understand it in terms of a relation between textual particulars and general truths, but in neither case does this provide for a principled rhetorical opposition between fiction and the historical narratives with which both critics are also concerned. In Lukács’s case, the function of mimesis is encapsulated in his concept of “typicality” (1950: 6). The historical novelist captures the movement of history just insofar as the novelistic particulars typify it: the type negotiates between particular and general as an instance, an embodiment of general propositions. The problem, though, is that Lukács’s notion of the type makes sense only in relation to an established concept of the “totality” against which its typicality can be evaluated. As with any theory in which the mimetic function is a matter of correspondence, the model founders upon the assumption that the world (or sociohistorical formation) to which the text corresponds is itself unproblematically available to the critic or anyone else. Lukács does distance himself from the universalizing presumption of bourgeois ideology by explicitly grounding his sense of totality in a politicized, Hegelian philosophy of history (1970); but this self-awareness only makes more apparent the extent to which the whole process is a formal tautology. The only mediation achieved here turns out to be between a fictional process of instantiation and its own mirror image, a philosophical process of abstraction.
In Auerbach’s case, mimesis amounts to a figural relation between the text and its context, in the specific sense that the text realizes the author’s experience of a particular historical milieu and hence is the fulfilment of a view of reality implicit in that milieu. The concept of “figura” that underpins Auerbach’s study refers in the first instance to the Christian view of reality in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. In this view, grounded in biblical exegesis, the relations between remote events are understood as a series of figural anticipations and literal fulfilments which manifest, and are guaranteed by, divine providence. The history of mimesis, for Auerbach, is the history both of the secular transformations of this world view itself, and of the forms of literary narrative that have realized each of those transformations. Versions of the same mechanism, then, inform the synchronic relation of the mimetic text to its historical milieu and the diachronic relation of the worldview it encapsulates to past historical paradigms. Furthermore, as Hayden White has argued, the same figural principle becomes the template for Auerbach’s own account of literary history, in which forms of realism are understood as fulfilling the promise of previous forms. This self-reflexiveness leads White to characterize Auerbach’s theoretical stance as what he calls a modernist historicism (1999). He shows how the logic of figura, applied to Auerbach’s own perspective, ultimately undermines the mediating role of mimesis by disallowing any final historical ground. Without the anchor of Christian teleology, every event has the capacity to be not only itself, but also the fulfilment of an earlier event and the figure for a later one, resulting in a kind of unlimited semiosis. Once the divine overview is relinquished, the figurality of historical understanding itself becomes discursive and literary through and through, and hence subversive of the distinction between fiction and history (1999: 98–100). Seen in this light, Auerbach’s mimesis, far from articulating the distinction between fiction and history, appears to expose their fundamental synonymy.

For both Lukács and Auerbach, then, the relation between particular and general ultimately transcends any opposition between fiction and history. Auerbach’s sense of mimesis, in fact, seems ultimately to have the same relation to narrativity in general that the term has in Ricoeur’s avowedly extended usage. At first sight, Auerbach’s key term “figura” seems to be taken up in Ricoeur’s account of the three stages of mimesis, which he calls “prefiguration,” “configuration,” and “transfiguration” (1:53). But actually, in Ricoeur’s account these terms introduce a crucially different perspective upon mimesis. Prefiguration consists in our practical knowledge of how things work and the set of social competences we bring to narrative.
Configuration is the making of plot, understood as a systematic synthesis, which is not the reproduction of something already given but creative production; it doesn’t operate ahistorically, but paradigmatically, allowing for the possibility of innovation or deviation from narrative norms within a context of “rule-governed deformation” (1:69). Finally, transfiguration relates to the activity of the reader, which “accompanies the narrative’s configuration and actualizes its capacity for being followed” (1:76) and therefore defines the communicative constraints upon the possibilities of configuration.

The new element here is an emphasis on mimesis as process. Ricoeur sees mimesis as inseparable from *muthos*, the plottedness of narrative, and therefore as an aspect of the construction of narrative rather than of its representational content, or referential world. Mimesis doesn’t mediate the narrative content, but the narrative act: the imitation of action is a practice, in which *muthos* is understood less as a copy than as a synthesis—not as “plot,” but as “emplotment” (1:34). This is a valuable move, because the shift from “imitation” to “configuration” provides for a coherence theory rather than a correspondence theory of the relation between narrative and (temporal) reality. But is “configuration” in itself sufficient to the role of mimesis in fiction? If mimesis, as configuration, is the imposition of narrative significance upon given data in the case of nonfiction, it is not quite right to say that in the fictional case it is the imposition of narrative significance upon imaginary data. Fictional particulars, after all, are themselves generated in a reciprocal, dialectical relationship with the general framework of narrative understanding that they both depend on and produce.

The paradoxical nature of the fictional situation is apparent as soon as it is recognized that the conceptual framework of the general must logically precede the determination of the narrative particulars, even as those particulars are supposed to advance our understanding of general truths. This dilemma is implicit already in the *Poetics*. On the one hand, Aristotle’s account of mimesis is aligned (in the contrast between poetry and history) with the articulation of general truths; on the other hand, when he asserts that its responsibility is to the plausible even at the expense of the possible (because a plausible impossibility is mimetically preferable to an implausible possibility), he aligns mimesis with the rhetorical enthymeme and common received opinion (Prendergast 1986: 216). Such received opinion may be grounded in social discourse or specific to literary discourse, as is arguably the case with Aristotle’s own example, Homer’s Achilles chasing Hector around the walls of Troy. Here the plausibility derives from
generic expectations of the epic, with its emphasis on individual heroic deeds rather than the mass action of warfare. The narrative’s authority is that of literary convention, but that is itself only a conspicuous instance of the much more pervasive authority of narrative precedent in our common sense of how the world goes. Fiction, apparently, is at the same time a vehicle of general truths and a perpetuator of commonplaces, stereotypes, and prejudices. This seems right, actually, and at too fundamental a level for any value-laden definition of mimesis that claims to discriminate between the two, as has been the case throughout the whole history of polemics about realism. As in Ricoeur’s tripartite model, a bargain must always be struck between the fundamentally conservative forces of pre-figuration and transfiguration, and the innovative, creative faculty of configuration. What is distinctive about the fictional case, however, is that there is nothing to negotiate over but what is conceived for the sake of the negotiation itself.

The fictional instance of the mimetic process, as articulated by Ricoeur, is inflected by radically different rhetorical purposes. If we accept his amendment of “the imitation of action” to “the configuration of action” as valid for narrative in general, then the rhetoric of fictionality requires that the traditional imitative sense of mimesis be overlaid upon that formula, to give something like “the imitation of the configuration of action.” But the word “imitation” doesn’t quite do the necessary work here. If the general case of narrative mimesis is conceived as a process, the specifically fictional case is not an imitation of that process. Nor is a term like pretence appropriate, notwithstanding its key role in the standard speech-act account of fiction (by which I mean John Searle’s “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse” and its legacy). The process, configuration, actually occurs; the difference is that it has no object (no data) on which to act other than what it proposes to itself, and so it lacks the direct purpose of nonfictional narrative understanding. Some indirect purpose must be hypothesized, then, for this model of mimesis to be applicable to the rhetorical functionality of fiction. The required element of indirectness is best articulated, I think, by the notion of “exercise”: the analogy I have in mind is physical exercise, which is indirectly purposeful in the same way. When you go for a jog, you may not be trying to get anywhere in particular, but you are certainly not pretending to run.

Fiction is distinguished from nonfiction, I suggest, as the exercise of our narrative understanding, as distinct from its application. “Exercise” means both “use” and “development,” and both senses are in play here: the production and consumption of fictions is both an application of the
capacity for narrative understanding we already possess and an opportunity to enhance it. All narratives, in the pursuit of some interpretative dividend, must work with the balance of power between the conservative forces of prefiguration and transfiguration, and the creative scope of configuration; but in fiction, that balance of power itself may also be at stake. Fiction is able to undertake a constant renegotiation with the internal logic of mimesis, and so extend the scope of our narrative understanding, not least by appealing to quite different ways of making sense than the causal logic of Aristotle’s model of action. But another kind of breadth is also suggested, I hope, by the exercise analogy. The range and multiplicity of motives for, and satisfactions offered by, other forms of exercise are reflected in the comparable range of motives for fiction—from the most innate pleasure to the most end-directed seriousness.

To view fictionality in this light is to discover a much clearer basis for its rhetorical distinctiveness. Against the common ground of narrative understanding there emerges a more nuanced distinction between the roles of nonfiction and fiction, the particular explained by appeal to generality on the one hand, and the particular as a way of thinking generality on the other. Exercise of any kind requires an occasion, even if the particular occasion is fabricated for the sake of the exercise. So, with fiction, the relation of particular to general is the dialectical relation of imaginary data to narrative understanding, the former largely for the sake of the latter. It is the particulars that are fictional, not the mimetic process, which does not reside in these particulars themselves, but in their narrative articulation. The reciprocity between these two, the general faculty and the imaginary particulars, secures the real-world benefits of engaging with the unreal. What we understand, feel, and value may be ultimately grounded in the abstract and the general, but it is not in general terms that we experience understanding, feeling, or valuing it. Fiction enables us to go through that process, for the sake of the experience.
It will already be clear from my arguments up to this point that I am seeking to characterize fictionality in discursive terms, as a feature of communicative rhetoric rather than a quality of certain objects of representation. The notion of a specifically narrative object of representation is encapsulated in the concept of fabula, the interrogation of which is my main purpose in this chapter. But my intention is not to explode the concept: in fact I think it is invaluable to the view of fictionality I advocate—so long as it is assigned a subordinate function within the process of interpretation. That is to say, I want to argue for a view of fabula as an interpretative construct that accompanies and serves the reader’s negotiation with narrative discourse. Neither the discourse’s primum mobile nor its end product, fabula is a contingent feature of the process of narrative comprehension which has no meaning except as a by-product of that process. On this view, a notion of fabula is so innate in our experience of narrative that its contingency is all too easily taken for granted and forgotten; that is where the theoretical trouble begins.

The distinction between fabula and sujet is, according to various commonsensical definitions, the distinction between what happens in a narrative and how it is told. Narrative theory, however, has struggled to reconcile common sense with conceptual rigour. The terms themselves derive from Russian Formalism, but the basic opposition they articulate is much older—it is there in the Poetics (everyone agrees that sujet corresponds to Aristotle’s muthos, but whether fabula is best equated with praxis, or logos, or holos rather depends on which theorist you are reading).1 Numerous alternative terms have been proposed since the Formalists, too, and later in this chapter I shall be referring to story and discourse
(Seymour Chatman), and histoire, narration, and récit (Gérard Genette). Such terminological revisions have typically sought to give new inflections to the Formalist pair, or to make the cut in different ways, but a sense of conceptual continuity dominates nonetheless, and if anything, this sense becomes stronger as the terms proliferate. In current usage there is no clear distinction between fabula and, for example, story, despite the latter’s structuralist pedigree (indeed the term “story” itself is blurred both by its nonteoretical currency and by its association with E. M. Forster’s rather different contrast between story and plot, where the distinguishing criterion is plot’s relative emphasis on causality). My use of fabula here is meant only to invoke the consensus underlying the terminology, a shared but variously articulated sense of something fundamental to the understanding of narrative and its relation to the idea of a sequence of events. I don’t want to exclude, in the first instance, any of the ways in which this elusive something has been conceived; my purpose, though, is to work towards a viable concept by a process of elimination.

The theoretical problems were already apparent in the Formalists’ own usage. They had reacted against realist poetics by inverting the priority of content over form, so that in their vocabulary “device,” rather than “material,” was privileged as the essence of art, and in the same spirit, they treated fabula as just a foil for the literary effects of sujet. Boris Tomashevsky goes so far as to suggest that fabula may exist outside the realm of the work altogether: “Real incidents, not fictionalised by an author, may make a story [fabula]. A plot [sujet] is wholly an artistic creation” (1965: 68). He says “fictionalised” rather than “narrativised” (a point to which I’ll return), but he seems to assume that fabula may precede all narrative—that it may be found ready-made in real life. The motive, clearly enough, is to exclude the mere material of narrative creativity from the domain of art, but the consequences are paradoxical, because any attempt to locate fabula outside the narrative domain is bound to deny it the specificity and integrity that constitute a fabula as such. The totality that is a “world” lacks, of itself, any principles of organization (spatially or temporally) by which to delimit any specifically narrative material for sujet to manipulate. Whatever view we may wish to take upon the actual relations existing between the multitude of real events, the isolation of any particular sequence is already the intervention of narrative artifice. This is not really a matter of the logical or evaluative priority of either term, but simply of the linear, developmental nature of narrative, which is not provided for by Tomashevsky’s off-the-peg notion of real-world fabula—nor, for that matter, by fictional worlds approaches to fiction. Fabula must be in
some sense storied: it can’t be understood as simply the world of the story, whether actual or fictional, because that would strip it of any specific relevance to narrative.

For theorists who reject the Formalists’ sense that fabula is innocent of artifice, though, a predictable consequence is that the distinction between fabula and sujet starts to collapse. This collapse can be seen happening in an early critique of formalist theory, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, which begins by accepting the terms, if not the basis, of Tomasevsky’s distinction: “although we can separate story [fabula] from plot [sujet] as the formalists understand it, the story itself is, nevertheless, artistically organized” (Bakhtin/Medvedev 1978: 113). This move soon modulates into a rather abrupt declaration that the distinction itself is redundant: “It is impossible to distinctly separate the two and to no purpose to do so. An orientation toward plot, i.e., toward the definite and actual development of the work, is necessary to master the story. Even in life we see the story with the eye of the plot . . . Thus story and plot are essentially the same constructive element of the work” (139). The lurch from unsustainable dualism to reductive monism here is one that recurs in later arguments about the nature of narrative. Perhaps the clearest instance is an exchange between Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Seymour Chatman in the pages of *Critical Inquiry* (Smith 1980; Chatman 1981). In Smith’s critique of narratology, Chatman stood as the principal American synthesizer of structuralist approaches to narrative, and his terms, story and discourse, were the focus of her argument. Structuralist narratology had readily appropriated the Formalists’ dualistic perspective, but their tendency to privilege sujet over fabula, device over material, was now reversed: story, though necessarily seen through the prism of discourse, had become essential and primary. From the structuralist perspective, some such distinction as that between fabula and sujet was fundamental to narrative theory—it was in fact definitional of narrative insofar as it could be understood as both a coherent discursive category and a structure capable of articulation in different media. Fabula or story, in this context, provided the deep structural logic underlying all the contingencies of a narrative’s manifestation in the form of any particular sujet or discourse. For Smith, our sense that there may be different versions of a narrative did not require that they should be referred to a common structural basis, as discursive variants of the same story. Against the deep structural notion of story, she argued that the similarity between narratives could not be conceived in structural terms without simply producing another version: not story, but more discourse. Chatman’s response, in the face of this monism, was to
reassert his dualistic perspective; but he did little to address Smith’s objections on their own ground. He suspected her of confusing story and plot summary, and he condemned her exclusively linguistic frame of reference, but above all he insisted, in the face of all theoretical objections, upon the sheer utility of the concept of story. Yet if the balance of the argument was on Smith’s side, Chatman has in some sense been vindicated by the subsequent history of the concept. Story has indeed been found too useful to abandon, even by critics who share Smith’s sense of its theoretical illegitimacy, such as Monika Fludernik (1996: 334–36) and Patrick O’Neill (1994: 20–21).

In many respects, the structuralist enterprise is now as much a part of the history of literary theory as Russian Formalism: narratology’s figuration of narrative as a language (in accordance with structuralism’s linguistic paradigm) has proved unsustainable, and its decline has much to do with criticism of the opposition between story and discourse. But the distinction persists, and in certain respects—I want to suggest—with good reason. My claim is that the concept of fabula, appropriately understood, is not only useful to narrative theory, it is crucial to any account of the interpretation of fiction. But I need to distinguish my understanding of fabula from the many respects in which it proves unsatisfactory, including its associations with structuralist narratology (under the guise of story and other terminological variants). I am not proposing to resurrect the Formalist perspective, except in the one respect that arises from my specific concern with the relation between fabula and fictionality. The Formalists were concerned fundamentally with the artifice of literature, precisely where they located both literature’s specificity as an object of study, and its value as a cultural phenomenon. So, when Victor Shklovsky invokes the concepts of fabula and sujet, it is in order to celebrate the self-conscious artifice of Sterne’s games with the telling and the told in Tristram Shandy (1965: 25–57). When Tomashevsky uses the distinction, it is to articulate a model of literary thematics as an organizing principle of narrative, in opposition to representational logic: he conceives of the primary materials of fiction not as events, but “motifs” (1965: 61–95). The Formalists perceived that fictional narrative is primarily driven by the dictates of art (however they might be conceived), and that its conformity to a logic of representation is always in some sense a dissimulation. The implications of this specific interest in fictionality have been obscured in the subsequent history of narrative theory, however, precisely to the extent that the artifice involved has come to be understood as an attribute of narrative in general. The Formalists’ focus upon “art” was not specific to narrative,
and so it inhibited their efforts to explain narrative representation; but narratologists’ more rigourous isolation of the category of narrative has all too often been oblivious to the issue of fictionality, despite their own almost exclusive attention to fictional narratives. In fact, the habit of narrative theory in general has been to use fictional narrative as its paradigm, but nonetheless to appropriate a nonfictional, and philosophically realist, notion of narrative events (an example from a solidly anti-structuralist quarter would be the orientation of fictional worlds approaches to fictional reference). A necessary first step in redeeming the theoretical value of fabula is to re-evaluate its relation to the concept of event.

The Narrative Event

Events, and reference to them, seem to present an obvious basis for fabula’s relation to sujet. Definitions of the minimal criteria for narrative are often couched in terms of specified relations between events, understood as the basic units of the sequence that underlies whatever arrangements and selections may constitute the sujet of a given narrative. There is little consensus among theorists as to the detail, but most of the disagreements are relatively trivial consequences of a tendency to overspecify the nature of the required relations between events. One issue, though, is fundamental: must a narrative consist of at least two events, or may only one suffice? I don’t wish to adjudicate, but only to note that the possibility of disagreement on this point implies that the concept of event may be understood in two contrasting ways. One position treats the event externally, as a singularity, so that narrative temporality emerges only in the passage from one to the next; the other locates narrative structure within the event, in the transformation it marks between before and after. The mutual presupposition entailed by these two interpretations of event doesn’t admit of resolution without recourse to metaphysical argument, but that doesn’t matter here, because I want to show only that the appeal to events cannot in any case provide for a definition of the deep structure of narrative or a concept of fabula. In either case, the concept of event begs the question of narrativity, which either slips between or continues to lurk within event; each sense tacitly defers to the other, and the definitions of event and fabula become circular.

Reference to an event does not constitute the narration of an event; equally, there is no theoretical dividend to be gained from resolving the narration of an event into sequential reference to (sub) events. The idea
of the event cannot provide a basic structural unit upon which narrative discourse is grounded: on the contrary, the event is itself always susceptible to decomposition—to reconceptualization as a temporal rather than a punctual phenomenon. In the absence of any conceptual limit to this regressus, only narration itself, defined non-tautologically as the delinea-
tion and delimitation of process, can confer eventhood and narrative sta-
tus. Narrative discourse is logically prior to the concept of the event, not consequent upon it; fabula is a construction of events from discourse, not their reconstruction. Any narrative analysis that uses events as its fundamental units is necessarily regarding them as quanta, but not according to any criteria other than those supplied by the sujet: that is, criteria deter-
mined (in part) by the medium of representation. The view of the event as an integral unit is influenced, I suspect, by the integrity of the sentence, or of the verb phrase: as soon as the question is transferred to a nonverbal narrative medium such as film, it is impossible to conceive of the event other than in durational terms. Narration in any medium represents the event in process, not by invoking it as a narrative unit, and it is only as represented that the event acquires narrativity at all.

The only solid ground available, then, lies on the plane of sujet, not fabula: it is the categorical distinction between reference and narration. This itself, in the limit case, comes down to a choice of interpretative stance: for example, nothing else can determine whether many early single-
shot films are descriptive or narrative in mode. A common genre of early actualities entertained audiences with scenes of moving water (waves, rough seas, etc.); their point, of course, was to exhibit the new medium’s remarkable powers of descriptive reference. But the situation is more ambiguous in instances like the 1897 Lumière travelogue of Niagara Falls, in which a group of people congregate at the rail on the far bank. If the interpretative focus is the Falls, the mode remains descriptive (this is unde-
limited process); but if the action on the far bank is the centre of attention, the film becomes (minimally) narrative. The action, of course, occurred either way, but the “event” here, as a unit of action, is constituted by the discourse, under a narrative mode of interpretation. Because narrative cannot be defined in terms of reference to events, neither can fabula be construed as the referent of sujet.

**Chronology, Temporality, Causality**

Beyond its association with narrative events, the most prevalent assump-
tion about fabula is that it is unmarked by the distortions of chronological sequence that may characterize sujet. The Formalists were immensely interested in works (like *Tristram Shandy*) that exploit the relation between the order of telling and the order of occurrence, and this preference undoubtedly encouraged an equation between fabula and the zero degree of chronology. But since a narrative may just as well be told in straightforwardly chronological fashion, such a sense of fabula runs an immediate risk of losing its analytical force. In fact, as Meir Sternberg has shown in detail, chronological narration is far from neutral in its temporal organization. Sternberg himself therefore finds it useful to relate even the most straightforward sujet to a chronological notion of fabula, on the grounds that the dual-level model of fabula and sujet captures the distinguishing feature of narrative effects, their “interplay between times”: fabula’s development in mimetic time and sujet’s discourse in communicative time (1992: 519, 531). Yet at the same time, his attentions to the artfulness of chronological narrative problematize the notion of mimetic time itself. It becomes increasingly clear that chronological sequence as such can’t serve to define fabula, because it can’t be reduced to a degree zero unmarked by temporal and perspectival selection. There is never an absolute chronology of events, not because they cannot be put in temporal sequence, but because any such sequence always remains contingent upon interpretative choices, most fundamentally, the determination of what shall count as the events, and what the transition from one to the next (Zeno thrived upon just this conceptual indeterminacy). Until the events have been determined, there is no basis for conceiving their sequence.

Sternberg’s emphasis on narrative effects is very properly part of his argument for a functionalist approach to narrative: in the absence of an objective norm of chronology, categorical differences in narrative treatment can only be described as differences of effect (497). But these effects often resist the dual temporal order of fabula and sujet itself. For example, he notes the pervasiveness of simultaneity in narrative; that is, the representation of concurrent events, which are necessarily consecutive in the telling because of the linear nature of sujet. In such cases, the sujet arrangement of events is an imposition of sequential order, not the reordering of any fabula-like chronological sequence (1990: 941). A related possibility is noted by Genette in *Narrative Discourse*, where he observes that a narrative may include “events not provided with any temporal reference whatsoever. [. . .] To be unplaceable they need only be attached not to some other event (which would require the narrative to define them as being earlier or later) but to the (atemporal) commentarial discourse
that accompanies them” (1980: 83). In other words, the organizational principle of the narrative in such circumstances cannot be specified in relation to the chronology of events narrated, but only at the level of the narration. Genette’s examples, of course, come from À la recherche du temps perdu, but this phenomenon is far more common (on a more modest scale) than narrative theories have recognized; it won’t do to treat it, with Genette, as anomalous. Even one of the classic instances of the sujet’s disruption of fabula chronology, the in medias res opening, cannot finally be accounted for in these terms. The effect of such openings clearly relates to all the questions begged by the immediate representation of dramatic events, and in some cases this disorientation may be manifestly the result of a deferral of antecedent narrative information; but in the absence of any prior knowledge of the whole narrative (which distinguishes such circumstances as second readings, or stories drawing upon well-defined mythical or folkloric traditions), the in medias res effect has no necessary relation to a sense of disjunction between sujet and fabula chronology, because it may precede the reader’s awareness of any such chronology. While Sternberg’s discussion of such matters effectively demonstrates the need to ground theoretical approaches to narrative ordering in effects that “variously manifest themselves on the narrative surface” (1992: 497) rather than in the sujet’s relation to an underlying fabula chronology, I would want further to urge that the representational priority of fabula (as the virtual event-sequence “reconstructed” from sujet information) is itself undermined by such arguments.

The relation between narrative and temporality itself also resists treatment as an aspect of sujet’s manipulations of fabula. Perhaps the least successful part of Genette’s treatment of narrative time is the notion of narrative duration, or pace. He describes this variable by appealing to the idea of speed, because it concerns the relationship between a spatial dimension (of “récit” or sujet—he confines himself to written media) and a temporal dimension (of “histoire” or fabula), and so may be calibrated in lines (or pages) per minute (or day, or year) (1980: 87–88). But the account is unconvincing, because narrative duration really just elaborates upon the old distinction between scene and summary, and it doesn’t pertain to temporality so much as to the quantity of narrative information. Genette’s principles of fabula chronometry do little to account for the narrative sense of time, not least because at bottom temporality and narrative are interdependent concepts. Paul Ricoeur, in Time and Narrative, dedicates three volumes to the proposition that “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in
turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience” (1984–88: 1:3). To the extent that narrative is already inherent in our sense of temporality, it is fruitless to appeal to that sense as the fundamental ground upon which narrative is built. Ricoeur, commenting on the circularity of his own argument, observes that “the manifest circularity of every analysis of narrative, an analysis that does not stop interpreting in terms of each other the temporal form inherent in experience and the narrative structure, is not a lifeless tautology. We should see in it instead a ‘healthy circle’ in which the arguments advanced about each side of the problem aid one another” (1:76). This is, I think, an apt formulation; but it clearly denies precedence to either side, and so disqualifies any model of fabula that claims such precedence by invoking temporality as its benchmark.

For some, the concept of fabula is better characterized by appeal to the underlying causal logic of narrative, rather than mere chronology. Certainly Tomashevsky emphasized the association between fabula and causality from the Formalist point of view, and others have followed. But such an approach to fabula is hardly viable, even leaving aside the Humean argument that, as Jon-K. Adams says, “causality is not in the world we experience but in the discourse we use to represent the world” (1989: 151). It is no more possible to define the causal linkage between a series of events than it is to definitively identify those units called events in themselves. Our causal understanding of a narrative certainly cannot be restricted to the causal relations explicitly stated: no narrative can ever be fully explicit about the logic linking the events it represents. Even the most intrusive novelist will necessarily leave a great deal implicit, and in nonlinguistic media, the notion of explicitly causal relations is almost unintelligible. The interpretative activity this requires of the reader is not of a kind that strips away the discursive surface to expose an innate logic in the particulars of the narrative events; rather, it is a process of narrative supplementation. A narrative’s silences co-opt the reader’s interpretative collaboration and so serve a rhetoric of verisimilitude rather than merely resting upon a subtext of causal necessity. Causal explanation, whether given in the sujet or inferred from it, does not invoke an underlying, discourse-independent logic, but produces it: it is only possible to build a sense of a narrative’s representational causality in the terms dictated by the logic of the sujet itself (Sternberg 1992: 498). Indeed, it might be said, to adopt a formula from Roland Barthes, that the most elementary function of narrative discourse is to produce and make literal the fallacy of post hoc ergo propter hoc (1977: 94).
Perspective and Narration

Perhaps the most fundamental weakness in the concept of fabula, though, is betrayed by the Formalists’ bias towards questions of temporal ordering at the expense of perspectival issues—as Sternberg notes, despite the chronological emphasis of his own work (1978: 9). Point of view has always been central to narrative theory, but relatively little attention has been paid to the problems it raises about the ground against which perspectival restrictions are perceived. Fabula, in order to function as the untransformed substructure beneath the adopted point of view of the sujet, would need to be innocent of all perspective (compare Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 236). If fabula is, as it must be, narrative in form—not world, but story—then this requirement is flatly impossible: the difference between an undifferentiated mass of congruent facts or events and a sequence exhibiting the coherence of a story can only be the product of perspectival criteria, which is to say, again, that fabula cannot be logically prior to sujet. The use of the term “omniscience” in novel criticism should not be allowed to confuse the argument here. It can’t provide a model for undistorted narrative, because it could not, taken literally, offer any narrative at all (it would be overwhelmed by multiplicity and simultaneity). “Omniscient narration,” which is in any case a discursive category and belongs to sujet, is only omniscient in respect of its potential liberties with point of view, not in its actualization. It might be further argued that chronology and causal sequence are themselves best thought of as ultimately perspectival issues, inasmuch as they are aspects of the question of narrative unity. A sequence of events is constituted as a sequence by decisions about relevant and irrelevant consequences, and the degree to which relations of consequence should be pursued and elaborated. That there are no sequences of events independent of such choices alone makes it illegitimate to privilege chronological or causal sequence as an unmarked, unmediated substratum of narrative. The issue of perspective is not merely presentational and cannot be confined to sujet; it goes all the way down. This amounts to a kind of Heisenberg uncertainty principle for narratologists: there is no way to conceive of narrative events that does not in itself affect them.

Up to this point, I have barely acknowledged the issues raised by the several tripartite variations on the distinction between fabula and sujet. Of these, Genette’s terms “histoire,” “récit,” and “narration” are representative. He sets out his wares in this way: “I propose [ . . . ] to use the word story [histoire] for the signified or narrative content [ . . . ] to use the word narrative [récit] for the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself,
and to use the word *narrating* [narration] for the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place" (1980: 27). This scheme raises the issue of the narrating instance—which is to say the mediation of a narrative by a represented narrator (because for Genette the narrating instance in fiction is always represented, even where this representation consists of nothing but the bare existence of an unpersonified narrator). By promoting the narrating instance in this way, Genette is merely formalizing some widely held assumptions, but in doing so he confirms the suspicion that, as Fludernik argues, “the story vs. discourse opposition seems to repose on a realist understanding of narration” (1996: 334). This has implications for both sujet and fabula. With respect to sujet, Genette’s representational model of narration is an issue on which I shall be commenting at length in chapter four; with respect to fabula, the model implies that fabula is always literal in relation to its own sujet. In other words, the distinction between the (complete, objective) fabula and the (partial) sujet of a fictional narrative is negotiated through a narrator (agent of the narrating instance) who, however incompletely or even unreliably, is communicating fictional facts. The inadequacy of this model is apparent if we consider, for example, a dream narrative. In such a context it is distinctly odd to state, as one critic does with reference to *The Wizard of Oz*, that “the hours Dorothy and her entourage spend walking on the Road are omitted” (Bordwell 109). Which hours are these? In the literal world of the film (the situation in the novel is somewhat different) there are no such hours because this is part of a dream, and no more accountable to realist temporal logic than to realist attitudes towards witches, scarecrows, lions, and the rest. This is not to say that we make no reference to temporal logic in interpreting the dream or the film—indeed we must, in order to make any narrative sense of it whatsoever—but it would be perverse to infer a fabula in which the narrative’s unnarrated intervals unfold in clock time. (It’s significant that the presiding timepiece of the dream is the hourglass, not a clock: what matters here is that time runs out, not its chronometry.) Indeed, to take Oz literally would be to disregard our recognition of the correspondences between Oz characters and Kansas characters, and the extent to which the Oz narrative is driven by events in Kansas, above and beyond any representational logic of its own. Dream narrative does not submit to the literalism of Genette’s version of fabula because its structural logic is not founded upon dream facts, but dream meanings. And although it is superfluous to my argument at this point to say so, in this respect, dream narrative may be thought of as merely a special case of the situation for all fictional narrative (see chapter six).
If the intermediate concept of “narration” does little to help the conventional distinction between fabula and sujet, further problems arise in connection with the actualizing medium itself. One of the most frequently reiterated arguments for a concept of fabula is that it is needed to explain the possibility of transposing the same narrative into another medium. A film and a novel, despite the inevitable changes in manifestation (or sujet) imposed by the capabilities of their different media, may both tell what is recognizably the same “story,” and, in Chatman’s words, “This transposability of the story is the strongest reason for arguing that narratives are indeed structures independent of any medium” (1978: 20). In saying so, he is only echoing a fundamental tenet of such structuralist forbears as Claude Bremond (1964: 4) and Barthes (1977: 121). But is deep structure really the only way of accounting for this? To say that a film and a novel have the same fabula, or story, is to say that the same plot summary would serve for both, although of course a plot summary itself cannot be regarded as “story” because it is a manifest narrative, with its own discourse features, and furthermore, it is not unique—it is always possible to summarize a narrative in a number of ways. Nevertheless, to refer this equivalence back to a common deep structure adds nothing. Any summary that worked for both novel and film would specify their sameness to just that extent, quite independently of any appeal to “story.” Nor, in fact, can story itself be appealed to except in terms of some such exercise in summary. Such narrative sameness is interpretative, posterior (however much anticipated and provided for by authorial or directorial intention), and it is negotiated in terms of actual versions, without recourse to an abstract structural congruence. The medium of plot summary itself, of course, is typically linguistic—but not inherently so: a film storyboard can perform the same function. Narratives are not so much structures independent of any medium, as structures common to several media. The medium, if non-specific, is not extrinsic but necessary to the concept of narrative.

While the Formalists were sometimes happy to consider fabula as a manifest version of the narrative, most subsequent theorists (and certainly those within the structuralist camp) have insisted that fabula is necessarily abstract. The role of abstraction in definitions of fabula is typically dictated by two considerations: that it is logically prior to any sujet, and that any manifest narrative necessarily already involves sujet. In Chatman’s technical sense of the term, “Story [. . .] exists only at an abstract level; any manifestation already entails the selection and arrangement performed
by the discourse as actualized by a given medium” (1978: 37). It’s hard to get at this sense of the abstraction of story or fabula, which all too conveniently evades awkward questions about its specificity, and Chatman himself muddies the water by describing story content as “representations of objects and actions” which, as representation, would seem to be already discourse (24). A helpful attempt to illustrate the idea has been offered by Edward Branigan, discussing story in relation to film narrative. He offers the analogy of an object represented in a film: “We know the object when we know how it may be seen regardless of the position from which it was actually seen. The object thus acquires an ‘ideal’ or ‘abstract’ quality. It should be mentioned that knowing how the object may be seen is very nearly imagining an object that is not in view at all” (1992: 15). This statement effectively conveys the idea that our knowledge of an object independent of any view is very like our knowledge of a fabula independent of any sujet; except that, unlike an object, an event or sequence of events has no integrity (as event or as sequence, depending on whether you are taking an inside or outside view of the event) apart from that produced by its narration as such. Representation and narration are not interchangeable concepts, despite the dominance of a representational paradigm throughout the history of narrative theory and criticism. The notion of fabula as the abstract plane of narrative, then, does little to redeem it. The sense of abstraction required is either inscrutable, or else accessible only in the form of a narrative version in spite of itself.

Narrative Genesis and Interpretation

One other consideration seems to be involved in arguments for the logical priority of fabula: it is often associated with conceptual “raw material” in the genesis of the work. This was certainly true of the Formalists, for whom the articulation of a given fabula as sujet exclusively constituted the art of narrative creativity.5 Sternberg’s account of fabula has sometimes taken this line, too: “it may thus be viewed as the second-degree ‘raw material’ (postselected and straightforwardly combined narrative) that the artist compositionally ‘deforms’ and thus recontextualizes in constructing his work (mainly by way of temporal displacements, manifold linkage, and perspectival manipulations)” (1978: 8). Tellingly, such a view leads Sternberg on to countenance the possibility of a specific manifestation of fabula prior to the fully realized narrative, of which he takes James’s notebook scenario for The Ambassadors to be an example: “This scenario being in
fact a foreshortened fabula, the temporal and other presentational discrepancies between it and the finished product go to show that the concept of preexistent fabula, though indeed primarily a theoretical or reconstitutive rather than genetic model, may actually serve as ‘raw material’ and starting point for the process of artistic manipulation” (313n1). Yet the scenario is itself a narrative, and so ought itself to comprise both fabula and sujet: such preliminary narratives (whether extant or in the author’s head) are not “raw,” but already parboiled. Sternberg’s concept of fabula here both encroaches upon that of sujet (since to sketch a narrative in outline remains a way of telling it) and requires a further fabula-like frame of reference to be projected beyond itself, producing an infinite regress—one, indeed, that might be equated with the intentionalist regress inherent in such an approach to creativity.

In general, a fundamental slippage between incompatible models of fabula occurs whenever accounts of its relation to the creative and interpretative processes are juxtaposed. Chatman, for example, discussing the necessary selectiveness of discourse in relation to story, invokes a notion of the “complete” account of a given course of events as the foil to that selectiveness: “each character obviously must first be born. But the discourse need not mention his birth . . .” (1978: 28). He goes on to relate this never-realized complete account to his concept of story: “Thus story in one sense is the continuum of events presupposing the total set of all conceivable details, that is, those that can be projected by the normal laws of the physical universe. In practice, of course, it is only that continuum and that set actually inferred by a reader, and there is room for difference in interpretation” (28). By presenting discourse as narrative selection, Chatman unavoidably commits himself to a concept of the totality from which that selection is made. But such a definition of story is unworkable (each character must presumably have parents . . . ), so he immediately qualifies it by appealing to interpretative practice, an appeal that makes story dependent on readers’ actual inferences from the discourse. This move distributes the concept of story between two senses, one genetic and ideal and the other interpretative and pragmatic, without acknowledging that the logical relation between story and discourse has been inverted in the process. Chatman speaks of the reader’s inferences as “logically necessary,” but this necessity derives from the general framework of understanding we bring to narrative interpretation, not from the specifics of a pre-existent fabula (29). As the emphasis shifts from narrative articulation to narrative interpretation, so discourse, rather than story, takes logical priority as the delimiting framework of the narrative.
Chatman, then, shuffles between authorial and interpretative models of fabula in an attempt to reconcile two incompatible premises: that sujet is based on fabula, and that fabula is derived from sujet. The author-oriented model insists upon the abstraction and logical priority of fabula as the basis for the selections and arrangements of the realized sujet; the reader-oriented model provides for the lack of any access to fabula except through sujet, by conceiving of fabula in pragmatic terms as an interpretative reconstruction. I want to suggest that this pragmatic model alone, once it has been detached from fabula’s claim to abstract priority over sujet (that is, once it is recast as an interpretative construct rather than a reconstruction), can provide all the analytical power we need from a concept of fabula without falling prey to any of the conceptual problems I have been discussing. Fabula, in this view, is a function of interpretation: it doesn’t strip the presentational features of sujet back to an objective narrative core, but reveals them as they are by imagining them otherwise. What that otherwise may be is largely contingent upon the orientation of a particular reading, but in general, fabula simplifies sujet: it reduces it to the simplest terms consistent with the needs of the interpretation—most obviously to a chronological order, wherever practical and useful. This reducing process is not for the sake of the residue, but the distillate: its concern is with the qualities of the narrative as given—the rhetoric of sujet. And though this view of fabula is centred on reading, I shall argue in chapter seven that such an interpretative model can serve equally well as an account of the creative process.

In what sense, then, does the concept of fabula continue to be valuable? Much of what I’ve said relates to the pervasiveness of narrative understanding in general, because such irreducible narrativity means that narrative knowledge is always characterized by the artifice of sujet, and such artifice is precisely what undermines the conventional idea of fabula. In fact, the persistence of a traditional concept of fabula is largely responsible for the common misconception that narrative artifice is inherently a “distortion”—in other words, that the narrative information can be conceived of in undistorted form. But the kind of artifice with which the Formalists were primarily concerned, and that interests me here, is of a different order from that which narrative theory has insisted is intrinsic to all narrative, fictional or nonfictional. Quite apart from any concept of fabula, historical narrative does have obligations to prior sources, whether narrative themselves (e.g., first-hand testimony) or non-narrative (e.g., statistical records), and some theorists have sought to incorporate this into the fabula/sujet model. Dorrit Cohn, for example, suggests historical narrative
may be distinguished from fiction by its adherence to a three-level model of the form “reference/story/discourse” (1990: 779). Although this does nothing to resolve the contradictions in the concept of story, it does help to tease apart two different kinds of concern involved in narrative interpretation and obscured by the tendency to use fiction as the model for general theories of narrative. Dominant in the nonfictional case are criteria for assessing a narrative’s relation to the prior sources and intersecting narratives invoked by Cohn’s term “reference.” In this context, the role of fabula is to serve the reader’s evaluation of sujet in relation to (actual or hypothetical) alternative versions, with different sujet emphases, slants, or omissions. At issue in nonfiction is not the adequacy of fabula to source material (which would beg all the important questions), but the adequacy of sujet: fabula serves not as the uninflected story beneath the rhetorical manipulations of sujet, but simply as the means of throwing sujet rhetoric into relief. In nonfictional narrative, it facilitates the dominant interpretative issue of comparison between actual or possible versions, in the context of adequacy to sources; but in the absence of (constrictive) sources or alternative versions, it takes on a new significance. Fabula in the context of fiction is simply diagnostic of the rhetorical weight and distribution of salient values in the narrative itself. In fiction, fabula is both how we understand sujet per se, and how we understand its contingency (potentially, its unreliability), not in relation to facts or sources, and usually not in comparison with other versions, but with respect to its own disposition of values. The importance of the concept of fabula, then, is its direct link to rhetorical perceptibility, above and beyond issues of representational coherence; it is an interpretative exercise in establishing representational coherence only as a means to the end of this perceptibility. The role of fabula is enhanced in the interpretation of fiction, precisely because the role of rhetoric is enhanced. Fabula serves to police the rhetoric of nonfictional narrative, but it serves much more fundamentally to explore the rhetoric of fiction, inasmuch as such rhetoric is the raison d’être of fictionality.

A rhetorical (or functional) approach to narrative, and especially to fiction, anchors the concept of narrative in sujet rather than fabula (Sternberg 1992: 509–10; 513). Fabula is not so much an event chain underlying the sujet as a by-product of the interpretative process by which we throw into relief and assimilate the sujet’s rhetorical control of narrative information. Its integrity as a concept is not to be found in its relation to any given narrative, but to any given act of narrative interpretation. To recall the commonsensical definitions with which I began, fabula and sujet are often construed as “what happens” and “how it is told.” I am suggesting
that the value of the distinction may still be conceived in terms of a “what” and a “how,” but with the poles reversed: sujét is what we come to understand as a given (fictional) narrative, and fabula is how we come to understand it. Our understanding, in other words, is not of “what happened”; it is of the weight and import of the narrative as actually told. The model of fabula I wish to affirm does not reject abstraction in favour of any specific manifestation (which would be no fabula at all); it merely inverts the logical priority of fabula to sujét. The reader’s engagement with sujét does not enable the reconstruction of fabula, but its construction. Fabula is not independent of any sujét—it is entirely dependent on sujét, is nothing other than the permutation and assimilation of sujét features into an ongoing interpretative version; nor is it ever realized in itself, since it functions only as an instrument of interpretation and is pursued only so far as the needs of the occasion demand. Fabula is always relative to and contingent upon both a given sujét and a specific act of interpretation. Such an understanding of fabula meets the need for which the concept has continued to be invoked despite some intractable theoretical problems, but it avoids those problems by using a rhetorical rather than representational frame of reference. Reconceived in this way, fabula no longer trades off utility against conceptual incoherence. It is indeed a version, but not a prior version, and not extant; it is the reader’s working version, a function of the process of interpretation, and a means rather than an end in itself. It serves not as the decoding of sujét, but as the triangulation of sujét features in order to gauge and respond to the rhetoric they embody. And in relation to fiction, its continued value as a concept lies in the fact that the possibilities of this rhetoric define the entire scope of fictionality.
Any rhetorical account of fictionality must be grounded on the fictive act, yet one of the most entrenched concepts of narrative theory is utterly debilitating for such a project, because it functions as a kind of inaugural step inside the frame of fiction, the fictionality of which is henceforth held in abeyance. I mean the concept of the narrator, precisely to the extent that it is understood as structurally necessary to the representational logic of fictional narrative. The currency of the concept is widespread: today most narrative theorists, and even more literary critics, are happy to regard the narrator as an inherent feature of narrative. Yet the narrator’s promotion, as a concept, from a representational effect to a structural principle has occurred specifically in response to the qualities of fiction, not narrative per se, and the concept has only been put to the most cursory use outside the fictional context. The reason is that the narrator, as an inherent structural principle, functions primarily to establish a representational frame within which the narrative discourse may be read as report rather than invention. In other words, it defines the extent to which we can set aside our knowledge that the narrative in hand is indeed fictional. By conceiving of a fictional narrative as issuing from a fictional narrator, the reader has cancelled out its fictionality, negotiated a mode of complicity with representation, and found a rationale for suspension of disbelief. I want to suggest, though, that certain dubious critical tendencies are perpetuated by this model of fiction. Critical interpretation tends, in point of detail, to be confined within the narrative’s representational frame, rather than attending to its rhetorical import—with the common result that criticism can be unreflectively complicit in the fiction’s own rhetoric.
of representation. On the other hand, when criticism steps beyond this representational frame, the effect is a kind of critical double vision that separates the intrafictional perspective from a larger sense of the fiction as a literary work (characterized by its style, technique, themes, symbolism, etc.), as if such literary awareness was the belated supplement to a naïve primary reading experience. I would want to argue that as the basis for reading fiction, a willing suspension of disbelief will not do: disbelief is essential to reading a work of fiction as fictional, and it is only by doing so that we apprehend the effects it achieves by means of fiction’s own particular literary resources, including the involvement to which the phrase “suspension of disbelief” testifies. One of the consequences of rejecting the concept of the narrator is that the representational frame, as a conceptual boundary between the creative and (putatively) informative aspects of fiction, is breached. This, I suggest, is a good thing, not merely because it conforms with my pragmatic, relevance-based model of fictionality, but also because it allows a conception of the experience of fiction—for all readers, however sophisticated or naïve, provided that they are not simply credulous—in which there is no conflict between engaging with authorial fictive discourse and engaging with the story. It is with this in mind that I am going to question the idea that the narrator, as a distinct and inherent agent of fictional narrative, is a logical, or even plausible, construct.

Who Is the Narrator?

I’d like to approach the problem schematically, in the first instance, by invoking two of Gérard Genette’s distinctions: between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators (a matter of person; that is, in place of the common distinction between first- and third-person narrators, a more exact contrast between involvement and noninvolvement in the world of the story); and between intradiegetic and extradiegetic narrators (a matter of level; that is, the distinction between a narrator who narrates within a larger, framing narrative, and one whose narration itself constitutes the primary narrative). Between them, these distinctions produce four classes of narrators (1980: 248); my intention is to show that none of them requires a distinct narrative agent. The two intradiegetic classes are relatively straightforward: these narrators are simply characters, within a narrative, who relate a story in which (respectively) they are and are not themselves involved. Marlow, in *Heart of Darkness*, sitting aboard the “Nellie” on the sea reach of the Thames and narrating his journey to the
farthest point of navigation, is intradiegetic and homodiegetic. In Sarra-sine, Mme. de Rochefide's unnamed admirer, who tells her the sculptor's story on the evening after the Lanty ball, is intradiegetic and heterodiegetic. The extradiegetic categories are more difficult. Genette maintains that an extradiegetic narrator, being outside any diegesis, cannot (in the role of narrator) be a character—"for that would be meaningless" (1988: 85), yet an extradiegetic homodiegetic narrator like Huck Finn is, of course, identified with a character in the story. So the extradiegetic homodiegetic case seems to establish a clear distinction, even within the fictional frame, between characters and narrators. But obviously, many such narrators—Huck Finn, Tristram Shandy, Humbert Humbert, Molloy—are at least as strongly characterized in the telling of their tales as they are in the role of protagonist. How, then, are they different from their intradiegetic counterparts? Genette has himself acknowledged that the distinction between extradiegetic and intradiegetic is relatively unimportant, given that "all that is needed to convert an extradiegetic narration into an embedded narration is a sentence of presentation" (1988: 95). He illustrates the point with a playful revision of À la recherche du temps perdu, a favoured extradiegetic homodiegetic narration. I won't quote in full, as the crux is simply this: "Marcel cleared his throat and began: 'For a long time I used to go to bed early,' etc." (1988: 95). Very well, but consider the vastly different effect of this: "The ironic spinster cleared her throat and observed, 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune,' etc." This second case is the transformation of an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narration, and it involves something that the first did not—namely the creation of a character (we might want to call her Jane). I shall return to the case of extradiegetic heterodiegetic narration in a moment, but first, I want to pursue the implications of this difference for Genette's homodiegetic example. My point is that, in the homodiegetic case, the only necessary effect of a transformation from extra- to intradiegetic is to give some specification of the circumstances of the narrating instance. This cannot amount to a change in level, as for Genette a narrating instance is implied by every narrative: "the main point of Narrative Discourse, beginning with its title, reflects the assumption that there is an enunciating instance—the narrating—with its narrator and its narratee, fictive or not, represented or not, silent or chatty, but always present in what is indeed for me, I fear, an act of communication" (1988: 101). Indeed, to concede that a narrating instance is not implied by every narrative would be to concede to the linguistic arguments for non-narrated narratives advanced by Ann Banfield (1982) and others.
Discourse, as an act of communication, is action; in fiction, the represented discourse of a homodiegetic narrator is therefore represented action. And what is action, to adapt Henry James (1911: 392), but the illustration of character? Extradiegetic homodiegetic narrators are indeed characters, and if there is any meaninglessness lurking in that formulation, it can be located in the concept of the extradiegetic itself. Narrators are always outside the frame of the stories they tell; “extradiegetic” appears to have the additional force of placing the narrator outside representation. But if the narrator is fictional, where would that be? In such cases, the telling of the story is itself a represented event, as clearly represented as any act of speech, thought, or writing in the story; we could legitimately put quotation marks around the whole.

The purpose of my attention to the extradiegetic homodiegetic narrator has been to establish this preliminary point: there is nothing about the internal logic of fictional representation that demands a qualitative distinction between narrators and characters. Such narrators, because they are represented, are characters, exactly as intradiegetic narrators are. The functional distinction between the roles of narrator and character in such cases is no more analytical than the distinction between an experienced older self and an innocent younger self that so often goes with it. The fact that homodiegetic narrators sometimes have “powers” that they do not possess as characters only reinforces the point: in Genette’s scheme such incidences are classified as paralepses, anomalies of representational logic, the justification for which is to be found in their conventional or occasional rhetorical function (1980: 194–97). But of course, it is the fourth class of narration, the extradiegetic heterodiegetic, that constitutes the real issue. In this class fall those narratives that we might want to call “impersonally narrated,” such as The Ambassadors, The Trial, or Mrs Dalloway, as well as what is sometimes called “authorial narration”—Tom Jones, Vanity Fair, or Middlemarch. The one irreducible fact underlying the impulse to attribute such narratives to a narrator is that these narratives are fictional: despite the token gestures of narratologists whose bias towards fiction sits uneasily with their claims for the more general bearing of narratology, there is no more reason to posit a narrator for historical or biographical narrative than to attribute every nonfictional discourse to a textual agent. Dorrit Cohn proposes to make quite explicit the way the author/narrator distinction operates as a basic criterion for segregating fictional from historical narrative (1990: 791–800), while Genette’s own early statement of the underlying assumption is representative: “the narrator of Père Goriot ‘is’ not Balzac,” he says, “even if here and there he expresses
Balzac’s opinions, for this author-narrator is someone who ‘knows’ [connaître] the Vauquer boardinghouse, its landlady and its lodgers, whereas all Balzac himself does is imagine them” (1980: 214). The function of the narrator is to allow the narrative to be read as something known rather than something imagined, something reported as fact rather than something told as fiction. F. K. Stanzel is equally emphatic on this point: “the authorial narrator and the first-person narrator [. . .] originate in that primal motivation of all narration, to make the fictional world appear as reality” (1984: 17). But such a view of the matter suffers the embarrassment that some of the things such an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator is required to “know” are clear indices of the narrative’s fictional status, and so they contradict this rationale for positing such an agent. The most obvious of these occurs with internal and free focalization—that is, the narrative’s access to the mind of another: “her heart, like a larded partridge, sweltered before the fire of a burning desire to shake off the shroud of Vauquer and rise again as Goriot. She would marry again, sell her boarding-house, give her hand to this fine flower of citizenship. . . .” (16–17). The only way to account for such knowledge of characters’ minds in terms of the narrator model is to take quite literally the figurative concept of “omniscient” narration: in order to know rather than imagine, the (evidently superhuman) agent of narration must indeed have such power, or some lesser or intermittent version of it. “Omniscience,” I would suggest, is not a faculty possessed by a certain class of narrators but, precisely, a quality of authorial imagination. Even when authors self-consciously dwell upon their own omniscience with regard to their creations, the power itself is, of course, fanciful; the reader is not obliged to hypothesize a narrator who really is omniscient in order to naturalize the authorial imaginative act.

There are other aspects of focalization, even where omniscience is apparently renounced, that prove unassimilable to the concept of the narrator as the one who “knows.” Consider external focalization, which prohibits any access to the characters’ thoughts: here “the focus is situated at a point in the diegetic universe chosen by the narrator, outside every character” (Genette 1988: 75). But this focus cannot be understood as a heterodiegetic narrator’s own perspective, because that would make the narrator homodiegetic—even if anonymous and perhaps noncorporeal. Seymour Chatman, discussing the issue of focalization, has rightly insisted upon the radical difference between narratorial “slant” and character “filter.” To Chatman, the narrator “is a reporter, not an ‘observer’ of the story world in the sense of literally witnessing it. It makes no sense to say that a story is told ‘through’ the narrator’s perception since he/she/it is precisely
narrating, which is not an act of perception but of presentation or representation” (1990: 142)—a particularly salutary observation in relation to Stanzel’s equivocal account of the narratorial status of reflector-characters (1984: 145–47). Chatman draws the necessary conclusions for the category of narration we are considering here: “The heterodiegetic narrator never saw the events because he/she/it never occupied the story world. . . . Even for so-called ‘camera-eye’ narration it is always and only as if the narrator were seeing the events transpire before his very eyes at the moment of narration” (1990: 144–45). How are we to understand this “as if”? We cannot resort again to omniscience, unless we compromise it by assuming a sustained narratorial reticence about the characters’ thoughts, and other such matters. This reticence could only be disingenuous; in Genette’s terms, it would have to be described paradoxically, as a defining paralipsis. So the only way to construe external focalization would be as the work of the narrator’s imagination: again the narrator’s rationale, as the one who “knows,” is undermined.

Narrative Discourse and Speech Act Theory

Of course, the point isn’t really that the narrator “knows” at all; it’s that the author can’t know. The purpose of the narrator is to release the author from any accountability for the “facts” of fictional narrative. Genette has codified this principle in the double formula “A = N → factual narrative and A ≠ N → fictional narrative,” where the equal sign symbolizes “the serious commitment of the author with regard to his narrative assertions” (“Fictional Narrative” 766, 770). This narrow definition of identity is adopted in preference to “onomastic or biographical identity,” because the narrator of a manifestly fictional story may indeed be identified with its author in these terms, as is the case in Borges’ “El Aleph,” or in Tom Jones. It is perfectly clear that Fielding “does not in the least vouch for the historical veracity of the assertions of his narrative,” but Genette argues further that he does not “identify with the narrator who is supposed to have produced it, any more than I, good citizen, family man, and free-thinker, identify with the voice that, through my mouth, produces an ironic or playful statement such as, ‘I am the Pope!’” (768). The assumption is that fiction and irony are “nonserious” speech acts and so require a distinction between their actual and pretended speakers. Genette is following John Searle, whose account of fictional utterances as pretended acts of assertion is the canonical speech act treatment; and if the implication
of a narrator is not quite self-evident in Searle’s pretence formula, it may arguably be present in another description, “imitating the making of an assertion,” which he offers as equivalent (“Logical Status” 324). Searle approaches fiction with priorities very different from those of the literary theorist, however: he remains in broad sympathy with J. L. Austin’s view that such matters “fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language” (1975: 22). Searle’s less hasty but still dismissive response to fiction is motivated by the evident need to distinguish it from mere falsehood: if a fictional utterance is read simply as an authorial assertion, then it must be taken as infelicitous—an error or a lie—which hardly satisfies our sense of how fiction works. But his own pretence theory is equally unsatisfactory from a literary point of view, because far from using speech act theory to explain fiction, it disqualifies fiction in order to protect speech act theory. To classify fiction as a “nonserious” speech act is simply to disallow it as a use of language within the purview of the theory; the problem of fictionalisation is not accounted for, but merely displaced onto the (non-speech) act of pretending or imitating. So, instead of a real act of asserting something fictional, Searle gives us an imitated act of assertion, that is, a fictional act of assertion, since fictionality (unlike falsehood) is not just a property of propositions. A fictional act of assertion would not seem to be any less problematic than an act of asserting something fictional; it has merely expelled fictionality from the domain of speech act theory. And if this account of fiction as authorially disavowed assertion amounts to the creation of a narrator, as Genette assumes, then its question begging is even more starkly exposed. Either the narrator is fictional, or the narrator asserts something fictional; in either case, such an account can have no bearing at all on fictionalisation, which remains to be explained. The pretence formula can only appear to accommodate fictionalisation by oscillating between these alternatives and so, in effect, positing a narrator simultaneously inside and outside the fiction.

Genette’s own response to Searle goes some way towards addressing the problem by arguing that the description of fiction as pretended assertion does not exclude the use of fictional utterances to perform some other, serious illocutionary act. The aim of his intervention “is by no means to replace Searle’s ‘Fictional texts are pretended assertions,’ but to complete it approximately as follows: ’... which hide, under indirect speech acts, fictional speech acts that are themselves illocutionary acts sui speciei, serious by definition” (“Pragmatic Status” 66). Indirect speech acts (among which Genette includes figurative utterances as simply indirect speech acts with an unacceptable literal meaning) are those in which one illocutionary
act serves as the vehicle for another. The assertion “you’re standing on my foot” is also, usually, a request that you get off; the assertion “Hegel is a dead horse” is also an assertion that it is no longer worth disputing with him. Searle would not count the second example as an indirect speech act: his reason is that the literal assertion of a figurative utterance is defective (because it is evidently false), whereas the literal illocution of an indirect speech act is not. Indirect speech acts are always literally defective, however, in terms of relevance. Searle denies that they are necessarily so (“Indirect Speech Acts” 70–71), though it seems to me that, where utterances may be taken as literally felicitous, to precisely that extent they are ineffective as indirect speech acts.

For Genette, fictional texts are indirect speech acts that imply, by means of pretended assertions, acts in the category of “declarative illocutions with an institutive function” (“Pragmatic Status” 64), that is, acts declaring the existence of a fictional world. The illocutionary act of establishing this fictional world, with the agreement of an audience—Genette cites “Coleridge’s durable phrase” (63)—is the serious element of the fictional utterance. I have two objections, to which I have already referred briefly in chapter one. Firstly, if fictional utterances are indirect speech acts, they must seriously do something more than institute a fictional world. Genette sometimes appears to regard this declarative illocution as itself a fictional speech act, in which case it remains within the frame of fictional reality and adds nothing to Searle’s account of the authorial speech act. But in any case, it confines the creative act to the existential matter of fiction, without any sense of the extent to which this act concerns meaning, in language, rather than existence. This sits uncomfortably with Genette’s claim that the novelist thereby creates “a work of fiction,” as he seems to acknowledge when he says (with more than a hint of circularity) that the successful achievement of a fiction’s illocutionary intention consists “at least” in having its fictional intention recognized (62, 67–68). His own account seems to allow this much at most, in which case it cannot be a sufficient general formula; nor, I think, is it sufficient even on occasion.

Secondly, if fictional utterances are to have an indirect illocutionary force, then the literal speech acts by which they achieve this cannot be pretended but must be seriously performed. Genette can only interpret pretended speech acts as indirect speech acts by blurring two distinct concepts: he notes that Searle himself explicitly refuses to consider fiction as figurative utterance “in the name of a distinction, to my mind rather fragile, between ‘nonserious’ and ‘nonliteral’ ” (66). But Searle is right in
this respect: as he defines it, seriousness attaches to illocutionary intention, whereas literalness attaches to sentence meaning. This is why he makes it clear that “to pretend” is itself an intentional verb: if you didn’t intend to pretend, you didn’t pretend (“Logical Status” 325). Searle distinguishes between serious and nonserious (pretended) speech acts according to whether or not the illocutionary act was actually performed. If there is no actual performance, but only a “pseudoperformance” (325), then there is no possibility of a serious indirect speech act, because the felicity conditions (or maxims, after Grice) normally attaching to the speech act are suspended, in which case they cannot even be violated, much less flouted in the interests of conversational implicature. Genette seems to interpret seriousness as sincerity, which allows him to say that any nonliteral illocution is obviously also, in its literal sense, nonserious (read insincere). But sincerity is just a condition upon the success of serious speech acts—it doesn’t even arise unless the speech act is serious. If pretence is understood in the sense it has in Searle’s account, then indirect speech acts and pretended speech acts are incompatible. And even if Genette has silently reformulated Searle’s pretence account as “pretending to be the narrator,” this translates the model for third-person fictional utterance into that for first-person fiction, in which case the discourse itself is intrafictional and excludes the possibility of any indirect speech act declaring its fictionality. I would want to argue further, against both Genette and Searle, that first-person narration does not conform to a pretence account. For Genette, first-person fictional narrative must “finally come down to the dramatic mode (a character speaks) and consist of serious illocutions more or less tacitly posited as intrafictional. The pretence here consists, as Plato and Searle agree, in a simulation, or substitution, of identity (Homer pretends to be Chryses, Doyle pretends to be Watson, as Sophocles pretends to be Oedipus or Creon)” (“Pragmatic Status” 68–69). I can accept the first sentence, and note that in saying so Genette appears to have retracted his claim that the first-person narrator is not a character. But against the second sentence I would argue that authors do not pretend to be narrating characters, they represent narrating characters. The possibility of unreliable narration demands this, because when such unreliability occurs the narratorial slant itself (rather than the events of the narrative) is the primary object of the author’s representational rhetoric. The distance between author and narrator is essential to interpretation, and if pretence or imitation is understood as a simulation or substitution of identity, that distance is elided. In first-person narration, authors do not imitate the narrating character, nor “the making of an assertion,” but a discursive idiom.
If the indirect speech act model applies to fictional utterance, then the pretence model does not; but if pretended speech acts are not required for fiction, neither is the narrator. I don’t wish to repudiate the idea behind the attempt to understand fictions as indirect speech acts: the broad outlines of Genette’s account point towards the relevance model of fictionality that I have set out in chapter one. But that model requires fictional utterances to be serious authorial speech acts, which excludes any possibility of a default narrator. If, when Genette declares “I am the Pope,” we assume that he is neither deceitful nor deluded, then we note the literal absurdity of the statement and understand, perhaps, “I acknowledge a fondness for issuing the occasional bull”—or some other relevant implicit meaning. There is no phantom voice here, because this is a serious speech act, the felicity of which (in Gricean terms) is provided for indirectly, by conversational implicature. So it is with fiction: an author can seriously narrate a fictional narrative, because its relevance is not fundamentally a matter of literal information; its falsehood, or indeed any adventitious veracity, is beside the point for the purposes of fictive rhetoric.

The answer I am proposing to my original question, “who is the narrator?” is this: the narrator is always either a character who narrates, or the author. There is no intermediate position. The author of a fiction can adopt one of two strategies: to narrate a representation, or to represent a narration. I say this in full awareness of Genette’s criticisms of the concept of representation (1988: 42): indeed his point, that the term equivocates between “information” and “imitation,” is borne out by my own antithesis. “Representation” is a matter of (fictional) information in “to narrate a representation,” but a matter of (discursive) imitation in “to represent a narration.” But I persist in the usage on the grounds that this disjunction of means does not at all undermine the unity of the rhetorical end that I take “representation” to signify.

Unreliable Narration, Covert Narration

Where does unreliable narration fit into this scheme? The need for a concept of unreliable narration arises when we wish to explain inconsistencies in the narrative without blaming the author. This is not to say that we do not sometimes find the author culpable: when we discover Sancho, in chapter 25 of Don Quixote, riding the ass that was stolen from him in chapter 23, we can dismiss it as an oversight on Cervantes’ part. We need more substantial reasons than inconsistency alone if we are to identify
unreliable narration. To be interpreted as unreliable, a narrative must provide some logic by which its inconsistencies can be explained—some means of accounting for the narrator's self-contradictions or manifest distortions. That is, unreliability cannot simply be attributed to an impersonal narrator: it must be motivated in terms of the psychology of a narrating character.²

But perhaps Chatman's concept of narratorial “slant” suggests a more subtle, evaluative form of unreliability. Perhaps it is possible for the language of a novel in its own right, without implying any disjunction between the narration and the “facts” of the narrative, to cohere into an idiom, register, attitude, or ideology that requires a distinction between author and narrator. That is, after all, the situation with first-person narration, although there are simpler and more obvious representational grounds for identifying a narrator when that narrator is homodiegetic. Is the narrative language alone sufficient to betray a narrator? Dorrit Cohn argues that just such a situation may arise when “reportive” narrative is interrupted by commentary. Her example is from Death in Venice, and it prompts us, she thinks, to “personalize the source of the weighty intervention . . . as a rather narrow and opinionated moralist”—in other words, not Thomas Mann (1990: 797). I don’t actually find the passage she quotes very provocative in this respect, but in any case I have strong reservations about the possibility of such narratorial characterization in principle. Clearly the difference between authorial and narratorial personality must be established in textual terms (it is Mann as author, not Mann as public figure, who concerns us here), yet the absence of textual indicators such as inconsistency necessitates an appeal to the author’s personality as already known, prior to the text. Authorial personality can be regarded as an intertextual phenomenon, to be abstracted from a writer’s whole corpus; but there still remains the unwarranted assumption that this personality is uniform, for otherwise there is no reason why the narration in question should not be taken to exhibit another aspect of authorial personality. Personality, after all, is not monolithic; it is not timeless, not unitary, not even necessarily coherent. Indeed, novelists, who are perhaps rather less straightforward than academics, are quite likely to attitudinize in diverse ways in their writing. Such mannerism remains an aspect of self-presentation, and should not be granted an independent identity. Cohn recognizes that works like Death in Venice may indeed be taken as authorial narration, but she thinks her interpretation preferable “for readers intent on salvaging the aesthetic and ideological integrity of the work in question” (799). The integrity she is actually concerned with is that of the author, not of the
work: I would suggest that the issue of integrity arises only because the work in question has been illegitimately excluded from a prior interpretation of authorial personality. In general, I think the possibility of distinguishing between authorial and narratorial personality depends upon that distinction being available to interpretation as a meaningful aspect of the text’s own representational rhetoric. At that point, I suspect, the passages of commentary to which Cohn appeals would have effectively cohered into a homodiegetic frame around the narrative.

I want, nonetheless, to consider one of the conclusions Cohn draws from the possibility that narrative language alone can characterize a narrator. For my purposes here, that claim in itself causes no difficulty: it’s a characterization, involving creative work, and not something inherent in narrative as such. But since this characterization is occasional (it only occurs in passages of commentary within a continuous narrative) it must, in my terms, imply an intermittent character. For Cohn, the only logical way to account for this is to conclude that the narrator is always present, sometimes overt, and sometimes covert. “By extension and analogy,” fictions like The Castle or A Portrait of the Artist can then be taken to have covert narrators throughout (797–98). This covert narrator, wholly uncharacterized, is exactly the kind of pure narrative agent I am trying to eradicate.

Leaving aside the validity of “extension and analogy,” can there be such a thing as covert narration, even between passages of overt narration? I want to suggest that the underlying assumption here—that narrating characters must have continuity of being—is an instance of criticism internalizing a literal model of the logic of representation and then using it against the text itself. In representational terms, any narrating character is the source of the narrative language, certainly: but then representation itself is only a product of the fictional deployment of the same language. We need to understand these relations hierarchically, in that the language of fiction is its means of representation, and representation is its means of ascribing that language to a narrator. So to treat a represented instance of narration as ontologically prior to the language doing the representing is to press the logic of representation beyond representation itself and to make the subordinate term superordinate—that is, to assert a paradox in the name of logic. Yet this is exactly what the idea of covert narration demands: even when the representation of a narrator is not sustained, the whole discourse is interpreted as a unified narrating instance because the narrator, a local representational issue of the language, is translated into its global, literal source. We should keep in mind the fact that represen-
tional “logic” is actually a fictional rhetoric; it should not be made to exceed its brief. If a (hypothetical) novel’s language invokes a narrator in the interest of some local effect, then to interpret this effect as indicative of a ubiquitous but otherwise covert narrator is to miss this rhetorical subtlety completely in our rage to impose a uniform representational logic upon the novel.

The idea of an intermittent narrating character, on the other hand, would fit such a novel very well, and I think it entirely consonant with the rhetoric of fictional representation. Consider the situation of homodiegetic narrators. They are far from being ubiquitous presences, even if we discard such categorical aberrations as *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert as Charles Bovary’s classmate in the opening chapter) or *Vanity Fair* (Thackeray making his characters’ acquaintance at Pumpernickel in chapter 62). As Genette has noted, Marcel has a striking propensity to disappear as narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu* whenever Proust’s purposes demand the omniscience his narrator denies him (1980: 250–52). But if Marcel is too literary a narrator to make the argument, try Huck Finn. Huck is as strongly realized, and ingenuous, a narrator as you could wish for; yet Twain put an explanatory note in front of his novel drawing attention to the different dialects it contains, because he didn’t want readers to “suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding” (48). He didn’t do this to emphasize Huck’s talents as a mimic, nor was it an oversight on his part—he’d paid particular attention to it, he was proud of it, and he wanted to make sure we notice his fine ear for dialect. The conclusion must be that, in those parts of the novel where Twain is accurately representing the various dialects of the Mississippi valley, the narrating Huck Finn is not merely covert, but entirely absent; he is not a factor in the mediation of this language. I should emphasize that Twain’s note is not essential to this point: it only makes starkly explicit the truth that a conflict of representational objectives is likely to arise in any mediated narrative. There is an inherent tension between the author’s concerns in representing the narrative transmission and in representing the narrative events. In most respects, this is a fluid matter of relative priorities, but in the case of direct speech, it is almost always the character’s language itself that is represented, not the narrator’s representation of that language. A representational model of narration may accommodate such occasions as merely conventional, but that does not affect the point that in terms of the logic of representation itself, the situation at such moments is a mirror image of our hypothetical novel: local elimination of the narrator rather than local creation of a narrator. Obviously this provides no basis for a
qualitative distinction between extradiegetic and intradiegetic narrators: Marlow and Mme. de Rochefide’s admirer are subject to the same constraints. Accordingly, it doesn’t provide for any such distinction between narrating and other characters, either. There is a recursiveness about the act of narration, compared to other represented acts, that tends to highlight the representational contingency of character; but this contingency applies to any character, as recent innovative fiction has shown (I take the disintegration of Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow* to be a quite explicit example). Representation involves no commitment to the continuity of characters, except insofar as this is itself a privileged representational objective—which, of course, in any broadly realist fiction, is the case most of the time.

**The Implied Author**

There is another figure who threatens to intervene in this discussion of the narrator: having made an appeal to the author, I need to take account of the implied author. Wayne Booth originally advanced the concept as a way of talking about authorial personality and intention without co-opting, or being encumbered by, the author’s actual biography—for reasons that are well founded in the history of criticism. But as his choice of term indicates, he objectified this concept as a distinct agent situated “between” the narrator and the author. If I am saying that in fact the narrator and the author are sometimes one and the same, I appear to have simply disregarded this intermediate figure. A short answer may be to observe that, as the conventional wisdom has it, the implied author (being implied) cannot actually be the narrator. In that case, perhaps the issue does not arise here: the “implied author” is just the author implied behind a narrating character, and when it is the author who narrates, the implied author obviously need not be invoked. But the argument might be pressed the other way round: if the locus of textual intent is definitionally the implied author, then the narrator cannot be simply the author—and so must be a distinct agent. A closer inspection of the implied author is needed to dismiss this objection.

It is possible, on reading Booth’s original discussion in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, to extract two pertinent motives for distinguishing between the real author and the implied author. The first is a matter of authorial personality: against Ford Madox Ford, Booth insists that Fielding, Defoe, and Thackeray cannot be accused of insincerity on the basis of external
evidence: “A great work establishes the ‘sincerity’ of its implied author, regardless of how grossly the man who created that author may belie in his other forms of conduct the values embodied in his work. For all we know, the only sincere moments of his life may have been lived as he wrote his novel” (1983: 75). As the second sentence suggests, Booth’s defence here actually hovers between two strategies: to declare a separation between the real author and the implied author, or simply to refuse the uniformity that Ford’s rigid “sincerity,” regardless of the diversity of its occasions, seems to impose upon personality. The second option, it seems to me, is quite sufficient. Booth’s second motive has to do with authorial intention: in order to explain our “apprehension of a completed artistic whole” as a textual phenomenon, we need “a term that is as broad as the work itself but still capable of calling attention to that work as the product of a choosing, evaluating person rather than as a self-existing thing” (73, 74). Again, the distinction is blurred by equivocation. As Chatman has observed, “this definition straddles the fence of ‘intentionality,’ half accepting and half rejecting its relevance to textual structure. On the one hand, Booth disallows the intention of the real author, but on the other, he wishes to avoid calling texts ‘self-existing things’” (1990: 81).

Chatman’s own defence of the implied author proposes to redefine the concept in order to “resist the anthropomorphic trap” due to which it continually gravitates back towards the real author in Booth’s usage (88). Accordingly, he takes “the anti-intentionalist view that a published text is in fact a self-existing thing. . . . The text is itself the implied author” (81). His argument is founded on a distinction between oral and written narrative. The oral situation is straightforward, thanks to the actual presence of the author, but in the case of a published fiction, “the real author retires from the text,” and the implied author is invoked “on each reading” as the textual principle of invention and intent (75, 74). Chatman emphasizes his concept’s freedom from anthropomorphic assumptions by offering alternative terms: “‘text implication’ or ‘text instance’ or ‘text design’ or even simply ‘text intent’” (86). Yet even these terms indicate the tension in his argument. If the text is to be a self-existing thing, divorced from authorial intention, then there are no grounds for appealing to a concept of intent at all—it is no longer required. Chatman insists that “the act of a producer, a real author, obviously differs from the product of that act, the text”; but then he can only explain textuality by reinventing that act of production as itself immanent in the text: “If all meanings—implicit as well as explicit—are the products of the text’s activity, and if this activity always presupposes agency, then we have to posit some such text principle or
agent as the implied author” (83, 90). He conceives of the written text as manifesting, on each reading, its own intentional agency—that is, a virtual oral authorship equivalent to the actual presence of the author. This seems to be just a more subtle version of the anthropomorphic trap from which he claims to have escaped. If we want to talk about intent in fiction, we should accept that in doing so we are necessarily invoking the author. Of course, our idea of the author of a written narrative is no more than an interpretation, but this is equally true with oral narrative.

It will be clear by now that I subscribe to Genette’s principle that “agents should not be multiplied unnecessarily” (1988: 148). Genette has himself rejected the concept of the implied author, reasoning that it has been “constituted by two distinctions that remain blind to each other: (1) IA is not the narrator, (2) IA is not the real author, and it is never seen that the first is a matter of the real author and the second is a matter of the narrator, with no room anywhere for a third agent that would be neither the narrator nor the real author” (145). It’s a nice knockdown argument, and I would only want to qualify it by extending its scope: there is no room anywhere for a third agent that would be neither a character nor the real author.

My argument against the narrator, then, comes down to this: fictions are narrated by their authors, or by characters. Extradiegetic homodiegetic narrators, being represented, are characters, just as all intradiegetic narrators are. Extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrators (that is, “impersonal” and “authorial” narrators), who cannot be represented without thereby being rendered homodiegetic or intradiegetic, are in no way distinguishable from authors. This assertion is unaffected by the fictionality of the narrative, since that is best accounted for by the role of relevance-based inferential processes in optimizing the felicity of speech acts; nor is it affected by issues of unreliability, because unreliability always requires characterization; nor by covert narration, because that concept is an abuse of the logic of representation; nor by the implied author, because the senses in which that term conflicts with my argument are themselves bogus.

To repudiate the narrator as a distinct narrative agent intrinsic to the structure of fiction is to repudiate the idea of a closed border between the products of representation and the real-world discourse of the author. The narrator, postulated simultaneously inside and outside representation, dissociates the author from the act of representation; the concept accordingly divides critical attention between the events and characters of the fictional world in their own right, and the literary ends they serve as representations. The former mode of criticism requires that critics suspend their
awareness of the narrative’s fictionality, this awareness being reserved for the latter activity. But when the narrator disappears, so does this division in critical attention. By insisting that fictional representation is an authorial activity, I keep the fictionality of the narrative always in view. My critical attention is always to the literary act, the representational activity that is fiction. Instead of attending to representational content and artistic form by turns, I can integrate them at every point as aspects of a fiction’s argument, that is, the end to which a particular fiction directs its rhetorical resources. And as I shall argue in subsequent chapters (particularly chapter seven), such a critical perspective is actually congruent with less self-aware reading practices in ways that a narratorial frame does not allow.
F. K. Stanzel opened *A Theory of Narrative* with the proposition, “Whenever a piece of news is conveyed, whenever something is reported, there is a mediator—the voice of a narrator is audible” (1984: 4). As it turned out, Stanzel’s interest in mediacy centred on fiction and on “rendered mediacy” (21). From a rhetorical point of view, this focus on fiction must immediately call into question the model of narrative transmission—information being conveyed—with which he began, both because such narrative information is not primarily offered or understood as news (see the discussion of information in chapter one) and because it typically does not exist, phenomenally or discursively, prior to the act of narration, and so is not properly being “conveyed” or “reported.” But the main point, for my purposes here, is that Stanzel embodies a tradition in which mediacy is a specifically linguistic phenomenon, an indirect form of representation the antithesis of which is the direct, immediate presentation of drama, or film. I want to begin instead with the premise that mediacy is a property of media, and that the distinction between (for example) fiction and drama is not a distinction between indirect and direct form, but between semiotic means of representation, in one case symbolic (language), in the other iconic (mise en scène, performance, etc.—note that the language within dramatic performance is itself represented and subordinate to the iconic function of the medium). The term I am going to seize upon is “voice,” which has general currency in narrative theory. It provided the focus for a substantial special issue of *New Literary History* in 2001, the contributions to which demonstrated strikingly (among other things) that voice
allows for a very large range of nuance, and that it is something of a touchstone for different theoretical orientations. The concept is as intuitively appealing as “story”: as commonsensical at first sight, and as unexpectedly elusive on closer inspection. In all its narratological applications, the term “voice” is figurative to a greater or lesser extent, and Stanzel’s usage here is no exception. By setting it in the context of narratives in all media, I am only insisting upon its metaphorical status: the scope of the term already exceeds the specifics of verbal narrative. In an effort to contain the plurivocality of voice, then, I want to suggest that its use in the context of narrative theory can be distributed under three broad headings which between them, and with some degree of overlap, cover the range of its metaphorical application. I shall elaborate upon each of these three senses of voice in turn, but to be schematic in the first instance, I propose to treat voice as it is applied to a representational act, an object of representation, and a representational subject position. That is to say, in this scheme, the metaphor of voice may be understood to encompass voice as instance, as idiom, and as interpellation.

My purpose in approaching the topic in this way is twofold. Firstly, I want to argue that a clear discrimination between these three applications of the voice metaphor helps to resist the slippage between senses that often tends to blur important conceptual boundaries. But secondly, I want to use the representational framework within which I have disposed my three categories in order to frame the vocal or linguistic basis of the metaphor; to see the concept of voice, and its limitations, in the larger context of its theoretical relation to the range of narrative representation across all media. The rhetoric of representation in general, and of fictional representation in particular, provides the overarching framework for this approach to voice. One of the great benefits of fictional worlds approaches to narrative, in opposition to discursive approaches, has been to put the object of representation centre stage in narrative theory. This emphasis on the represented world of stories, by subordinating the issues of narrative transmission that preoccupy discursive-structuralist theories, helps to evade the presumption of verbal communication that dominates such theories. But from a discursive point of view it remains crucial that stories are told, in the largest sense: not just some kinds of verbal stories (telling vs. showing), or verbal as opposed to nonverbal stories (mediacy vs. immediacy), but all stories in all media. Stories do not emerge circumstantially out of phenomena: they exist as stories by virtue of being articulated (always admitting that this may be a private, internal act of representation as well as a public, social one). The immediate implication is that narration in its
primary sense is never merely narrative transmission: the latter applies not to the telling of a story (as if it pre-existed as such), but to the mediation of a prior discourse. In fiction, transmission is an element of the rhetoric of represented telling—that is, representing an intrafictional narrative discourse as if you were transmitting an extant discourse. The apparent fragility of the distinction between narrative representation and narrative transmission (which is obliterated in equal measure, though in different ways, by Stanzel’s “mediacy” and Gérard Genette’s “narration”) arises because of the prominence of the fact (to which I shall return) that acts of narrative representation are themselves among the possible objects of narrative representation, that one of the things a story may be about is the telling of a story. The crucial point, however, is that this recursive possibility, however prominent in fiction, is not coextensive with fictionality: the effect of narrative transmission is a subordinate and contingent product of the rhetoric of narrative representation. A novel like *Great Expectations* invites the reader to consider its narration as itself an object of representation; a novel like *Our Mutual Friend* does not.

By re-examining the metaphor of voice in narrative theory from a representational perspective, I am adopting the premise that narratives in linguistic media constitute one kind among several in the genus of narrative representations; that is, a special case only in respect of the distinctiveness of language as a semiotic system and as a social and cultural phenomenon, and not otherwise privileged or paradigmatic. This emphasis on the metaphoricity of voice is as much a check upon any lapse into its literal interpretation in linguistic narrative as it is a basis for analogy between narrative representations in different media. A representational model of narrative telling can encompass narratives in all media without prejudice; but of more immediate concern here, it offers a degree of detachment from the specifics of language as a narrative medium, which can help a great deal in the effort to disentangle the complex web of ideas about verbal narrative that goes by the name of “voice.” My purpose in this chapter is to see linguistic narrative in the context of its theoretical continuity with narrative in other media, in order to establish the viability of that inclusive perspective (I shall go on to focus more directly upon other media in the next chapter). To reiterate, then, the concept of voice in linguistic media applies to three distinct but closely related aspects of narrative representation in general: a representational act (instance); an object of representation (idiom); and a representational subject position (interpellation). What happens when this most linguistically marked narrative concept is considered from a transmedia, representational perspective?
One of the main sources of confusion around the concept of voice in narrative theory is that in Genette’s usage the metaphor does not draw upon the sense of voice as vocalization, but upon its grammatical sense (active or passive voice): “‘the mode of action [. . .] of the verb considered for its relation to the subject’—the subject here being not only the person who carries out or submits to the action, but also the person (the same one or another) who reports it” (1980: 213). It is no less metaphorical for that—indeed, Genette acknowledges that his appropriation of linguistic terminology throughout *Narrative Discourse* shows the most strain at just this point (31–32). But the range of Genette’s metaphorical vehicle is quite distinct from that of the more common, or more intuitive, usage, and a major consequence is that many of the concerns that fall naturally under “voice” for other theorists are addressed separately by Genette. So free indirect discourse, for many the key issue in discussions of voice, is treated under “mood” in Genette’s scheme. The chapter on mood is also where he presents the crucial concept of focalization, which for Stanzel is inextricable from the broader notion of mediacy—that is to say, voice in Genette’s own sense, as narrative instance. Given these terminological and taxonomical discrepancies, it is perhaps all the more striking that both theorists quite explicitly privilege language as the paradigmatic, if not intrinsic, medium of narrative instantiation. Like Stanzel, Genette makes this axiomatic: he refers to media such as film and comic strips as extranarrative, “if one defines narrative *stricto sensu*, as I do, as a *verbal* transmission” (1988: 16).

I am suggesting instead that a narrative instance is any particular use of any medium for narrative purposes. Narration is essentially a representational act, not just a verbal one. Voice in Genette’s sense, then, is a figure for agency in narration: it is as inherently a part of film and drama as it is of the novel, and as crucial to understanding the rhetorical import of narratives in those media. In this respect, the voice metaphor is in no way specific to language, and neither are the main concerns that Genette addresses under this heading: person and level. Tense, Genette’s other concern under the heading of voice, is clearly specific to language unless taken more broadly as an index of the temporal relation between represented narrations and the events they narrate. (But see the following discussion of his comments on the homodiegeticizing effect of present tense narration.) As already noted in the previous chapter, Genette is himself quick to point out the strict irrelevance of the linguistic category of
person to the traditional distinction between first- and third-person narration: the basis for his own distinction between homo- and heterodiegetic narration, as well as the distinction of level between extra- and intradi- egetic narration, is the relation between the narration and the represented world of the story (I leave aside auto-, which is just a subset of homo-, and meta-, which is just second-degree intra-). I want to suggest, however, that even these distinctions, although undeniably useful, are not finally well-founded in terms of their own theoretical premises, and they actually point towards a somewhat different paradigm in which the salient fact is simply the recursive possibility that one of the many things a narrating instance may represent is another narrating instance, or in Plato’s terms, that narrative diegesis may give way to narrative mimesis.

Genette derives the adjective “diegetic” from the French term diégèse, not diegesis, so his terminology of level and person has no direct relation, despite appearances, to Plato’s distinction (1988: 18). Instead, it invokes a distinction originating in film theory between the diegetic universe (domain of the signified) and the screen universe (domain of the signifier). A diégèse, therefore, is the universe of the story narrated by a given discourse (17). Despite this subordination of diégèse to discourse, Genette’s classification of narrative levels assigns each narrating instance to the diegetic level that includes it, such that the “first level” of any narrative is necessarily “extradigetic” (1980: 228–29). In what sense, then, is the extradiegetic a diegetic level? Genette requires it to be such, since the primary narrating instance may be fictional, and so represented—and he insists anyway upon an irreducible distinction between the narrating instance and the authorial “literary instance” (229); but he also requires it not to be diegetic, since the primary narrating instance may be addressed to “you and me” (229). This frame asymmetry results from an attempt to halt the infinite regress of diegetic levels generated by the assumption that every narrative instance is a literal report with respect to the events represented: such an assumption dictates that if the events are fictional, the report is fictional and therefore must itself be represented, and so implicitly framed. And behind this literal conception of narrative mediacy, irrespective of whether or not the discourse is fictive, lies the equally untenable assumption that narrative mediacy is always narrative transmission: that narrative is something channelled through discourse, rather than created by it.

The equivocation between representational and transmissive senses of narrative instance is equally debilitating for the category of person, and Genette’s distinction between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration.
In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette draws a parallel between the homodiegeticizing effect, upon ostensively heterodiegetic narrative instances, of present tense narration and of historical narration in fiction (80–81). These are actually antithetical cases: one, under the sway of fictive representation, is pulling towards a sense of fictional instance (Genette cites the last chapter of *Tom Jones* among his examples); the other, under the sway of referentiality, is subverting the ontological integrity of the notion of a diegetic universe—because the narrator of a historical novel, by virtue of its historicity, necessarily figures as a quasi-homodiegetic “subsequent witness” (80). The fact is that the category of person, as defined by Genette, depends on an ontological notion of *diégèse* (it comes down to a relation of identity, or not, between the narrator and some member of the story universe, i.e., the complete set of states of affairs posited by the narrative). Accordingly, it has no place except within a rhetoric of fictionality; nonfictional heterodiegetic narration becomes meaningless. Genette’s anomalous cases are not marginal oddities within a formal narrative logic, but ordinary consequences of the contingency of representational rhetoric.\(^5\)

There is an inherent possibility for any representational medium to represent an instance of its own use; for example, a film that represents the filming of a series of events (e.g., *The Blair Witch Project*). This possibility is rarely realized in the extradiegetic narrative instance of a film, though the film-within-a-film is common enough; whereas the equivalent in linguistic fiction encompasses the whole range and history of homodiegetic narration, as well as intradiegetic narration (whether homo- or hetero-), that is to say, the whole order of narrative mimesis in Plato’s sense. The reason, presumably, is that verbal narration is a native human faculty, whereas cinematic narration is a sophisticated technological extension of human narrative powers. On the other hand, the private, internal faculty of narrative articulation (as distinct from communication) may as readily be cognitively perceptual as linguistic—as, for example, in dreams (see chapter six). Techniques of literary narration that strive to represent this mental faculty (internal monologue, stream of consciousness) can be seen as straining at the limits of their medium, and depend upon the establishment of certain representational conventions; their filmic equivalents—representations of dream narratives, for example—are accommodated more straightforwardly by the medium (it’s notable that dreams figure prominently in the early history of film).\(^6\) The prominence, in verbal fictions, of the mimetic paradigm (that is, of the narrating instance as a representational product) may account for a non sequitur that seems to
underlie many theoretical models of fiction. Represented narrations are theorized (modelled) in terms of actual narrations, a perfectly appropriate interpretative strategy (though theory often extends it well beyond its legitimately rhetorical scope by insisting upon a systematic formal equivalence that is by no means inherent in the analogy, and sometimes obfuscatory); then, by a kind of back-formation, actual narrations of fiction are themselves modelled as represented narrations, a move that requires some such hypothesis as a default narrator and a “dummy” representational frame of the sort I rejected in the previous chapter. A transmedia sense of narrative instance can be a helpful corrective here, if we reflect upon the redundancy of treating film in that way; as if there were any theoretical dividend to be gained from regarding the discourse of every fiction film not as the film itself, but as something ontologically framed and mediated by the film (the discourse of a filmic narrator, communicating as fact the narrative of the film, through the medium of film, yet being only a formal inference from the fictionality of the film).7

By viewing the narrative instance as a representational act, then, I am affirming two things. Firstly, that the most elementary and irreducible distinction among narrative instances is not symmetrical but hierarchical: it corresponds to Plato’s distinction between diegesis and mimesis, formulated as, on the one hand, a first-degree act of narrative representation (Genette’s extraheterodiegetic category); and on the other hand, a second-degree narrative representation of a narrative representation (all Genette’s other categories). This latter possibility is more prevalent in linguistic media than others, but in any case it encompasses all circumstances in which the concept of voice in my second sense, as represented idiom, may be applicable to a narrative instance, because it encompasses all circumstances in which the instance is itself an object of representation (see below). Secondly, I am affirming the importance of a distinction between narrative representation and narrative transmission. Properly speaking, media cease to function transmissively (i.e., as technological conduits for independently semiotic content) as soon as they themselves become semiotic—which is to say, here, representational (see chapter six). So while it is possible in nonfiction for a narrative instance to be transmitted within a framing instance (that is, for one narrative to be quoted within another), the appearance of such hierarchies of transmission within fiction is itself a product of representational rhetoric. The various transgressions of level that Genette classifies as metalepsis, whether foregrounded or incidental, are answerable only to that rhetoric; their significance is to be evaluated in relation to the discernible import of the representational discourse,
rather than to the iron law of noncontradiction. Beyond the pragmatic, contextual circumstances of actual communication (including actual fictive communication), the structure of narrative instantiation does not exist except as a product of representation, and the logic of represented narrative transmission has no priority over the rhetorical emphases of the representational act itself. Narrative theory and interpretation, then, must avoid the temptation to impose the coherence of a systematic logical structure upon the process of narrative representation, which is contingent and inherently protean in its rhetorical emphasis and focus, direction and misdirection. In reading through the represented structure of narrative transmission, narratologists should take care not to mistake interpretative strategies for theoretical paradigms.

**Idiom**

Where voice is used as a metaphor of idiom in narrative theory, it is a way of bringing to the fore the mimetic dimension of the narrative discourse, its capacity for representing the discourse of another. The represented discourse concerned may itself be a narrative instance, or it may be a discursive act of another kind; it may imply a particular discursive subject, or it may be a generic representation. The defining feature of voice in the sense of idiom is that it is always objectified, and hence the product of a representational rhetoric, and in this respect it is crucial to keep it distinct from voice as narrative instance. The temptation is to apply the sense of voice as idiom equally to represented discourses and first-degree narrative discourse, or diegesis, because intuitively, narrative language does not only represent voices, but also exhibits voice. In rhetorical terms, however, the function of voice in these two discursive contexts—diegesis and mimesis—is quite different. It is true that we are likely to focus upon a similar range of phenomena whether we attend to qualities of voice in narrative diegesis or in a represented discourse, but the significance of these phenomena for narrative interpretation is radically distinct in each case. When attending to voice in diegesis we are attending to rhetorical means (which may or may not be intentional), whereas in attending to voice in represented discourses we are attending to rhetorical effects—even where these take the form of represented rhetorical means, as for example in the case of a represented narrative instance. So in diegesis, questions of voice bear upon the significance we attribute to the represented events, the narrative object, whereas mimetic voice (which I’m calling idiom) invites
evaluation of the character whose discourse it represents—the discursive or narrative subject. It’s easy to see why the notion of voice as idiom might seem applicable to all discourse, but it’s also apparent, I think, that such usage strains the range of a single concept, given this disparity of rhetorical emphasis. In fact, the case in which both senses of voice are applicable (that of a represented narrative instance) does not obscure the difference between them, but highlights it. A narrative told by a character, considered as idiom, contributes to the job of characterization; considered as instance, it contributes to the job of narration. Most of the time there is no incompatibility between these two functions, though the emphasis varies widely from case to case. But fictions can include embedded narratives for reasons that have nothing to do with characterization, and in fact the latter may be an undesirable distraction. In such cases idiom defers to instance; this is commonplace in film, where a character’s narration typically progresses in quick succession from diegetic verbal discourse to voice-over, to impersonal filmic narration. But consider also the gothic novel, where the function of elaborate narrative embedding often has much less to do with the narrating characters than with a generic strategy for bridging the gap between the reader’s quotidian norms and the novel’s extreme, imaginatively remote subject matter (a similar strategy, in fact, to the “friend of a friend” framework typical of urban legend). Perhaps the most extreme example is *Melmoth the Wanderer*, the story of which is in part relayed via a Shropshire clergyman, Melmoth himself, the ancient Jew Adonijah, and the Spaniard Monçada to the student John Melmoth. These various narrative instances also span about 150 years, yet there is little attempt to distinguish the idiom of any of them.

Even within narratives in linguistic media, voice is used in senses ranging from the almost literal, for representations of oral discourse, to metaphorical applications so far abstracted from orality that the term becomes virtually interchangeable with “vision.” But throughout this spectrum, the notion of voice enshrines an assumption that the distinctive features of a discourse afford an insight into an enunciating subject—that voice is expression. Indeed, this assumption provides the whole rhetorical basis for the representational evocation of voice that I am categorizing as idiom: the point of representing a character’s idiom is very much to invite inference about that character’s subjectivity. Inference of this kind, however, is a much more hazardous and less obviously relevant undertaking when the notional voice is not objectified, as in narrative diegesis. In this case, many of the discursive features commonly embraced by voice are equally, and perhaps better, understood as style. By “style” I mean
discourse features understood in their relation to meaning, as conceived within the field of stylistics, rather than as the expression of subjectivity. This substitution makes it easier to recognize that there is no inherent expression of authorial subjectionhood—no authentic self-presence—in such discursive features; nor indeed is there inherently a singular authorial subject, either in linguistic media or (more self-evidently) in nonlinguistic media. Of course, stylistic analysis also relates discourse to ideological import, and this intimates another sense of voice that remains usefully applicable to narrative diegesis, but which relates narrative rhetoric to the constitution of a subject position, rather than to an originary subject as such; this usage belongs with the sense of voice that I am proposing to treat later, under interpellation.

For all forms of represented discourse, then, voice as idiom is a particular (idiosyncratic or typical) discursive evocation of character. It is worth insisting upon the correspondence between such rhetorical strategies in different media, in order to grasp the phenomenon at a representational level rather than a specifically linguistic level. The recursive model of represented voice that I’ve invoked suggests that the place to look for analogies would not be representations of verbal discourse in nonverbal media, but rather those cases where a medium is used to represent an instance of its own use. I’ve already suggested that the range of represented narrative instances in film might be taken to extend from fairly literal representations of the use of filmic apparatus to representations of the use of the medium’s semiotic channels, as mimetic of cognitive narrative processes. On this basis, represented narrative instances, which occupy one part of the territory covered by the concept of voice as idiom, would include dream or fantasy sequences, as in *Billy Liar* or *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*; but the same principle can be extended to other represented discursive and cognitive acts, including any point-of-view shot that represents the character’s own distinct cognitive-perceptual subjectivity, for example, the recurrent shot, in *Once upon a Time in the West*, of a blurred figure approaching, which turns out to represent the memory of “Harmonica” (Charles Bronson), articulated as his younger self’s exhausted perception of the approach of Frank (Henry Fonda) in the scene that motivates his vengeance.

The most inclusive applications of the term “voice” in narrative—those that are interchangeable with terms like “vision”—suggest the equal applicability of linguistic and perceptual metaphors for the concept, which is a helpful support for the proposal that the issue of voice should be placed in the context of representational rhetoric across all narrative media. The analogy with “vision” also relates directly to another prominent metaphor
in narrative theory that I shall discuss further when I come to address it under interpellation; that metaphor is focalization. But for the moment, I need to draw a principled distinction between focalization, as an aspect of voice as interpellation, and the discursive features that fall under idiom. Voice as idiom always constructs a distinct subject (even if generic), by virtue of its objectification, that is, its difference from the narrative diegesis (or a framing narrative mimesis) within which it is represented. Focalization, on the other hand, constructs a subject position only, which may or may not be aligned with a represented character (external focalization is precisely not character centred). When focalization is aligned with a character, its rhetorical means may very well be a representation of idiom. Consider the relation between free indirect discourse (FID) and internal focalization. Free indirect discourse is one of the privileged topics in discussions of narrative voice, and in my scheme it falls within the scope of voice as idiom. It also necessarily implies internal focalization (however momentary), though the reverse is not true: internal focalization does not always involve FID, or any other representation of idiom. Free indirect discourse is a form of discursive mimesis, whereas focalization is a feature of narrative diegesis (not, I hasten to add, of narrative transmission: it is a product of representational rhetoric, not an information conduit). Where FID and internal focalization coincide, these are two sides of the same coin, the one oriented towards the represented discourse, the other towards the subject position constructed by that representation.

How does this perspective upon voice inform an account of FID? The sense in which it involves some kind of doubling of voice was encapsulated in the title of Roy Pascal’s classic study of FID, *The Dual Voice*, as well as in Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of double-voiced discourse, of which it is a very specific instance (I shall return to Bakhtin below). One way to get at the hierarchical logic of this doubling of voice would be to consider a well-known example, not of the diegetic use of FID, but of a representation of its use by a character. It comes from Austen’s *Emma*, and the heroine is talking with Mrs. Weston about Miss Bates:

“To have her haunting the Abbey, and thanking him all day long for his great kindness in marrying Jane? . . . And then fly off, through half a sentence, to her mother’s old petticoat. ‘Not that it was such a very old petticoat either—for still it would last a great while—and, indeed, she must thankfully say that their petticoats were all very strong.’

“For shame, Emma! Do not mimic her. You divert me against my conscience.” (234)
Mimicry is a reasonably good model for how FID works: free indirect discourse is a representation of the idiom—the objectified voice—of another (here, Miss Bates), in neutral or parodic style, with sympathetic or ironic inflection, but in any case with a certain distance inherent in the fact that the representing act itself remains to the fore. This act, here, is Emma’s, and its indices persist within her mimicry of Miss Bates in the form of temporal and perspectival markers (past tense verbs, third person pronouns) that correlate to Emma’s own subject position rather than that of Miss Bates herself. That is to say, the sense in which Emma’s voice inhabits the FID is not as idiom, but as instance (overtly), and as interpellation (implicitly). Despite the fact that Emma is herself a representational object of Austen’s discourse, and so her idiom is objectified in the representation of her speech generally, there is no objectification of Emma’s voice within the FID. If there were, it would constitute a representational focus at odds with the mimicry and tending to obscure rather than highlight it. The sense in which FID is “double-voiced,” then, is a synthetic product of distinct senses of “voice.”

Emma’s mimicry diverts Mrs. Weston against her conscience; it is both entertaining and morally questionable. As such, it epitomizes Emma’s wit and her flawed character in a way that foreshadows the moment at the Box Hill picnic when Emma, goaded by the strained gaiety of the occasion, mocks Miss Bates to her face and so earns Mr. Knightley’s reprimand. Her wit and her flaws are also the qualities for which Austen supposed Emma to be a heroine no one but she herself would like, so it’s notable that this mimicry is stylistically indistinguishable from that practiced by Austen elsewhere in the novel, in her own FID representations of Miss Bates and others. If Emma is led astray by her wit, does Austen risk censure on the same grounds? No, because the subject position implied by Emma’s mimicry of Miss Bates is quite distinct from that implied by Austen’s representation of her doing so, and similarly distinct from the subject position implied by Austen’s own FID representations of Miss Bates. For Austen, and for us, these FID representations are not, after all, mimicry, because Miss Bates is fictional, and her characteristics are not imitated but (in part) produced by this authorial discourse. Emma’s moral hazard arises from the fact that she is mocking, to Mrs. Weston, a mutual acquaintance (though confidentially, to be sure)—and at Box Hill, catastrophically, she mocks the very person she is addressing. Austen, on the other hand, pillories no individual: the ethical force of her fictional representation lies in the normative implications of the distance between Miss Bates’s idiom and the authorial discourse. Richard Aczel usefully proposes that FID
in general can be considered in terms of its difference “not from some putative—but ultimately absent and irretrievable—character-utterance, but from a given and textually present narrating and quoting instance” (1998: 479). I agree, but I would cite the crucially different representational logics applicable to the two levels of FID in Austen’s novel in support of a more radical discrimination between its function within nonfictional and fictional rhetorical paradigms.11

**Interpellation**

Although certain forms of focalization go hand in hand with representations of voice as idiom, such as FID, this is not the sense in which voice may be understood as applicable to focalization in general. As idiom, voice is an object of representation: it is offered up to the evaluative scrutiny of the narrative’s audience and so held at arm’s length. There is a structurally intrinsic detachment, however sympathetic, to the rhetorical function of voice as idiom. Focalization in general, however, does not operate in this way: the perspectival logic of a representation is not manifested as an object, but as an implicit premise of the rhetorical focus of the representational act. That is to say, while voice as idiom serves to characterize a discursive subject as a more or less individuated object of representation, focalization as such functions indirectly, to establish a subject position only, one that may or may not coincide with a specific character, but which in any case is not an object of representation but a tacit rhetorical effect of the discourse’s mode of representation of another object. Where a specific character is involved, it is possible to describe the contrasting effects of represented idiom and focalization as comparable to an effect of sympathetic or ironic detachment, as against one of empathetic subjective alignment (as long as the term “empathy” can be understood as without evaluative prejudice). The more general, abstract concept that applies to the latter effect, however, is interpellation. This is the heading under which I want to consider the third sense, or group of senses, in which voice is used in narrative theory and criticism.

Interpellation is the process by which an ideology or discourse “hails” and constitutes individuals as subjects (Althusser 1971: 162). Narration always involves perspectival choices, which necessarily carry with them some set of presuppositions, ranging from the physical (spatiotemporal), through the epistemological, to the ideological. This structure of presupposition may be aligned with a character, as in first-person narration and
internal focalization, or it may not. But in every case, the act of narrative comprehension requires an imaginative alignment between the reader (or viewer) and the implied subject position of the discourse. Such alignment may, to an extent, be conscious and qualified by reservations of several kinds; but to the extent that it is unconscious, it has the ideological effect of making the implied subject position seem to constitute the authentic selfhood of the narrative recipient.\(^{12}\)

Perhaps the most overt example of interpellation in narrative (overt, but for that very reason also atypical) occurs in certain forms of second-person address. The second person has been used to a wide range of effects in both diegetic and mimetic narrative discourse and has attracted considerable research interest as a topic in its own right, usually treated as a category of narration. But it makes better sense in many cases to consider it as a strategy of focalization: not, that is, as part of a representational logic of narrative transmission, but as part of a rhetoric of interpellation. In most cases, beyond the pragmatic context of face-to-face narration, I would suggest that a narrative audience is unlikely to feel specifically and individually addressed by a narrative's use of the second person: certainly they do not generally respond as if they were. But to feel interpellated, certainly; in the sense that the second person can generate a subject position specified in terms of imaginative collaboration with the authorial address, with which an individual reader may engage, responsively or resistantly, in a more or less conscious exercise of perspectival alignment. A plausible analogy in film would be Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake*. It is usually cited as a (rather crude) experiment in cinematic first-person narration, but in fact the camera articulates the protagonist's experiential perspective, not his narration (this function is delegated to Marlowe's voice-over). The second-person rhetoric of such a narrative strategy is made explicit in the film's publicity tag line: "YOU accept an invitation to a blonde's apartment! YOU get socked in the jaw by a murder suspect!" (Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 268). The distinction between address and interpellation might be compared, in the context of filmic narrative, with the difference between treating the perceptual experience of a filmic diegesis as your own, and responding to it as the construction of a subject position with which you are invited (or induced) to align yourself imaginatively.

I've already discussed the sense in which voice, as represented idiom, can be understood as a rhetorical means of characterizing the subject of represented discourse. It is a perfectly intelligible and modest figurative leap from there to a usage of "voice" that refers to the subject position implied by any discourse (represented or diegetic, aligned with a character
or not). This is a distinct sense of voice not only because it need not be representationally embodied or owned by a character, or a narrating character, or indeed the author, but also because its scope extends well beyond the category of the discursive, or even the perspectival in any limited perceptual or cognitive sense (the domain of focalization), to become an organizing concept for ideology. Where the concept of voice is invoked in this sense, it seems to do quite various service for critical orientations ranging from Bakhtinian dialogics to identity politics. The figurative instability of the term itself is partly responsible, no doubt: it allows for uncertain fluctuation between a usage in which the ideological subject position is a discursive construct, and a usage in which it is an authentic manifestation of (subaltern) identity.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin identifies a range of “double-voiced” phenomena in narrative discourse, the dialogic nature of which is brought out only by a theoretical approach he describes as “meta-linguistic” (181). This is because double-voiced discourse is only perceptible as a feature of concrete, situated language use, from which the discipline of linguistics (including formal stylistics) is necessarily abstracted. Double-voiced discourse emerges, then, when the manifest voice of an utterance can be contextually understood to be in dialogue with some other, implicit voice. Voice in this second sense can be assimilated neither to voice as idiom, since it is not represented, nor to voice as instance, since it is not even explicit.\(^1\) Its implicit nature, and the fact that it is not necessarily attributable to a particular subject, or even any specific discursive form, marks this out as a sense of “voice” that falls under my category of interpellation. But clearly, since the dialogic interaction that interests Bakhtin is ideological (ideology being the unifying principle of the “voice” with which the discourse is engaged), the sense of voice that applies on the explicit side of the dialogue also finds its integrity in ideological terms, rather than as a set of formal discourse features, or the represented idiom of a particular subject. Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony necessarily dissociates voice from the individual subject, but without some other organizing principle the polyphony would be too diffuse a phenomenon to be conceptually useful—and in fact the notion of monologism, which Bakhtin retains, would be unintelligible. The organizing principle at work in Bakhtin’s system is a concept of voice as the relative agglomeration of ideological significance, the integrity of which is not (even in the most monological instance) to be found in the discursive subject as such, but in the projection of virtual subject positions; that is, in the mechanism of interpellation.
Perhaps the most prominent example of an attempt to integrate ideological critique within narrative theory is feminist narratology, and especially (in the context of this discussion of voice), the agenda set out by Susan Lanser in *Fictions of Authority*, the introduction to which puts her case for a “feminist poetics of narrative voice” (1992: 3–24). Some of the resistance to such a project within narratological circles might have been forestalled if Lanser had described her project as “metanarratological” in the same way that Bakhtin (whom she does invoke) describes his as metalinguistic. The reason she does not, perhaps, is that she regards the formal category of narrative voice (instance) and its ideological sense (interpellation) as merely two perspectives upon the same phenomenon. One symptom of this conflation of ideas is Lanser’s confusion about the status of an authorial narrator, which she situates, within two pages, both “inside” and “outside” the fiction (16–17). It is crucial to separate the different senses of voice, it seems to me, with regard to that other perennial issue in feminist theory, the distinction between discursive and essentialist constructions of gender. The narrative instance is not innately gendered; rather, it invites naturalization in terms of a gendered subject position, the ideological force of which may or may not be apparent to the reader. It is in the space between a passive (unconscious) and active (conscious) response to such interpellation—that is, between being defined by, and being empowered by, constructions of gender—that feminist narratology comes into play. Once again, it helps to insist upon the metaphorical extension of the concept of voice here by understanding it within the broad framework of narratives in all media, as a feature of the rhetoric of narrative representation in general and not of the particular discursive attributes of linguistic media: one very obvious example is the ideological function of the gaze as conceived in film theory since Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). By distinguishing between voice as idiom and as interpellation, I am contrasting a sense of the term in which it represents the expression of a particular subject with one in which it discursively insinuates an ideological nexus with the potential to constitute a particular subject (represented or otherwise). Such a distinction, I think, provides for a politicized sense of voice in which the contextual production of situated political identities is at stake (to be engaged critically, recognized, or resisted), without hypostasizing the concept as the authentic expression of such identities.

If my discrimination between senses of voice has any merit, it is the result of approaching the issue with two key assumptions in mind. Firstly, an assumption that the senses of voice—instance, idiom, and interpellation—
need to be conceived in terms of representational rhetoric, and in particu-
lar the rhetoric of fictionality; and secondly, an assumption that the issues
covered by the term “voice” are not exclusively linguistic, but semiotic,
and relevant across the whole range of narrative media. My argument in
this chapter has invoked the larger context of narrative media primarily
as a way of illuminating the specific literary case. But I want to turn next
to examples from other media, and to the place of media, in this semiotic
sense, within a rhetorical account of the narrative imagination.
My purpose in this chapter is to follow up on my objection, in chapter three, to the presumption that narrative, capable as it is of expression in several different media, is constituted by a medium-independent content and to advance instead a rhetorical model of its medium-contingency. I shall consider the nature and role of the medium against the background of a view of narrative as a cognitive faculty. My interest centres on the semiotic function of media and its place in a principled opposition between narrative and phenomenal experience, or more particularly, between fiction and illusion. This question is raised most pointedly in relation to iconic media, and so my main examples in this chapter are taken from the media of comics and film. Integral to my position is an emphasis on the self-reflexiveness of the narrative imagination in process, and it’s no coincidence that the examples I’ve chosen overtly thematize that self-reflexiveness; they serve both to illustrate and carry forward the discussion, and I shall attend to them in some detail accordingly. The subject matter of one (dreams) and the argument of the other (a parable of mimetic illusion) will lead me ultimately to some speculative reflection upon the relation between dreams and fictions in the light of the foregoing explorations.

**Narrative Media and Narrative Cognition**

The various notions of a medium in general usage tend to compound several overlapping senses, which have been helpfully teased apart by Marie-Laure Ryan: she draws a basic distinction between transmissive
and semiotic concepts of a medium, as a “channel of communication” or a “material means of expression” (2004: 16). Ryan argues that neither category alone can yield an adequate definition of medium. Transmissive senses represent media as merely the technological conduits of essentially autonomous meanings, whereas semiotic senses do not provide for the conceptual separation of medium and message that is necessary if we are to understand narrative as a structure independent of any medium, and transposable between media (17). However, the view I want to advance jetisons this second criterion, because it maintains that there is no conceptual level of narrative between the formlessness of mind-external data and the semiotic framework of representation, in which some medium is inherent, whether mental or technological: narrative ideation is itself medium bound, in the perceptual and conceptual apparatus of mental representation. Narrative, on this view, cannot be medium independent: it is always dependent on representation in some medium, although it is capable of harnessing several. In other words, my position implies that the semiotic sense of medium does indeed supply a necessary and sufficient definition of medium for the purposes of narrative theory, while the transmissive sense involves a range of more or less contingent, more or less technological extensions of the concept.

The sense in which the category of narrative transcends any particular medium, I suggest, is not to be conceived in deep structural terms, by invoking medium-independent notions such as fabula, or story grammar. It is a discursive matter—a communicative rhetoric that exploits certain representational capabilities that are common to a range of media. The alternatives to this view are that narrative structure can be conceived in the absence of representation, or that representation can be conceived in the absence of any medium. For narrative structure to be independent of representation, story logic would have to be innate in mind-external reality, the world itself already storied. On the other hand, it is possible to conceive of representation in the absence of a medium only by adopting an unjustifiably restricted definition of “medium,” for instance by regarding story grammars as mental representations, but independent of “medial realization,” which is then reserved for the process of “externalization” (Jahn 2003: 201). A medium, minimally, is a vehicle of semiosis, which is present at the ground level of cognitive processing, in the articulation of sense data in the perceptual system. The necessary condition for semiosis, here, is articulation, rather than communication in any restrictive “external” sense: semiosis is always, even within the mind, a contextually situated and dialogic process. The idea of representation is not intelligible
without a medium. The media of narrative mental representations, then, are the mind’s own perceptual and conceptual systems.

Resistance to this view may in part be a legacy of the structuralist analogy between narrative and language, which is itself indirectly buttressed in narrative theory by the privileged status often accorded to narratives in linguistic media. Ideas of narrative syntax, story grammars, and the general baggage of the linguistic analogy tend to contaminate more broadly cognitive terms such as “script” and “schema” (Schank and Abelson 1977). For my purposes, at least, the value of these concepts lies precisely in the extent to which they are irreducible to a linguistic paradigm, so it’s worth noting why that is so. Scripts are not particularized narratives, somewhat as grammars are not sentences; but unlike grammars, they are not generative, in the sense that they do not define what shall and shall not be a well-formed, or “grammatical,” narrative. Instead, scripts are heuristic: their value lies in the extent to which they facilitate the ongoing encounter between mind and temporal existence. Any heuristic will do until you encounter something that resists its explanatory or predictive power, at which point you have to revise the script. Grammars are medium-independent abstractions that can be used to characterize the structure of digital semiotic systems, such as language, which use discrete signifying units; but narrative is capable of articulation in both digital systems and analogue systems such as visual imagery, which are graded or scalar. Narrative, then, is not essentially a digital system, and it is not amenable to grammar. Narrative “grammars” themselves turn out to be limited heuristic devices. Scripts and schemata are not abstractions but templates, general-purpose representations, which serve as tools of the cognitive project of the narrative faculty. The narrative faculty, on this view, is not a species of the linguistic faculty, but something quite distinct, more inclusive and more elemental in its systemic logic.

In the discussion so far, I have silently run together two perspectives upon narrative representation that I now want to juxtapose more explicitly. In one perspective, a narrative is the object of interpretation; in the other, it is a means of interpretation. These alternatives are well captured in David Herman’s introduction to Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences, where he distinguishes between “making sense of stories” and “stories as sense-making” (2003: 12–14). We differ slightly in our interpretation of the second category, which he takes to mean stories “as tools for thinking” (14), whereas I take it, more fundamentally, to mean “stories as sense-making processes.” That is to say, I want to place the emphasis on the narrative process as a basic, essential human sense-making activity, rather than on
the narrative product as a tool of sense-making. This process is inherently anthropocentric, and indeed anthropomorphic, not because stories are about people (though they usually are), but because they are by people; their frame of reference is human experientiality. We are capable of recognizing the partiality and distortion entailed by this horizon, and we have developed other ways of modelling the universe which have greater analytic and predictive powers in many contexts, but there is something irreducible about the limitations of narrative sense-making, because those same limitations are integral to narrative’s role in the production of human value. This elemental reciprocity between narrative process and narrative meaning is what I mean to capture in the word “articulation,” which means both the creation of significant relations between parts, and the expression of such relations; in narrative, fundamentally, these two are the same. This reciprocity can also be seen as the root of a recursiveness that I think is innate in narrative understanding generally, and crucial to the fictive use of narrative. The same recursiveness is latent in Herman’s distinction between making sense of stories and stories as sense-making: the correlation of these two perspectives expresses very well the point that, within the parameters of narrative, making sense of stories is making sense of sense-making. That is to say that, both across and within media, narrative representations are intelligible in terms of other narrative representations. Narrative sense-making always rides piggyback upon prior acts of narrative sense-making, and at the bottom of this pile is not the solid ground of truth, but only the pragmatic efficacy of particular stories for particular purposes in particular contexts.

In elaborating this view, I shall focus on two examples that make highly self-conscious use of the recursiveness of narrative representation in their respective media. The second of these, The Countryman and the Cinematograph, is a surprisingly artful relic from the early years of film, which plays with the idea of mimetic illusion in its own medium and so contributes directly to my argument here. The first example is taken from Neil Gaiman’s Sandman, one of the most interesting works in the comics medium to date, which is formally self-conscious about its own media and thematically self-conscious about the narrative imagination in general, for example in relation to the recurrent figures of Orpheus and Shakespeare, and more particularly through its emphasis on dreaming (the Sandman himself, Morpheus, is Lord of the Dreaming, and much of the narrative advances through or in reaction to the dreams and nightmares of the characters). The comics page reproduced in figure 1 comes from Sandman volume two, The Doll’s House, and represents the dreams of a lesbian
couple named Chantal and Zelda, residents of the boarding house to which the title of the volume partly refers. The page contains two parallel narrative strands, Chantal’s dream running across the top and Zelda’s along the bottom, both anchored by the central image of the sleeping couple.

Before I address the reflexivity of representation in these dream narratives, however, I want to show how my perspective upon narrative media bears upon an example of narrative articulation in sequential art. Consider the relation between two adjacent comics frames, where these delineate a simple event, for example, the lifting of the veil, at the bottom right of the page. Here we have two consecutive images of the same figure, the first with the veil lowered, the second with it raised to reveal a spider’s head. The spider, and indeed the veil, are elements of the couple’s gothic preoccupations: they are known in the boarding house as the spider women, and they claim to have “the largest collection of stuffed spiders in private hands on the Eastern Seaboard” (66). These associations help to explain why Zelda’s response at this point in her dream is not the reaction of horror we might have expected. My immediate concern, however, is how such a sequence of two images works in narrative terms. If you were to explain how we comprehend this sequence you might say, with Umberto Eco, “obviously the reader welds these parts together in his imagination and then perceives them as a continuous flow” (1987: 24). But is this obvious? It may to an extent be possible to do so, in the same sense that it is possible to use a fiction as the basis for imagining a fictional world, though there is considerable scope for doing so in different ways (in this case, is the movement slow and ceremonial, or abrupt and dramatic?). However, I would argue that such a process is in no way inherent in reading such a sequence, and furthermore that in terms of narrative comprehension, it would in fact be a retrograde move.

Consider the way Eco’s comment represents what happens in the interpretation of a comics sequence such as this veil example. It is conceived as a two-stage process, an imaginative welding followed by perceiving, by means of which the reader works back through the transformations of the creative process and arrives at a virtual experience of the originary stream of sense data that it is supposed to mediate. The assumed end point of the process, that perception of “a continuous flow,” is the focus of my objection. An undifferentiated flux of sense impressions may indeed constitute the raw material of experience, but as undifferentiated flux it is meaningless; only the cognitive exercise of representation makes sense of it, by articulating it—among other things, demarcating it into events. The lifting of the veil is articulated as an event, an act of revelation, by these two
Figure 1 [this and facing page]

images, the two frames of the sequence. If we were really to respond to this sequence by subsuming it within a continuous flow, we would strip it of its status and meaning as an event. Event status, and narrative tellability, is not intrinsic in the temporal world, but evaluative, and always relative to some interpretative or communicative context (see the discussion of events in chapter three). There is a hint in Eco’s formulation of an analogy with film viewing, in which there is indeed a precognitive perceptual flow from frame to frame, but this is a conceptual transposition to another medium with different means of representation and narrative articulation.

It should not obscure the point, precisely because it is a shift to another medium, not a reading through the medium. In the realm of narrative comprehension, there is always another medium, because without media there is no representation; this is as true inside the head as it is on the page or screen.

The relation between frames is also discussed by Scott McCloud, who is quite clear about the differences between its operation in comics and in film. Here too, though, the point that concerns me is, at best, obscured. McCloud explains how we bridge the gutter between frames in terms of closure, a concept that would work very well if he meant it in the narrative sense, which is congruent with the demarcation of events. His usage, however, draws upon the idea of visual closure, “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (1994: 63), which makes it very prone to a conflation between representations and their objects. So while he says that “in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (66), a formulation I would happily accept, he also says that “closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous unified reality” (67), and “closure is comics’ primary means of simulating time and motion” (69). These are statements I want to resist, because they embody the basic assumption that I’m contesting: that is, the assumption that temporal existence is analogous to an object of representation, and so that representation simply provides for a reproduction, or simulation, of reality, temporality, and flux. Flux is what we encounter in the world, and there’s already plenty of it to keep us busy. Representation is one of the ways in which we busy ourselves, an encoding process of cognitive mapping which, as such, is semiotic: its power is that of assimilation, primarily by reducing the chaos of sense data to comprehensible terms. Representation always functions within some system of signs, the interpretants of which are not the real, but other signs. This pursuit of signs is a function of cognitive processing, and it could not lead beyond that frame of reference without ceasing to signify,
The efficacy of representation depends on the fact that it begins and ends in the mind: its baseline is not the real but the percept, which is itself a representation and only functional as significant within the differential system of perception. Narrative representation has its roots here, in the articulation of change: it delimits the mutability of matter in time, producing event, cause and effect, agent and purpose.

My view of the articulation of narrative events fits within a sense of narrative as a cognitive faculty. The event is a product of narrative processing, an instance of cognitive chunking in which the mind negotiates with temporal phenomena. Narrative processing, then, is a mode of articulation of the data of experience; “articulation” must be understood to mean the production of meaning, the creation of structure, rather than the expression of some mind-independent content. What matters is this codification, the respect in which mental representations differ from their objects rather than merely reproduce them, because this is the respect in which they assimilate data. A map you can read, however crude or partial, serves human purposes in ways that the illegible terrain itself cannot. It goes without saying that the meaning-producing act of articulation is also potentially a communicative, or meaning-sharing, act: meaning is inherently part of a discursive economy, whether it circulates within the individual mind or between minds.

Reflexivity and Dreams

I suggested that the principle of narrative recursiveness is crucial to the distinctive rhetoric of narrative fictionality, and the reflexivity of my Sandman example provides a way to elaborate upon that idea. The comics page in figure 1 is representative of the Sandman series as a whole in exhibiting several kinds of self-reflexivity, but I want to make a broad distinction between two kinds: the first kind, overt self-consciousness, is a circumstantial (but not unusual) feature of this example, and one of the ways fictionality often advertises itself; but the second kind, implicit self-reference, is the more fundamental feature of narrative self-reflexivity, and it is the exploitation of implicit self-reference that most strongly correlates with the rhetorical stance associated with fictionality.

Sandman is extremely self-conscious in its relation to the narrative stockpile of several cultures, drawing for example upon classical, Norse, African, and Eastern mythologies, as well as ranging widely over the liter-
ary canon. It is equally self-conscious in its more specific invocation of the history of the comics medium, including stylistic allusions to such varied instances as Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, EC horror comics of the fifties, and contemporary Japanese manga. It is also extremely self-aware and sophisticated in its use of the semiotic potential of the twin media channels of comics—image and text—both separately and in counterpoint to each other, and almost every page offers evidence of its rhetorical inventiveness in this regard. The overt self-consciousness in figure 1 is partly an instance of the way *Sandman* constantly indexes the literary and visual heritage of various cultural traditions. Here we have allusions to the gothic novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer* and *The Castle of Otranto* in particular, and the evocation of John Tenniel’s famous illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland*. Those are both features of Zelda’s dream, at the bottom of the page; but Chantal’s dream, at the top, also exhibits overt self-consciousness, in the way it manipulates the relation between the verbal and visual channels of the comics medium. Chantal dreams she is having a relationship with a sentence, and the sentence that tells us so, standing in for her lover-sentence (which we never get to read), is an embodiment of that odd elevation of language: the lettering emphasizes the materiality of the text (as in fact does the cursive script in the rest of Chantal’s dream, though to different ends), and the words form a monumental block filling half the frame, balancing the image of Chantal herself in the other half.

The verbal text of Chantal’s dream plays with the conceit of the lover-sentence in an overtly self-conscious way, but there is more going on in the images that complicates the story, and these effects depend on my second category of self-reflexivity, the implicit self-reference exploited by the rhetoric of fictionality (here, I’m referring to the fictionality of *Sandman*, not of Chantal’s dream narrative). This visual counternarrative begins at the juncture of text and image, with the letter Z, which appears to be the title of the book in Chantal’s dream; it is also, as Zelda’s dream reveals, the pet name Zelda’s mother used for her (and a central theme of Zelda’s dream is the structural interchangeability of her mother and Chantal). So it is significant that in the second frame Chantal kisses the book, as opposed to the sentence, and that in this frame, her head position and her anomalously dishevelled hair closely echo the image below, of their actual sleeping position, in which Zelda occupies the position of the book. These metonymic and metaphorical displacements (sentence to book, book to Zelda) imply that understanding the sentence is understanding Zelda, and they establish a web of signification that extends across narrative strands and narrative levels. As such, the visual counternarrative depends
upon discursive self-reference, rather than reference to any notional object of representation, and is sanctioned by our awareness of fictionality. But Chantal’s explicit dream narrative and this elaborated subtext work in tension with each other, and the next frame reasserts her idealized self-image, as represented by the full-face pose. The conflict involved in sustaining the surface narrative finds expression in the negative turn of events from this point on, and the direct gaze of Chantal’s ideal self-representation prepares the way for its fracture into shards in the last frame of the dream. This confirms it as a mirror image—or perhaps, since the “Z” is not reversed, as the Platonic self of whom the dreaming Chantal is herself only a broken reflection.

The *Sandman* series, as a whole, offers a wealth of material about dreams, but I’ve chosen to focus upon this page primarily because it offers a plausible, fairly literal representation of certain aspects of dreaming in process which open up interesting questions about the narrative quality of dreams. Cognitive approaches to dreaming are hampered by the inaccessibility of the primary empirical data, of course, and this is no answer to that problem: I’m not proposing to do anything so tendentious as to treat these fictional representations of dreams as if they were instances of actual dreaming. What I want to do, though, is to use some of the issues raised by the attempt at representation itself as an occasion to reflect upon certain features of dreaming, and in that context to relate the narrative quality of mental representations to that of the iconic (and semi-iconic) physical media of comics and film.

The two instances of dream representation in figure 1 respond to the challenge in different ways, which are manifested in their differing strategies of narration and focalization. Chantal’s dream is narrated in the third person, which might deter us from attending to her as dreaming subject, except for the strong sense of internal focalization—that is, of an alignment between the third person narration and Chantal’s own perspective. This is apparent in the text of the dream, and in the form of that text, the cursive script suggestive of Chantal’s own handwriting. It is also conveyed by the sense that, as I’ve already suggested, the frontal images of Chantal are mirror images, and hence that we are seeing through her eyes. The sense of Chantal’s dream that emerges is of a third-person self-narration, in which experience is continuously pushed to arm’s length, producing the cyclical, self-eluding self-consciousness that is central to Chantal’s characterization. A little later, her dreaming becomes an infinite regress in the form of spiralling repeated images with the text: “It was a dark and stormy night. And the skipper said to the mate, ‘Mate, tell me a story.’ And this
is the story he told: It was a dark and stormy night . . .” (191). Just as the substance of Chantal’s dream is an evasion of self-knowledge, then, the representation of that dream evades an ambiguity between dreaming as experience and dreaming as narration, even as it foregrounds it: the dream Chantal produces and consumes remains trapped in cycles of creation and reception, writing and reading.

Zelda’s dream is different in a number of ways. Firstly, the text is first-person narration, except in the very last frame. At the same time, the visual self-representation is even more dissociated than Chantal’s: it is not even a childhood self, but a cultural archetype of the young girl adrift in a strange world—Alice in Wonderland. There is a stronger sense here of a fluid, reciprocal relation between the generation of the dream narrative and the dreamer’s experience of it, a reciprocity conveyed by distributing its elements between the verbal and visual channels of the representation. The verbal narrative is a breathless monologue (the text is compressed so that there are no spaces between the words), which at times becomes a kind of metadiscourse, a running commentary on the visual articulation of the dream narrative: “That’s us”; “Let it be Chantal, not my Mom”; “Thank you God.” The visual channel, meanwhile, is both anticipating and responding to the verbal discourse. The iconography of mother and daughter in the second frame conflicts with the commentary identifying this as Chantal and Zelda, and leads into the anxious confusion of Chantal with Zelda’s mother that follows. Conversely, the verbal narrative of Zelda’s mother saying “Oh God Zee you’re sick listen Robert do you know what I saw in her room your daughter’s disgusting” is then elucidated via the image of an animal skull, the ornate picture frame of which marks it as a flashback, an image of a disturbed family history preserved on Zelda’s psychological mantelpiece. The perspectival fluidity of Zelda’s dream is even more apparent in the last three frames. The veil sequence is the only clear-cut example here of first-person experiential perspective, images in which the dream experience and dream narration coincide, whereas the detached third-person narration of the final frame removes us to a greater distance from the action than at any point previously. This frame can only continue to make sense as Zelda’s own dream perspective at the cost of a radical dissociation from her own self-representation—that is, a close analogue of the shattered mirror effect at the end of Chantal’s dream.

This problem of person and perspective in the representation of dreams is indicative of the dream’s ambiguous status between experience and narrative. The ambiguity is in part a question of the distinction between the dreaming mind and its self-representation within the dream—a distinction
manifest, for example, in any awareness that you are somehow not your-
self, as Zelda most obviously is not—but it is also, more broadly, a question
of consciousness in dreams. The difficulty in locating the self in dreaming
is the reason why it turns out that the most partial self-representation
here is the most direct one, the first-person experiential perspective of the
veil sequence. Conversely, the most rounded perspective emerges from the
most dissociated representation, the last frame, incorporating as it does the
interpretative idiosyncrasy of Zelda’s affective response to her own dream.
Selfhood is never integral in a semiotic model of cognitive articulation,
which is both by and for the self: dreams tend to foreground this internal
division, by compounding the split between sender and receiver with a
split between narrator and protagonist, the self who creates and the self
who experiences the dream.

A Parable of Mimetic Illusion

The issue that lurks behind this ambiguity between narrative and experi-
dence is that of the relation between representation and illusion, and I
can best elucidate that issue by appealing to my second example, and the
medium of film. The sense of an affinity between dreams and film has
been frequently noted and is perhaps most obviously expressed in the
common epithet for the Hollywood studio system, the “dream factory.”
It predates Hollywood, though, as the most cursory survey of early film
subjects will confirm. Counting only British films up to 1910, for instance,
records survive of over thirty titles along the lines of “Let Me Dream
Again” (1900), “The Ploughboy’s Dream” (1904), “The Bobby’s Nightmare”
(1905), “Dreamland Adventures” (1907), “In the Land of Nod” (1908), or
“Saved by a Dream” (1909). The film I want to discuss, however, has a
more analytical relation to the issues underlying this association, because
it literally stages the relation between illusion and narrative representa-
tion, at stake in both dreams and film, and it does so in a strikingly self-
reflexive way.

The early development of a new medium, as with a new genre, is
always likely to be accompanied by a high degree of self-consciousness.
On the other hand, its semiotic function as a medium is potentially ob-
scured when it lays claim to public attention most compellingly because of
its unprecedented verisimilitude, which is to say its apparent immediacy.
Such was the case in the earliest days of the cinema, when the technology
of the moving image was put before the public as an innovation for the
recreation not just of movement, but of life (not just the Cinematograph and the Kinetoscope, but Vitagraph, Bioscope, Zoograph, etc.). The communicative potential, and hence more specifically the narrative potential, of filmic representation necessarily had to wait for the emergence of a filmic rhetoric, and the consequent sense that the medium itself (rather than its representational content) was a way of articulating meaning, and not just a channel for transmitting phenomenological data. Normally, this filmic rhetoric is associated with the gradual development of editing conventions over the first twenty years of cinema history. My example suggests that its fundamental principles are being negotiated rather earlier, specifically in terms of the self-consciousness of filmmakers and the self-reflexive representations that characterize many of their early efforts. That is, I suggest that a fictive rhetoric of filmic representation, with its propensity for reflexiveness, can be seen to lead rather than follow the development of filmic narrative.

Of course, film producers and spectators were necessarily aware from the first that the filmic image, as such, is a representational product, which implies reciprocal assumptions about communicative agency and effect. The Lumière brothers, for example, dealt almost exclusively in actualities rather than overtly staged action, but their films exhibit a clear and deliberate use of the compositional principles of photography, both in spatial terms and, by extrapolation, in the management and selection of movement, most notably in their preference for strong diagonal movements towards and past the camera. One instance of this particular compositional technique is the subject of what has been described as “perhaps the oldest cliché of film history” (Kirby 1997: 62), the anecdotal story of how the first audiences of the Lumière’s L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de la Ciotat (1895) panicked and fled at the sight of the onrushing train. One obvious reason for scepticism about the supposed impact of L’Arrivée d’un train is that, as the title implies, it shows the train pulling into a station; anyone caught up in an illusionistic effect would feel themselves safe on the platform with the camera. But early cinema audiences may plausibly have been startled by some of the images presented to them, without this amounting to a triumph of mimetic illusion. Noël Burch, for example, sees no reason to doubt it, but he insists that mimetic illusion in any such sense has no place in the history of the cinema. Stephen Bottomore has shown that the cumulative evidence of reports of such reactions to early films (mostly, though not exclusively, of approaching trains) cannot be entirely explained away by reference to the enthusiastic hyperbole of reviewers, the self-interested publicity of exhibitors, or early audiences’ gratifying
projection of an unsophisticated other’s naïve response. He also offers an account, drawn from perceptual psychology, of a recognized reflex response to certain visual stimuli (the “looming” response), which is normally overridden by higher cognitive competencies, but which may well explain the flinching of some perceptually confused spectators in response to the novel stimulus of cinematic images (1999: 189–90). Nonetheless, I am most interested by the continuity between such stories about the reactions of early cinema audiences and a long tradition of equivalent tales, which might be labelled “parables of mimetic illusion.” One of the most ancient of these, recorded in Pliny’s *Natural History*, concerns the rivalry between the artists Zeuxis and Parrhasius:

This last, it is recorded, entered into a competition with Zeuxis, who produced a picture of grapes so successfully represented that birds flew up to the stage-buildings; whereupon Parrhasius himself produced such a realistic picture of a curtain that Zeuxis, proud of the verdict of the birds, requested that the curtain should now be drawn and the picture displayed; and when he realized his mistake, with a modesty that did him honour he yielded up the prize, saying that whereas he had deceived birds Parrhasius had deceived him, an artist. (1952: XXXV, 65–66)

Here the emphasis falls upon the power of art to deceive, to mimic nature so successfully that its artifice goes undetected by innocent nature itself, and even by the knowing artist. The model of creativity is competitive: artist versus artist, art versus nature. A contrasting example might be the myth of Pygmalion, in which art fuses with life under pressure from the sheer force of desire. Again, though, the emphasis is on creativity, not reception. The only audience is the artist himself, and so the implied model of art lacks a properly communicative, semiotic dimension. A closer analogy to the cinematic version of mimetic illusion would be the tradition of deluded responses to theatrical performance, as enacted in various plays within plays, or represented within the history of the novel by such as Cervantes in *Don Quixote* (1950: II: 26) and Fielding in *Tom Jones*. In Fielding’s play scene, the eccentric Mr. Partridge provides an ironic reversal of the classical *ars est celare artem*: he admires the bombastic actor playing Claudius, but he cannot perceive that the naturalistic Hamlet is acting at all (1966: XVI, 5; 759–60). Extrapolating from this version of the parable, we get a reception theory in which verisimilitude loses its value if it is not recognized as artifice. The best way to approach the cinematic
myth of mimesis, though, is through early cinema’s own versions of the parable, which both instantiate and reflect upon the rhetorical force of the medium and contemporary audiences’ attitudes of reception. R. W. Paul’s 1901 film, The Countryman and the Cinematograph, is probably the earliest of these cinematic parables of mimetic illusion. Only a fragment of the film survives, but the full narrative is recorded in Paul’s film catalogue:

This amusing novelty is a representation of an animated photograph exhibition and shows the stage, proscenium and screen. The first picture thrown on the screen is that of a dancer, and a yokel in the audience becomes so excited over this that he climbs upon the stage and expresses his delight in pantomime as the picture proceeds. The next picture (within the picture) is that of an express train, which rushes towards the yokel at full speed, so that he becomes frightened, and runs off at the wings. The last scene produced is that of the yokel himself, making love to a dairy maid, and he becomes so enraged that he tears down the screen, disclosing the machine and operator, whom he severely handles. (BFI Screenonline)

The surviving fragment runs from the end of the dancing scene to the beginning of the yokel and the dairy maid. The footage of the train provides a broad visual echo of the Lumière’s film—the point of view and direction of movement are the same—and while trains were a staple subject of early cinematic attractions, it is quite possible that the allusion is intentional. The yokel, however, is clearly not a representative member of the viewing public, but very much a stock character, a country bumpkin complete with smock, floppy hat, and neckerchief. He is a foil, like Fielding’s Partridge, and his function is not to represent the audience’s own attitude of reception, but to throw it, comically, into relief. The film was effective enough to attract the attention of the Edison Manufacturing Company, for whom Edwin Porter made a close copy, entitled Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show, the following year. Porter’s version uses inset film subjects from the Edison catalogue, including The Black Diamond Express (though not the extant version of 1896). The Edison train films are more dramatic than the Lumière’s offering and occasioned several stories of audience panic in their own right (Bottomore 1999: 181, 187). Uncle Josh, a country rube played by Charles Manley, had already featured in two Edison films, themselves part of a larger group of rube films from Edison and other producers. Manley’s Uncle Josh was also an established character in vaudeville, and the larger entertainment context of vaudeville and music hall helps
situate these encounters with the moving pictures. The countryman and
the moving pictures meet on stage: the framing theatrical setting is very
prominent in *Countryman*, and even more so in *Uncle Josh*, where the rube
(somewhat implausibly) has his own stage-side box. It is a kind of double
act between rival attractions, the comic turn and the screen, the more so
because the film within the film is an overtly fictional representation of
early cinema, just as obviously as the countryman is a stock fictional char-
acter. The narrative requires this: the presented scenes must follow each
other in rapid sequence, without interruption for the changing of reels, or
for the oral presentations of the exhibitor (*Uncle Josh* risks undermining
the whole basis of the comedy by including intertitles, as well as some
preliminary self-promotion for the Edison Kinetoscope). Similarly, both
films place the projectionist behind the screen for the sake of the narrative
climax, when the screen is torn down to reveal the machinery of illusion;
this despite the fact that rear projection was never general practice, for the
obvious pragmatic reasons that this made it difficult for the projectionist
to also present the attractions, and it required considerable depth of space
behind the screen (in *Uncle Josh*, the Kinetoscope is clearly far too close
to the screen to project an image of the size shown). The manifest artifice
of this representation of cinema serves to accentuate the fictionality of the
countryman’s own naïve response, and it foregrounds the several respects
in which he fails to recognize the semiotic nature of the medium. In doing
so, this cinematic take upon the parable of mimetic illusion treats the
fundamentally anti-illusionistic nature of the rhetoric of film as axiom-
atic—and prior to any consideration of the conventions of editing, since
these films are presented as single-shot narratives, despite the elaborate
postproduction actually required to achieve their effects. In particular, I
suggest that these self-reflexive films draw attention to three aspects of
the iconic image and insist upon their semiotic function. These three fac-
tors are scale, perspective, and framing. They are, of course, implicated in
each other, but I shall address them in that sequence, moving from the
least to the most inclusive.

**Scale, Perspective, Frame**

Scale in the visual arts may be considered as the spatial equivalent of the
temporal concept of “duration” in narrative discourse, as formulated by
Gérard Genette (1980: 86–112). Just as it is possible to identify a vari-
able relation between discourse time and story time (rather figuratively in
the case of the linguistic media with which Genette was concerned, and literally in the case of temporally iconic media such as film), so it is possible to consider the visual image in terms of a variable relation between image size and object size. It is very striking that even into the 1910s the cinematic trade press would frequently recommend the use of a screen of about ten feet by twelve feet, in order to produce a “life-size” image (Brewster and Jacobs 1997: 165). This recommendation is unintelligible without the inference that theatrical staging was still regarded as a compositional norm for cinematography even at that date. On that assumption, a projected image of ten feet by twelve feet would indeed reproduce the actors at approximately life size, since they would be in full shot, some distance beyond the picture plane (which equates, in theatrical composition, with the proscenium), and so they would be about six feet high on the screen. The illusionistic potential of this arrangement, though, is compromised even in shots that conform to its compositional premise by the fact that it takes no account of the perspectival effect of the representation of depth within the image. The six-foot image of a figure apparently several yards beyond the picture plane is in one sense life size, but in another (perspectival) sense gigantic.

The issue of scale necessarily arises in *Countryman* and *Uncle Josh*, where the protagonist attempts to interact with the figures on the represented screen. In *Countryman* it is handled quite well: though the train seems a bit too small, the images of the dancer and the country couple are proportionate to their apparent distance from the yokel’s own position adjacent to the picture plane. In *Uncle Josh*, though, the country couple comes much closer to the camera, and as a result they seem huge behind the diminutive figure of Uncle Josh himself—though arguably this just adds to the comedy of his attempted assault. In any case, in both films the juxtaposition of the countryman and the screen highlights the awareness of scale, whether absolute or relative, that is basic to our competence as interpreters of images. The countryman’s inability to distinguish between image and object is in part a comic obliviousness to the negotiation between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality by which we relate absolute image size on the screen to relative, diegetic object size. This consideration, of course, is inextricable from the question of perspective.

A necessary condition for the emergence of linear perspectival representation in the Renaissance was the assumption of a fixed viewing position, a single (and monocular) central point of view in relation to the picture plane—which the framed painting could specify in a way that the fresco could not (Heath 1976: 80). This premise enables a geometrical
mapping of three dimensions onto two, based on the points of intersection between the picture plane and light rays traveling from (actual or hypothetical) represented objects to that singular viewing position. Comprehension of perspectival representation depends on the ability of the viewer to correlate the plane of representation and the effect of represented depth in a reciprocal relation. The optical geometry of perspective remains unaltered by the mechanization of image production in photography, or its combination with movement in film: the cognitive exercise of interpreting a filmic image requires the same fundamental combination of two-dimensional and three-dimensional paradigms. The Countryman and the Cinematograph exploits this doubleness beautifully in the staging of its train gag to produce a witty double take upon the supposed reaction of audiences to the Lumière brothers’ train film (figure 2).

The yokel stands to the left of the inset screen, so although he must of course see what we see—a train traveling diagonally past the camera from right to left—we are also teased into visualizing the action in a way that makes better sense of his terror, by collapsing the film’s two levels of representation into one: from our perspective, the image of the train does indeed then rush directly towards the yokel. The comic timing here is perfect, with the yokel turning to flee at just the point when the edge of the screen breaks the illusion. It is a subtlety that the Edison version misses out on entirely, because while Uncle Josh also stands to the left of the screen, the footage of Black Diamond Express, though impressive in its own right, involves a diagonal movement past the camera from left to right—apparently away from the inexplicably panic-stricken rube.

Another element of the issue of perspective is being worked through in the recursiveness of these films. The perspectival logic of representation dictates that in terms of the diegetic universe we are not where we are (in the cinema) but in an imaginary spatial relation to the scene. The primacy of diegetic perspective goes hand in hand with the dominance of narrative in cinema; but at the time of Countryman and Uncle Josh this dominance was not yet established. Tom Gunning has characterized the dominant cinematic mode of this period as a “cinema of attractions,” in which the film action addresses itself directly to the audience, exhibiting itself rather than cultivating the sense of a self-contained diegetic universe (“Attractions” 56–62). The camera is treated in effect as a simple conduit between the space of performance and the space of exhibition (though this sense of immediacy was exploited through the elaborate use of stop motion and other devices by Georges Méliès and others). The cinema of attractions correlates with the fixed camera and frontal presentation typified by theatrical
Figure 2
staging, and it also reflects the common exhibition context of the period, in which film itself was often only one among several attractions. These features, as I’ve already suggested, are both embodied by and represented in Countryman and Uncle Josh, by virtue of their recursive nature: they are set on the stage. So, too, is another index of the cinema of attractions, the look at camera, which epitomizes that direct address. These mock country bumpkins perform their yokely or rube-ishlyness towards the camera as much as towards the phenomena that occasion it, the images on the represented screen. But in this respect, the recursive nature of the mise en scène, instead of baring the device as it generally tends to do, has a rather contrary effect, since it introduces (and arguably foregrounds) a representational ambiguity: is the countryman mugging at us, the actual audience, or at the diegetic audience of the moving picture show he is disrupting? The question is undecidable, but the latter interpretation follows from the rhetoric of disavowal by which we are invited to distinguish between ourselves and the countryman: if we laugh at his confusion of actual and diegetic perspective, we are prompted by contrast to naturalize his address in relation to a diegetic audience, rather than to ourselves. The rhetorical insinuation of such a perspective intimates a more fully diegetic narrative cinema and further enriches the sense in which these films are reflexively probing the representational possibilities of their own medium.

The fixed perspective of the cinema of attractions is not restricted to the model of theatrical staging, but draws upon a number of other models in order to motivate the camera’s viewpoint. The traditional view of early cinema as primitive took such motivation of perspective as evidence of a reception context in which the presentation of unmotivated views (such as a close-up without prior establishment, within the diegetic universe, of the optical means for that view) would be cognitively disorienting for the audience. But although some early films did supply diegetic motivation for the views they presented (Grandma’s Reading Glass, 1900; As Seen through a Telescope, 1900), in general the perspectival motivation derives from other media of representation, such as the magic lantern screen and the comic strip frame, or from other genres of exhibition, such as the music hall genre of comical facial expressions (Gunning, “Primitive” 100). The teleological fallacy behind the old “primitive cinema” account of early film is thrown into relief by the self-conscious redoubling of theatrical staging in Countryman and Uncle Josh. The disorientation exhibited by the cognitively challenged countryman actually tends in the opposite direction to that assumed by the idea of a primitive stage of cinematic development: it is not a failure to comprehend the representations presented to him, but
a failure to recognize them as representations. That is to say, he all too readily naturalizes the images he encounters, but as phenomenological rather than semiotic facts. He does this, furthermore, irrespective of the perspectival motivation of the images presented. The theatrical presentation of the dancer is plausibly continuous with the countryman’s actual environment, but the view of the train is, or ought to be, unassimilable in phenomenological terms. And to this must be added his obliviousness to the entirely arbitrary and noncontinuous cuts between the three presented views (see Gunning, “Non-Continuity” 86–94). Clearly, there is no role here for perspectival motivation conceived as a way of naturalizing the presentation of diegetic phenomena. The countryman is an exemplary primitive, far behind the actual audience assumed by these films, but what he lacks is the ability to recognize moving images as images, situated within an established visual culture. It is this cultural frame of reference, above all, that is invoked by the exhibitional motivation of perspective in early film, in order to relate it to a larger context of visual signifying practices. Perspectival motivation is a matter of rhetorical orientation, not a concession to the supposed cognitive difficulty of assimilating the new and alien phenomenon of the moving image.

The most salient feature of moving images is, of course, movement, the interpretation of which once again involves both three-dimensional and two-dimensional cognitive frames: the train moves relative to the diegetic background, and it moves across the screen. A striking oddity among the early Lumière actualities shows a moving walkway in Paris (Exposition Universelle de 1900: Vue prise d’une plate-forme mobile I). To modern eyes, it appears at first to be a tracking shot, and only upon closer inspection does it become apparent that the camera is stationary and that the almost uniform movement across the screen is in fact diegetic. This momentary cognitive disorientation would not have arisen for the film’s first audiences, for whom the stationary camera and consequent interpretation of movement relative to a fixed frame were normative conventions. Once again, the example resists a teleological sense of the natural development of filmic representation; what it also makes clear is that perspectival interpretation of film also necessarily involves an awareness of the frame.

Consciousness of the frame reminds us that the image has edges, that it is not coextensive with the field of vision, but a bound and discrete unit of information. Countryman and Uncle Josh thematize the cinematic frame by representing it: the screen itself is part of the mise en scène, there on stage, framed by the theatrical proscenium. Our attention is directed to
this literal edge and its function of semiotic demarcation most obviously by the movement of the train towards it and out of shot. The representation of the screen and of its limits serves to illuminate the way in which these two, image and frame, always interact. The train, as an object of representation, does not exactly disappear or cease to move as it passes out of shot, since that would require signification, whereas what happens is precisely that it ceases to be signified. Diegetic continuity beyond the frame is a matter of inference and depends on a prior distinction between the space of representation and the space of exhibition. The countrymen, however, are unable to grasp this distinction, because what they perceive is a train, not the representation of a train. Indeed, the sense of continuity between diegetic space and the auditorium is explicitly foregrounded in some contemporary comments upon the effect of early train films. It is what impressed Méliès about L’Arrivée d’un train: “the train dashed towards us, as if about to leave the screen and land in the hall” (Bottomore 1999: 194); and a poster for the cinématographe by Abel Truchet represents a film screening in which the train tracks do indeed extend beyond the screen into the auditorium (195). Upon the basis of just such a sense of the frame-breaking potential of the train image, the countrymen take evasive action: Uncle Josh retreats hastily to his box; R. W. Paul’s yokel, with a surer sense of the comedy of reflexivity, flees out of shot. The audience is prompted to draw a contrast between the yokel’s understanding of the represented frame and their own understanding of the film’s actual frame; their own ability to negotiate between image and diegetic space versus the yokel’s inability to do so.

The frame is not essentially a literal, physical limit, however: representations may indeed be effectively coextensive with our perceptual field (as in dreams or virtual reality simulations) without ceasing to be representations. In such cases, the frame is conceptual, demarcating the boundary between dreaming and waking, inside and outside the simulation, irrespective of the evidence of our senses. But in fact the frame is always fundamentally a concept. Direct perception of the image boundary is not necessary, because the knowledge that it is there is inherent in our understanding that it is an image. The frame is a basic element of the conceptual apparatus of semiotic interpretation, a fact brought to prominence by the way a number of early films play with frame-breaking devices. Two well-known examples are Cecil Hepworth’s How It Feels to Be Run Over (1900) and James Williamson’s The Big Swallow (1901?). Hepworth’s film shows a car traveling directly towards the camera, until the frame is completely filled and goes black, and the film resorts to intertitles scratched into the
cellulose itself: “?? !!! Oh! Mother will be pleased.” Williamson’s film shows an expostulating gentleman whose response to media intrusion is to advance upon the camera until his mouth fills the frame, at which point the film cuts to a separate shot of a camera and cameraman tumbling into darkness, and then back to the gentleman happily chewing and smacking his lips. Neither film, of course, can actually break its own frame—hence the compromise representations of their climactic moments. The real target of their playfulness, however, is not so much the literal frame in itself as the concept of the frame, the sense in which the frame is not a representational feature of the narrative transmission, but a rhetorical feature of imaginative orientation (see chapter four).

The situation is different in Countryman and Uncle Josh, where the representation of a frame within the frame provides the opportunity for a literal enactment of frame breaking. There is a significant difference in the way each film conceives the narrative development towards that moment, however. Both present it in three stages, in terms of the responses elicited by three films. In the first, a dancer, an image in keeping with the countrymen’s actual environments, prompts them to participate—but in a kind of parallel play: there is no direct interaction, and the integrity of the frame is not tested. In the second film, an image entirely alien to the theatrical environment—a speeding train—threatens to intrude into it, and the countrymen flee. From this point onwards Uncle Josh’s progress diverges from that of his precursor, as the description from the Edison film catalogue makes clear:

He is no sooner seated than a country couple appear upon the screen at a well. Before they pump the pail full of water they indulge in a love-making scene. Uncle Josh evidently thinks he recognizes his own daughter, and jumping again upon the stage he removes his coat and prepares to chastise the lover, and grabbing the moving picture screen he hauls it down, and to his great surprise finds a kinetoscope operator in the rear. The operator is made furious by Uncle Josh interrupting his show, and grappling with him they roll over and over upon the stage in an exciting encounter. (American Film Institute Catalog A.16342)

Having learned nothing from his anticlimactic encounter with the image of the train, Uncle Josh attempts to intervene within the representational frame, inadvertently breaking that frame and becoming the baffled victim of the projectionist’s anger: he remains a dupe to the last. R. W. Paul’s countryman, on the other hand, encounters his own image (rather than
that of his daughter) in the third film. It is a revelatory moment, a kind of parodic mirror stage, in which the countryman himself is exposed to the self-reflexiveness that has informed the audience’s experience throughout, and upon which the whole film is predicated. This second self can only be an image, and furthermore a compromising image that the countryman would rather not have on public display: “he becomes so enraged that he tears down the screen, disclosing the machine and operator, whom he severely handles” (BFI Screenonline). In a flash of insight, the countryman comprehends the fact of representation, its rhetorical force, and the agency behind it, and his frame-breaking action is a deliberate intervention, not in the represented world, but in the process of representation.

As a cinematic version of the parable of mimetic illusion, then, The Countryman and the Cinematograph is a technically and rhetorically sophisticated, as well as amusing, contribution to the tradition. It provides occasion for reflection upon the elementary features of our interpretative orientation towards images in general, moving images in particular, and the rhetoric of narrative in visual media. It exhibits an emergent filmic rhetoric of fictionality, the foundations of which are anything but illusionistic and indeed would be entirely undermined by the viewer’s cognitive transportation within the representational frame. On the contrary, this rhetoric is not available except in respect of the medium’s function as a vehicle of semiosis, and the viewer’s recognition of its enabling artifice.

**Illusion, Fiction, and Dreaming**

It is a given that any parable of mimetic illusion will be self-reflexive in the overt sense that I outlined earlier. What I have tried to show is that the rhetoric of this self-reflexiveness itself redoubles and draws attention to the other, implicit sense of self-reference that constitutes a medium’s semiotic capacity, and that self-reference in this latter sense marks an irreducible difference between illusion and narrative representation. I hinted that this quality of narrative representation in general is also, more particularly, essential to the very possibility of fictive rhetoric. The foregrounding of implicit self-reference is characteristic of fictionality because it is intrinsic to the priority of discourse over reference in the narrative imagination: the fictive process generates narrative in response to anthropocentric imperatives (on several levels: instinctual/libidinal, emotional, ideological), which are available as values only within a discursive economy, whereas nonfictional narrative is generated under the presiding referential
imperative of accountability to extratextual sources. I’m not offering an empirical distinction between fiction and nonfiction here, since the difference ultimately rests only upon the contextually assumed presence or absence of a text-independent referential ground. The privileging of value over documentary fact in the fictive regime does not imply a substantial distinction, but a rhetorical one. All narrative semiosis unfolds in an evolving recursive process or feedback loop within the domain of discourse. Nonfictional narrative, however, is characterized by a rhetorical “direction of fit” in which semiosis is always approaching its represented object, only to arrive at another sign, whereas fictional narrative semiosis is always approaching achieved significance, only to arrive at further representation. This reversal of the direction of fit that prevails in the nonfictional paradigm is the rhetorical reorientation that an awareness of fictionality provides for, and that makes it possible to comprehend this distinctive use of narrative media. Fictive rhetoric exploits representation’s power of assimilation more than its modelling of an object. What matters (as far as a fiction’s fictive rhetoric is concerned) is the respect in which representations are not their objects but uses of a medium, because this is the respect in which they serve human needs. The fiction/nonfiction distinction is not fundamentally ontological, but pragmatic; not a distinction between referential worlds, but between communicative purposes.

I want to return with this sense of fictionality to the subject of dreams, and their status with respect to the opposition I have delineated between illusion and representation, or experience and narrative, and in doing so to pursue a little further the implications of a medium-contingent concept of narrative at the cognitive level. The ambiguity between experience and narrative, concerning consciousness in dreams, is a multilayered issue. Consciousness of self is one level of it, somewhere midway between the irreducible level of consciousness on which you experience the dream on the one hand, and on the other hand, the more occasional consciousness that you are dreaming, or even your conscious manipulations of the course of the dream narrative. All these coexist with the unconscious level on which dreams typically form themselves, independently of any conscious choice on the dreamer’s part. Conscious choice, however, is consciousness of a choice; it is not coextensive with choosing. The sequential character of dream development is a result of an ongoing process of “self-interpretation” in dreaming, which can be said to straddle the border of consciousness. Bert States has aptly characterized dreaming as a “first draft of thought,” in which an initially random collision of images prompts the sense-making effort of the dream-work (2001: 110). He notes a key
difference between dream thought and waking processes such as free association or daydreaming, which is that “the dream can’t revise. What comes to mind goes straight to the visual cortex” (112). The sequential development of dreaming can be seen as an effect of this constraint: it is a kind of revision on the fly.

My speculative thought resolves into the question, are dreams fictions? The answer would be trivial if it rested upon their referentiality; of course they are not true. But it rests more fundamentally upon the way we understand the mental apparatus of perception to be functioning as a medium in dream cognition. Percepts in general are already internal representations, certainly, but they are not innately narrative; the narrativity of dreams depends on the assumed sources of dream material. Is the selection of dream material itself a cognitive process, drawing purposively upon episodic and semantic memory? Or is the input to dream cognition an effect of other determinants (instinctual drives, sensory stimuli, recency effects, random brain activity), in which case the cognitive phase of the dreamwork is the effort to make sense of this material, which is functionally equivalent to sensory data? The ambiguity is between fiction and illusion, or narrative and experience. It is clear, however, that whatever blend of these two aspects of dreaming applies, dreams cannot be purely illusional.

At the higher levels of dream cognition, of course, there is an overt self-consciousness informing the creative process of the dream-work; but even at the most elemental unconscious level, the dream-work is a sequential, recursive process, in which every representation is influenced by the cognitive assimilation of the preceding one. Where the dream materials originate independently of cognitive processing, they have the status of data, even if not quite the external data of waking life; but where they arise out of cognition, they are subject to whatever imperative values inform that process (and this need not exclude desiderata of the same unconscious origin as some of the first type of dream material). To that extent, the dream conforms to the direction-of-fit rhetoric by which I have characterized fictionality—its representations generated discursively, out of prior representations, rather than referentially, in response to experiential data; and so to that extent, it can be understood as a, or even as the, protofiction.
My discussion of the narrative imagination in relation to its media in the previous chapter insisted on the primacy of a semiotic rather than transmissive sense of the term “medium.” That, from my point of view, is a theoretical imperative; but I also want to do justice to the persistence with which the experience of narrative creativity is itself conceived as, precisely, transmission—as the mediation rather than the generation of narrative—and by the creators themselves. This conceit, I suggest, is invaluable as a way of moving beyond a communication model in which narrative is transmitted from author to reader, towards one in which the authorial relation to narrative is homologous to the reader’s. I have argued that fictional narrative needs to be understood as a rhetorical means in respect of its fictionality, not just its representational strategies, and this implies a view of the novelist’s communicative act in which that rhetoric is accountable beyond the frame of representation. But I would reject the conclusion that the rhetoric of fictionality must therefore be wholly accounted to authorial intention, not least because any such model of novelistic communication is necessarily abstracted from the particularity of the narrative, which would therefore be underdetermined. In order to elaborate an alternative view of narrative creativity, I propose to draw upon this idea of creativity as mediation, as expressed in the comments of novelists themselves upon their experience of the narrative imagination—bearing in mind that these comments also contribute in their own right to the communicative context of their fiction.

Let me begin with the note at the end of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, which reads, “I thank everybody in this book for coming—A. W., author and medium” (1983: 245). It’s a perfect, succinct expression of the
attitude I mean, and it appeals to me for three reasons, each of which intimates a key element of the explorations that follow. Firstly, it is an instance, if an extreme one, of a familiar and often-observed experience of novelistic creativity, the novelist’s peculiar loss of creative control over her own narrative. It belongs within the best-established tradition of such observations, those which figure this lack of control as a deference to the autonomy of the characters, but I want to suggest that this has its place within a more general understanding of the phenomenon. Such an understanding will need to recognize both the creative experience involved and the possible motives behind the various figurations of it in authorial testimony.

Secondly, Walker’s idea of herself as both “author” and “medium” strikes me as a highly suggestive way of formulating a general model for this seeming abdication of creative control, and in this respect it serves to introduce the central preoccupation of my inquiry. She is using “medium” in the spiritualist sense (the novel is dedicated “To the Spirit”); but the broader sense of “a means of communication” is inherent in that usage and heightens the paradox of its conjunction with “author.” Between “author” as “origin” and “medium” as “means,” where is the novelist? How to negotiate between communicative agency and this sense of creative mediation in fiction? The author, having been under a conceptual cloud for much of the century (in Russian Formalist, new critical, structuralist, and post-structuralist terms, among others), has latterly regained a certain standing as a focus of theoretical interest.¹ My concern is to understand the communicative act of fiction as authorially situated and particular, in terms which resist both the idealized intentionality of the “implied author,” and the tendency to contain such communicative acts within the fictional frame, as with the institution of the “narrator” as a universal agent of fictional narrative (for the reasons set out in chapter four). The idea of fictional narrative as a communicative instrument of prior authorial intentions is inadequate to the fecundity of the interpretative possibilities it generates; but if the novelist is figured as medium, narrative creativity becomes itself already an interpretative activity. The narrative text is no longer the medium through which a prior authorial intent is transmitted: the author is not a figure behind the text, but one on the same side of it as the reader. The novelist as medium is a kind of privileged first reader—privileged with a selectivity and control over the narrative which is analogous to the privilege, in another sphere of narrative creativity, of a lucid dreamer; engaged in a teasing out, an elaboration and development, according to laws or imperatives already in place, but only to be fully unearthed in the process of writing.
The third sense in which Walker’s note appeals to me has to do with its hint of an unexpected connection between creativity and its worldly context. Her “thank you” is a curious version of the formal acknowledgment by which writers conventionally recognize the debts incurred in producing a book. In this respect, it establishes what will turn out to be a recurrent association between the mysteries of narrative creativity and the practical realities of the profession of novelist (this is one reason why I have preferred “novelist as medium” to the more general and abstract “author as medium”). This association, in the comments of novelists themselves, between the spiritual and the material—between the ineffable creative process and the pragmatic business of turning out a marketable product—undergoes some significant transformations and is doubtless susceptible to analysis in relation to changing historical and cultural contexts. In general, though, it serves to negotiate the tensions between material interest and disinterestedness, and so also between the subjective, ideological occasion of communication and the claim to impersonal truths.

**Inspiration and Discursive Imperatives**

The most fundamental motive underlying novelists’ accounts of the “medium” experience is the appeal to an external authority as the guarantor of the narrative; an attempt to shore up authorship against the dubiousness of fiction. Such appeals are typically of two kinds: one invokes this authority in discursive terms, the other in representational terms. Although Walker’s version of the novelist’s (partial) surrender of creative control is centred on her characters, and therefore grounded on the authority of representation, its spiritualism also re-establishes a link with the most venerable prenovelistic manifestation of this experience, in which the author defers to a higher discursive authority. This is the idea of inspiration—the divine inspiration of medieval Christianity, or else that of the classical muse. To an extent, this tradition persisted into the age of the novel, although perhaps less as an expression of authorial humility than as a mock-epic veil for egotism—as with Fielding’s invocation of Genius, Humanity, Learning, and Experience to direct his pen in *Tom Jones* (1966: XVI, 5; 608–9). But even where the trope of inspiration does serve to diminish the credit accruing to the author’s conscious artistry, there are other benefits to be gained by using it. One of these is very evident in Charlotte Brontë’s observations upon the disconcerting qualities of her sister’s imagination, as manifested in *Wuthering Heights*. She scarcely thinks it “right or advisable to create
beings like Heathcliff,” but she insists that “the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that, at times, strangely wills and works for itself. . . . Be the work grim or glorious, dread or divine, you have little choice left but quiescent adoption. As for you—the nominal artist—your share in it has been to work passively under dictates you neither delivered nor could question—that would not be uttered at your prayer, nor suppressed nor changed at your caprice.”

Here the abdication of creative control is also a release from moral accountability, so the author’s own rectitude is no longer compromised by the darker qualities of her narrative. Of course, there are limits to the scope of such disclaimers. However compelled authors may claim to have been in writing a certain narrative a certain way, the compunction to have written at all (or, having written, to have published) could arise only from an authorial decision to grant authority to the inspiration. In acting as Emily’s apologist, Charlotte obscures the public communicative dimension of the novelist’s own act, and in doing so she tends to pathologize her sister, or the artist in general.

The idea of inspiration is straightforward where the novelist appeals to a higher authority (the muse, the divinity), but where the inspiration is demonized, the legitimation of its authority involves a more subtle rhetoric. The authority of demonized or Dionysian inspiration lies in the subterranean discourses of the primitive, the instinctual, and the unconscious, discourses to which the novelist, as a bourgeois, rational, conscious subject, can only appeal by adopting a double strategy: to embrace, in the act of narration, the imperatives of such another discourse, and to maintain nevertheless a sense of its otherness. The novelist as medium, then, both appropriates and submits to the inspirational authority; both inscribes and is inscribed upon.

The authority of the unconscious has been considerably enhanced since Emily Brontë’s day, and only partly in relation to the decline of the kind of moral anxiety about fiction evinced by her sister. As a way of talking about the source of a narrative, invocation of the unconscious has two potential advantages for the novelist. The first is that its association with the primitive and instinctual stakes a claim for some degree of collective relevance, for a generality of significance that escapes the idiosyncrasies of the novelist as a conscious subject. Its legitimacy is that of a common frame of reference to which novelist and reader alike should be able to connect, in spite of the inevitable differences between their individual sensibilities, values, and points of view. The second advantage is to an extent antithetical, in that the unconscious may also serve as an
evasion of the conventional, or of the shared assumptions and norms of the novelist’s culture. Here the unconscious authorizes a defamiliarization of received modes of understanding and legitimizes a vision which in some way subverts conventional wisdom and penetrates beyond superficial and habitual, acculturated ways of seeing. Or again, it defies the self-censorship to which the common run of the novelist’s and reader’s thoughts are subject, in the name of a more fundamental truth. This more radical project, the evasion of the novelist’s habituated and self-censoring modes of thought, has justified extensions of the role of the unconscious into every aspect of the creative process. But of course, even here, conscious authorial choice irreducibly frames the whole enterprise, and to that extent it cannot be interpreted as the discourse of another (the unconscious) with its own communicative agenda: if it had no conscious, authorial sanction at all, it would never see the light of day. The real interest, for both novelist and reader, is the potential for discovery offered by such creative practices. Only on such a basis can their legitimation in negative terms—as ways of eluding the constraints of conventional modes of narrative understanding—be reconciled with the fact that the results are necessarily evaluated in relation to precisely those norms.

Once it is recognized that this negative principle has a validity of its own, according to which the avoidance of creative control is simply a mechanism for innovation, the specific creative authority of the unconscious is redundant. The creative process may be just as legitimately subjected to mechanisms based on chance, or on any kind of artificial constraint. Raymond Roussel, for example, despite his subsequent adoption by the Surrealists, didn’t need the authority of the unconscious to justify his use, in Locus Solus and elsewhere, of elaborate homophonic puns as devices for text generation: it was enough that they were an effective stimulus to the production of narrative. The same could be said of the lipogrammatic narrative devices used by Georges Perec in La Disparition, or Walter Abish in Alphabetical Africa, or the use of textually disruptive mechanisms such as the “cut-up method” by William Burroughs. These devices have the potential to subvert conventional language and thinking, and they undermine ordinary assumptions about the communication contract between author and reader by frustrating any interpretation that seeks to refer the narrative directly to authorial intent. But above all, they provide for creative surprise and discovery—for the novelist, as for the reader. Despite the creative writing maxim that a mechanically imposed narrative plan will stifle creativity, here avowedly mechanical means are used to achieve the opposite effect.
This is as far removed from the notion of the novelist as originator of the narrative as it is possible to get: here the narrative only emerges as a by-product of obedience to external constraints on the novelist’s discursive agency. But the differences between such practices and the more traditional models of authorial inspiration with which I began are superficial—Burroughs, indeed, made straight-faced claims that his cut-up methods could be a channel of communication from the “pre-written” future (1989: 28). Whatever the source or engine of the narrative, and whatever scope its influence is allowed to have in determining the final form of the text, the novelist’s role in all cases is that of a mediator between that source and the reader, one whose claim is not to have originated meaning, but to have gained access to it, discovered it, or identified it and sanctioned its authority.

Representational Imperatives

Up to this point, I have been dealing with models of abrogated narrative creativity in which the novelist’s deference is to discursive imperatives. The most common novelistic sense of creativity as a kind of mediation, however, is not discursive but representational: it is the widely attested experience of having a narrative hijacked by its characters. I propose to take the general currency of this experience for granted, and consider its manifestations in the comments of a few novelists whose idiosyncrasies can perhaps shed more light on the general case. I do not mean to claim universality for such an experience of creativity; nor do I want to privilege it over authorial accounts that, on the contrary, emphasize and celebrate an extraordinary degree of control over narrative representation. The notion of autonomous characters is of course figurative (as will be underlined by my discussion of character in the next chapter); my interest is in the light shed by such a notion upon the general conditions of narrative creativity.

One point at which the notion of autonomous character actually coincides with that of demonic inspiration is in Scott’s prefaces to the Waverley novels, which speak of a demon who “seats himself on the feather of my pen when I begin to write, and leads it astray from the purpose,” and in the next breath, “When I light on such a character as Bailie Jarvie, or Dalgetty, my imagination brightens, and my conception becomes clearer at every step which I take in his company, although it leads me many a weary mile away from the regular road, and forces me to leap hedge and
ditch to get back into the route again” (1978: 49). This dual figuration of the experience clearly articulates an ambivalence. It is a “sore point” that under the demon’s influence, his planned “regular mansion turns out a Gothic anomaly” (indeed Scott’s Gothic affiliations, as with Brontë, make the idiom of demonic inspiration a natural choice). By contrast, his delight in following the lead of his characters is quite apparent, and indeed if the impulse is resisted, “my thoughts become prosy, flat and dull; I write painfully to myself and under a consciousness of flagging which makes me flag still more” (49). Authorial control and narrative creativity, then, are represented as antagonistic values. The emphasis falls on the dismaying loss of control when inspiration is figured discursively, but on the independent vitality of the narrative when it is figured in representational terms. This emphasis seems to imply an affirmation of mimesis over plot—Scott opposes “materials” and “story” (49)—the narrative artifice of plot being overthrown by fidelity to the representation of character. But the opposition here is not simply between static, descriptive mimesis and dynamic narrative action: when a character takes over the narrative, it is in narrative terms that he or she does so. The character dictates the course of the narrative insofar as the novelist’s conception of that character implies or excludes certain narrative possibilities. The reciprocity of character and action being what it is, it might be further said that this process is itself the unraveling of an authorial understanding of that character (or of something embodied in that character) which is already narrative in form. Narration and representation are symbiotic; Scott’s account of the autonomy of his characters is just as disingenuous as the appeal to his demon, and both need to be understood in relation to his deeper rhetorical purposes.

There is good reason for caution in interpreting such comments from the “Introductory Epistle to The Fortunes of Nigel.” Scott, at this point in his career, is still sheltering behind the anonymity of “the Author of Waverley,” and this is one of his most elaborate prefatory games. It purports to be Captain Clutterbuck’s account of his dialogue with the “eidolon” of his creator, and so both plays upon and consolidates the elusiveness of Scott’s own authority. This evasion, however, and especially its inversion of the narratorial hierarchy of author and character, is very much to the point, as are its immediate rhetorical dividends for Scott’s presentation of his novel to the public. The obliqueness of the preface allows him considerable license for pre-emptive self-criticism and, more assertively, the ironization or rebuttal of possible objections. The remarks on inspiration occur in the context of Clutterbuck’s intimation that the frequency of the Author’s
publications implies hasty composition, a charge which has both literary and mercenary implications. In response to the literary charge, Scott’s dichotomized model of the novelist as medium allows him to concede to the accusation, but then counter it in the same terms. When Clutterbuck returns to the issue as a matter of “the lucre of gain,” it occasions a similar double response: the Author first boldly affirms the view that “a successful author is a productive labourer,” and that the convention of literary disinterestedness is cant; and in doing so he makes a strong case for regarding the test of marketability as itself the only valid ground for a novelist’s authority (53). But then he hastens to dissociate himself from the motive of gain: “For myself, I am not displeased to find the game a winning one; yet while I pleased the public, I should probably continue it merely for the pleasure of playing; for I have felt as strongly as most folks that love of composition which is perhaps the strongest of all instincts, driving the author to the pen, the painter to the pallet, often without either the chance of fame or the prospect of reward” (54–55). Scott’s unease about the profession of novelist leads him to invoke the language of compulsion as testament to a gentleman’s literary integrity, his amateurism. This recurrence to the theme of his earlier remarks implies that the contrasting “sore point” about the demon’s disruption of his narrative plan does not express an aesthetic attitude so much as the interests of the novelist as a commercial manufacturer. Such an antithetical way of disposing the matter is in significant contrast to another voluminous producer of novels, Anthony Trollope, to whom I will shortly turn; but first there is one more aspect of Scott’s case worth noting.

The fundamental issue being so artfully negotiated in the introductory epistle is Scott’s claim upon his readership—his authority. This is the common thread running through the formal playfulness of his self-presentation, the question of his creative control and the integrity of his business relations with the consumers of his novels. It is also the key to another preoccupation of the prefaces, which surfaces parodically here and again in the similarly devious “Prefatory Letter to Peveril of the Peak”: the historical novelist’s relation to history. History, although seeming to offer up the authority of actual events to the novelist’s narrative mediation, is itself already narrative in form. Here again, the conventional opposition between mimetic fidelity and the novelistic artifice of plot is misleading. Indeed, Scott’s invocations of history are often used against the censure of mimetic criteria, as a means of vindicating narrative episodes he himself avows to be artificial. The focus of the dialogue with Jonas Dryasdust, however, is the converse problem of Scott’s liberties with history, and the
grounds upon which they can be authorized. He begins by appealing to the general disclaimer implied by fictionality as such, which makes any objection to unhistorical assertions “a discharge of artillery against a wreath of morning mist” (66). But he is clearly unwilling to relinquish the authority of history altogether: he claims at least to be awakening the historical curiosity of his readers, or even supplying in the more careless some compensation for the lack of it (67). Once again, he is trying to have it both ways, but this attempt to wrest the authority of history from Dryas-dust’s antiquarian pedantry is more interesting than a simple polarization of the historian’s responsibilities and the novelist’s creative freedom. Scott seems to be playing off the Aristotelian view of fiction as more philosophical than history (that is, appealing to the higher authority of universals rather than to historical particulars) against something that Lukács would recognize as a sense of typicality (that is, the ability of a narrative of fictional particulars to articulate in individual terms the general movement of history). Scott offers his historical fiction as a simultaneous adherence to these converse principles. Or, to resist his prefatory rhetoric a little, he invites the reader to discriminate as appropriate between the authorities upon which his narrative is grounded.

In Trollope’s case, too, the question of the novelist’s relation to his readers is as pertinent as the question of productivity mentioned earlier. As with Scott, both issues are directly involved in the way the narrative’s own imperatives are conceived. Trollope’s notoriously businesslike attitude to his art, as expressed in the Autobiography, pushes Scott’s notion of the novelist as productive labourer to an extreme that many commentators, including Henry James, see as indicative of “a certain infusion of the common” (1911: 99). What is striking for my purposes here, however, is that this authorial industry does not, for Trollope, involve the brutal subordination of his materials, but coexists with an unusually strong sense of obligation to the integrity and autonomy of his characters. In contrast to Scott, Trollope stands for a synthesis of the novelist’s job of work and the sense of creative mediation, and he is equally emphatic on both sides. Trollope’s sense of involvement with the lives of his characters went well beyond the common formulae of nineteenth-century novelists. He not only held rigorous views about the novelist’s accountability for his characters—“on the last day of each month recorded, every person in his novel should be a month older than on the first” (1950: 233)—but also continued his imaginative acquaintance with them beyond the bounds of the novels themselves, even (as with Mrs. Proudie, after he had killed her off) beyond the bounds of their creative utility. The terms of these imaginative
relationships are very much those of the novelist’s deference to the authority of autonomous characters: “He must argue with them, quarrel with them, forgive them, and even submit to them” (233). But this deference, far from conflicting with Trollope’s two hundred and fifty words every quarter of an hour, is the condition of their possibility. It is precisely by conceiving of himself as the scribe for the lives of characters who exist independently, in a realm of imagination, that Trollope rendered the function of the novelist so unproblematically businesslike. That efficiency need not be understood as his ultimate motive, however, especially as he was himself well aware that his overproduction exceeded all commercial sense (Wall 1988: 7). His rapidity of composition was rather a way of facilitating the imaginative mediation of his characters, which was finally its own satisfaction, even to the point of compulsion.

Trollope’s lack of artistic pretension, more than the excess of his productivity, was the quality to which James objected in him: he lacked a proper sense of the high calling of the novelist’s art. Oddly, though, James’s censure in this respect falls most heavily, not upon the literalism to which Trollope’s sense of character seems to reduce the novelist’s creative enterprise, but upon the most flagrantly artificial aspect of his writing: “He took a suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, a make-believe. He habitually referred to the work in hand (in the course of that work) as a novel, and to himself as a novelist, and was fond of letting the reader know that this novelist could direct the course of events according to his pleasure” (1911: 116). On the face of it, there are good grounds for surprise that Trollope, of all novelists, should behave in this way: his insistence on the relation between novelist and character seems to be comprehensively undermined. It is so only from the perspective of James’s own meditations upon the novelist’s obligations to the logic of narrative, however, and it fits with Trollope’s sense of things once its implications for the relation between novelist and reader are teased out. Trollope’s imaginative involvement with his characters risks casting the novelist as a private fantasist, and he appears to have been aware that the legitimacy of presenting such narratives to the public depended on a counterbalancing detachment. His authorial intrusions establish a critical distance, for both author and reader, from the narrative’s own imaginative momentum: they shift the emphasis from involvement to evaluation, and restore the sense of creative choice. The novelist’s role as arbiter, in the mediation of no matter how compelling a narrative logic, is reaffirmed. In the process Trollope draws attention to the discursive nature of fiction, and so makes the reader’s interpretative naturalization of
that discourse—its evaluation in terms of familiar nonfictional discourses—more than usually self-conscious. This sense of the accountability of his narratives to the ordinary truths of his readers’ world was thoroughgoing, and one of Trollope’s greatest strengths: it serves to keep the particulars of his narrative in constant touch with a general framework of understanding which he shared with his readership. One of his better known intrusions, in chapter fifteen of *Barchester Towers*, is symptomatic: he disabuses his readers of any doubt over the prospect of Eleanor marrying either Mr. Slope or Bertie Stanhope, insisting that whatever interest his narrative has to offer is not dependent on the thrill of suspense. Suspense is a staple of narrative rhetoric, but it conflicts with Trollope’s ideal of novelistic propriety, because it holds the reader hostage to the narrative, betraying the community of author and reader: “Our doctrine is, that the author and the reader should move along together in full confidence with each other. Let the personages of the drama undergo ever so complete a comedy of errors among themselves, but let the spectator never mistake the Syracusan for the Ephesian; otherwise he is one of the dupes, and the part of a dupe is never dignified” (1980: 144). This image of author and reader proceeding side by side is, after all, entirely in keeping with the way in which Trollope situates himself in relation to his material. His own sense of his characters is very much that of a reader, and although as the mediator of the narrative he is privileged to select and channel its development, his authority rests only on the judiciousness with which he does so, according to criteria which are shared by author and reader alike.

Elizabeth Bowen’s reflections on character in “Notes on Writing a Novel” have an indirect relation to Trollope which is too felicitous to pass over. The phrase “creation of character,” she says, “is misleading. Characters pre-exist. They are *found*. They reveal themselves slowly to the novelist’s perception—as might fellow-travellers seated opposite one in a very dimly-lit railway carriage” (1950: 251). This, as it happens, is exactly the scenario in the piece which precedes this essay in her *Collected Impressions*—a radio play in which the modern protagonist, having fallen asleep in a railway carriage, discovers Trollope himself seated opposite. The conversation turns to the novelist’s methods of character creation:

*TROLLOPE:* . . . I put myself into the habit of steady and rapid writing, set myself to turn out a set number of pages daily—and, moreover, turned ’em out, every day. That being so, my people just—came along.

*WILLIAM:* You suggest, you know, that a novelist is a sort of medium. Sits down, takes up his pen, goes into a sort of trance—
TROLLOPE [cuts in—shocked]: What—spirits? That flimmery-flummery?
God forbid! (239)

The nonspiritualist interpretation of the novelist as medium, on the other hand, is clearly articulated in Bowen’s own discussion: “The novelist’s perceptions of his characters take place in the course of the actual writing of the novel. To an extent, the novelist is in the same position as his reader. But his perceptions should be always just in advance” (251). The novelist’s creative act, for Bowen, is emphatically a process of discernment rather than the transmission of a preconceived meaning. Her sense of the fundamental necessity to which the novelist must submit is not primarily defined in terms of character, though, but plot—an emphasis on the particularity of the narrative itself which aligns her, as we shall see, with James: “Plot might seem to be a matter of choice. It is not. The particular plot is something the novelist is driven to. It is what is left after the whittling-away of alternatives” (249). As a corollary of this, she regards objectivity as an essential of the novelist’s art. “Pre-assumptions [she instances “social, political, sexual, national, aesthetic, and so on”] are bad. . . . Great novelists write without pre-assumptions” (258). She does not mean the novelist has no viewpoint, no conviction, but “the conviction must come from certainty of the validity of the truth the novel is to present” (258). The grounds of this truth prove elusive, however. Having elaborated upon the moral power of narrative’s revelation of “truth in action,” she asks herself, “Truth by what ruling, in relation to what? Truth by the ruling of, and in relation to, the inherent poetic truth that the novel states” (258). The pressure to transcend the novelist’s subjectivity is exerted by an elevated sense of the truth of art: Bowen’s rather baldly tautological statement of the matter reflects the extent to which authorial impersonality, the ruling idea of that view of the novel, conflates the novelist’s sense of narrative mediation with a claim that the logic of such mediation is an index of objective and universal truths.6

It’s unclear whether the ideal of authorial impersonality is a product of the novelist’s experience of creation as mediation, or a motive behind the claim to that experience. Once the rhetoric of objective truth is taken out of the equation, it remains possible to understand the doctrine of impersonality in relation to the fictional narrative itself, rather than the communicative situation within which that narrative operates: in other words, to understand impersonality as a fiction of the fiction, a representation of the novelist’s relation to the narrative rather than to the reader. This double aspect would seem to be a way of reading the duality expressed in
Flaubert’s well-known formulation of the creed of artistic impersonality: “The artist in his work must be like God in his creation—invisible and all-powerful: he must be everywhere felt, but never seen” (1980: 230). Joyce’s (or Stephen Dedalus’s) contribution to this analogy takes impersonality a step further by wholly disregarding the communicative relation: “The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (1992: 233). This model of the artist’s self-effacement in pursuit of an aesthetic absolute turns upon a familiar transfer of agency, which “fills every person [of the drama] with such vital force that he or she assumes a proper and intangible esthetic life” (233). Abstracted from the work’s representational world as the God of creation, the consummately impersonal artist grants the narrative a similar internal autonomy to that conceded by the hapless novelist whose characters simply take over; but here the dispensation is made without admitting any loss of personal artistic credit—rather the reverse. The appeal of this as a reconciliation between the novelist’s obeisance to the imperatives of art, and the proprietorial claim implied by the marketing of a narrative product, is obvious enough: the narrative is legitimated by its self-determination (theologically speaking, its free will), but it is still undeniably the novelist’s to sell.

My representative of the novelist as consummate artist is Henry James, whose name has arisen more than once already in this discussion. Unsurprisingly, the novelist’s relation to the marketplace doesn’t loom as large in James’s writings as it does in Trollope or Scott, but he does nevertheless make the same link, in an ironic aside, between the sense of creative mediation and the material considerations of the profession: “one cherishes, after the fact, any proved case of the independent life of the imagination; above all if by that faculty one has been appointed mainly to live” (1962: 152). But the significance of the opposition between Trollope (the novelist as tradesman) and James (the novelist as artist) is that it is James who feels the need to shore up the authority of fiction. His objection to Trollope’s authorial self-consciousness was not that it was often artless in execution, but that it was “suicidal” in principle. His assumption was that any allusion to the fictionality of the narrative left its authority ungrounded and arbitrary: “It is impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regard himself as an historian and his narrative as a history. It is only as an historian that he has the smallest locus standi. As a narrator of fictitious events he is nowhere; to insert into his attempt a backbone of logic, he must relate events that are assumed to be real” (1911: 116–17). For James, then, the novelist’s creativity must of necessity be subordinated
to a prior narrative logic, and he repeatedly conceives of this inevitability (“the necessary, the precious ‘tightness’ of the place”) in terms of “the authenticity of concrete existence,” so that once he has the “hint” of his subject, “the point is not in the least what to make of it, but only, very delightfully and very damnable, where to put one’s hand on it” (1962: 311–12). James’s accounts of the creative process, with their recurrent metaphors of germs, seeds, and crucibles, consistently figure the novelistic imagination as essentially the site for a process with (biological, chemical) laws of its own: “These are the fascinations of the fabulist’s art, these lurking forces of expansion, these necessities of upspringing in the seed, these beautiful determinations, on the part of the idea entertained, to grow as tall as possible, to push into the light and the air and thickly flower there” (42). But this is far from undermining the exalted calling of the novelist, which resides precisely in the scrupulous discernment with which these necessities are unveiled: “he alone has the secret of the particular case, he alone can measure the truth of the direction to be taken by his developed data. There can be for him, evidently, only one logic for these things; there can be for him only one truth and one direction—the quarter in which his subject most completely expresses itself” (123). The novelist’s concern is with “the careful ascertainment of how it shall do so, and the art of guiding it with consequent authority” (123): this “consequent” authority, which James calls “the treasure of treasures, or at least the joy of joys” (123), is that of a guide, a facilitator—a medium.

Rhetorical Imperatives

As soon as the emphasis falls more on the novelistic art than novelistic obligations, though, the rigour of James’s adherence to the objective logic of the actual seems to diminish. There is already more than a hint of subjectivity in the repetitions of “he alone . . . for him . . .” above; and his account of the actual origins of The Spoils of Poynton emphatically contrasts the artist’s “sense for the subject” with “the fatal futility of Fact”—the “classic ineptitude” to which “with the full measure of the artistic irony one could once more, and for the thousandth time, but take off one’s hat” (122). James here raises a critical question which escapes the habitual frame of his sense of the novelist’s obligations: “If life, presenting us the germ, and left merely to herself in such a business, gives the case away, almost always, before we can stop her, what are the signs for our guidance, what the primary laws for a saving selection, how do we know
when and where to intervene, where do we place the beginnings of the wrong or the right deviation?” (120). To what authority does the novelist defer if not, after all, that of life? James excuses himself from pursuing the question, pausing only to suggest “that general conditions fail or mislead, and that even the fondest of artists need ask no wider range than the logic of the particular case” (121). It seems to me, though, that the rudiments of an answer are already there in that comment, and they connect with observations James makes elsewhere. The particularity of narrative is finally irreducible to the embodiment of general laws, of a logic anterior to itself, even as it proceeds by invoking them. Its authority finally is as story itself, which, in the preface to The Ambassadors, he describes as “obviously, overwhelmingly, the prime and precious thing (as other than this I have never been able to see it)”—but also as “just the spoiled child of art” (314–15). The ambivalence is a considered acknowledgment of the extent to which his own efforts to hold his fiction accountable to general criteria are overwhelmed by the way in which the story “simply makes for itself,” however well it creates the illusion that its authority is well grounded: “It rejoices, none the less, at its best, to seem to offer itself in a light, to seem to know, and with the very last knowledge, what it’s about—liable as it yet is at moments to be caught by us with its tongue in its cheek and absolutely no warrant but its splendid impudence” (315). It seems that “story” answers to no reason but its own, and James further recognizes that this willfulness on the part of narrative extends even beyond those occasions when the novelist actually experiences the symptomatic loss of creative choice: this spoilt child probably has its own way “even when we most flatter ourselves that we negotiate with it by treaty” (315).

This line of thought stands as a corrective to the inference possible from my discussion so far, that the imperatives determining novelists’ narrative choices are essentially criteria of realistic representation, which would be to say that beneath all the mystification, the mundane reason novelists find themselves constrained to develop their narratives in certain ways is that they come up against their obligations to the mimetic correspondence between their fiction and reality. James’s reflections indicate that this is not the case, at least in any straightforward way: the rule of narrative derives from imperatives grounded in meaning rather than existence. The point can be confirmed by examining the similar experience of fictional creativity reported by an author whose aesthetic assumptions are not of a realist persuasion.

Donald Barthelme’s thoughts on narrative creativity begin with the outline for an implausible story involving an azalea bush, a gold pocket
watch, a handsome thief named Zeno, a chastity belt, and two disaffected Sarah Lawrence students. His sense of the writer’s experience, in the face of his scenario and in search of what happens next, is one of “not-knowing,” and this is essential to his notion of creativity: “Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention” (1985: 510). But Barthelme’s essay, playful and inventive as it is, turns out to be preoccupied with the imperatives to which the author, even in the absence of a realist aesthetic, is bound to defer. “Inside the pocket watch there is engraved a legend. Can I make it out? I think so: Drink me, it says. No no, can’t use it, that’s Lewis Carroll’s. But could Zeno be a watch swallow rather than a thief? No again, Zeno’d choke on it, and so would the reader. There are rules. . . . The not-knowing is not simple, because it’s hedged about with prohibitions, roads that may not be taken. The more serious the artist, the more problems he takes into account and the more considerations limit his possible initiatives” (510). Such considerations, he suggests, ensure that his kind of “postmodernist” fiction, despite critical assertions to the contrary, can never be other than about life; it cannot avoid its implication in the contexts both of other discourse (including Lewis Carroll’s) and of its own communicative situation, its accountability to the reader. Exactly which considerations a novelist takes into account are less important than the fact that some will be, whether they are grounded in realism or not. Here, as within a realist aesthetic, the problem of narrative creativity coincides with the novelist’s sense of professional imperatives. He must own his discursive authority (he must not be a plagiarist), yet must also derive it from independent sources to which the reader can hold him accountable. In this context it becomes clear that these imperatives are not simply representational—much less realist—but, more inclusively, rhetorical: the novelist’s authority is finally a negotiated condition of communication.

The prerequisite of any communication is a shared frame of reference, and it is this (rather than any mimetic principle) that assures the inescapability of the novelist’s social, cultural, and historical contexts. The writer of fiction engages with the world, Barthelme suggests, much as a musician (playing the “jazz banjulele”) improvises around a tune: “If I perform even reasonably well, no one will accuse me of not providing a true, verifiable, note-for-note reproduction of ‘Melancholy Baby’—it will be recognized that this was not what I was after” (521). But the tune does nonetheless define the parameters of a creative effort which is necessarily obligated to it as the assumed context of the performance: “Rather I
will play something that is parallel, in some sense, to ‘Melancholy Baby,’ based on the chords of ‘Melancholy Baby,’ made out of ‘Melancholy Baby,’ having to do with ‘Melancholy Baby’—commentary, exegesis, elaboration, contradiction. The interest of my construction, if any, is to be located in the space between the new entity I have constructed and the ‘real’ ‘Melancholy Baby,’ which remains in the mind as the horizon which bounds my efforts” (521). The fact that Barthelme’s choice of analogy is a performance further underlines the congruity of creation and interpretation, as acts or processes. Fictional narrative is a communicative gesture, the rhetorical force of which attaches to the process rather than to the substance of a representational product: acts of fiction are not accounts of imagined worlds, but imaginings. The sense of imagined world is residual: indeed, even in cases that most strongly suggest an authorial sense of reporting upon an imagined world (Wessex, Yoknapatawpha County, Middle Earth), this sense must itself arise from the cumulative effect of numerous prior imaginings.

The imperatives to which novelists defer, then, are not simply those of verisimilitude, neither in a universal sense nor even in senses which recognize the historical, cultural, and ideological contingency of truthful representations. The authority to which fictional narratives appeal may be cast in such terms, and it is certainly a function of truth. But the truth with which they are concerned is not grounded in correspondence. Fundamentally, it is less a matter of any kind of representational accuracy than an appeal to a specifically narrative rightness. This sense of narrative rightness has to do with the concord between the story in hand and other, prior narratives, not ultimately in the sense of a relation to sources, to a tradition, or even to any given set of narrative conventions, but rather to a way of meaning or of understanding—a rhetoric, but one with cultural roots so deep that it effectively usurps the authority of logic. Fictional narrative, to just the extent that it functions fictionally, is not the vehicle for another kind of knowledge; on the other hand, novels are not merely the communication of the story itself, as if its value were intrinsic. What is communicated in fiction is a form of understanding which negotiates dialectically between the general and the particular, and which is irreducibly narrative in kind. Its authority is legitimate only to the extent that it succeeds in assimilating to the extant repertoire of narrative understanding, or narrative competence, defined by its cultural context. The law of narrative is case law.

The novelist’s obedience to principles of narrative rightness informs the whole creative enterprise, not just those occasions when the narrative
seems to dictate to its author. Authorial control of the course of the narrative indicates the extent to which the narrative understanding already implicit in the novelist’s conception proves adequate to its realization, whereas the loss of that control, that foreknowledge, indicates the extent to which the creative process is a revision of the narrative understanding of its premises—or simply the discovery of other, more compelling narrative meanings. In other words, the novelist’s creative work is never simply original, and in fact it is only a process of discovery when it is least experienced as the author’s own; which, of course, is why an experience that might be expected to cause novelists nothing but frustration is so highly valued by them.

There are aspects of the sense of narrative rightness which tend to encourage a transhistorical view of narrative understanding. It must be, after all, as fundamental to consciousness as our related senses of causality and temporality. But the idea of the novelist as medium helps to qualify that view and historicize the act of fiction, by locating the novelist between the demands of the narrative and those of its readers. Novelists do not merely experience their creative deference to the narrative’s own discursive or representational imperatives; they repeatedly invoke the authority of that experience, as a way of negotiating their own relation to a particular cultural context, readership, or market. The sources of creative authority are so often discussed in conjunction with the professional relation of novelist to readership because mediation looks both ways and is in itself already a kind of salesmanship. That interestedness, with all its rhetorical and ideological concomitants, is what implicates the communicative act of fiction in an irreducible sense of its historical situation and occasion.
Having given an account of narrative creativity by analogy with the experience of reading narrative, it is incumbent upon me to say something more about reading itself. More particularly, I want to address the reading issue that, perhaps more than any other, underlies discussions of fictionality: the issue of reader involvement. Critical practice often defines itself in opposition to the reading experience, even (or especially) where it incorporates a notion of that experience as part of its object. This dichotomy may be formulated in a number of ways: between immersion and critical distance; between literalism and various strategies of figurative or symptomatic interpretative recuperation; between the reading process and synoptic thematics. The common assumption, though, is that an awareness of fictionality necessarily produces critical detachment, and this is the assumption I want to question. My point is not to disallow thematic, theoretical, and historicist discourses, but to make possible an attention to the reading of fiction that does not define it as oblivious to such frames of reference. My alternative proposal is that awareness of fictionality is always involved in the reading of fictional texts, and that its rhetorical force is necessarily always in play. A familiar objection to my emphasis on fictionality is that it militates against belief in fiction and therefore cannot account for one of fiction’s most striking rhetorical effects—its power to engage the emotional involvement of its readers. To counter this argument, I want to consider in detail a famous instance of emotive fiction—one with a historical dimension that I think further underlines the need for a rhetoric of fictionality: the story of Dickens’s Little Nell.

Several critics have noted, rather scathingly, that when Dickens warmed to the pathos of a scene he had a tendency to slip into blank verse. This
was first pointed out in 1844 by R. H. Horne, who gave the following lines, set directly from a passage in chapter 72 of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, as one of his examples:

Oh! it is hard to take to heart
The lesson that such deaths will teach,
    But let no man reject it,
For it is one that all must learn,
And is a mighty, universal Truth.
When Death strikes down the innocent and young,
For every fragile form from which he lets
    The parting spirit free,
A hundred virtues rise,
In shapes of mercy, charity, and love,
    To walk the world and bless it.
Of every tear
That sorrowing mortals shed on such green graves,
Some good is born, some gentler nature comes.

But Horne’s intention was not to disparage; he considered the lines “profoundly beautiful,” and “worthy of the best passages in Wordsworth” (1844: 1:67). It is a passage to which Dickens himself attached some importance. In America, in the period of unprecedented celebrity following the novel’s success, he regularly copied it out for autographs, and in a letter of 1842 he referred to the same paragraph as the best justification he could give for Nell’s death (House et al. 1965–2002: 3:68n, 80). He was a little defensive when this inadvertent versifying was brought to his attention—“It is not an affectation in me, nor have I the least desire to write them in that metre; but I run into it, involuntarily and unconsciously, when I am very much in earnest” (4:113)—but he nonetheless dismissed the risk of appearing “turgid or bombastic,” arguing that the effect must depend on the sentiments expressed. Indeed, Horne’s enthusiasm for these lines was explicitly grounded on the “deeply truthful sentiment” he found in them. Dickens’s (justified) confidence in this last respect is striking, given that the death of Little Nell has become a notorious example of the lachrymose excesses of early Victorian sentimentality. It emphasizes the steep decline in the novel’s reputation since its first reception, which was a triumphant demonstration of the full extent of fiction’s power to enlist the emotions of its readers.

Dickens’s pathetic strain had begun to attract criticism by mid-century, and certainly by the time of the obituary notices of 1870 it was a source of
some embarrassment; in 1895 Oscar Wilde’s famous quip, “One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing,” was hardly outrageous (Ellmann 1987: 441). My concern in trying to account for this reversal is primarily theoretical, but I want to acknowledge immediately the importance of a certain cultural context, if only to place within parentheses any direct appeal to its explanatory relevance (although I shall return to the question of the novel’s situation within cultural discourse in my conclusion). Nell’s critical fortunes are certainly part of a broad cultural change to which specifically literary questions are incidental: the sentimentality of the early Victorians extended far beyond the confines of literature and has come to seem equally strange to later generations in all its forms. It was a product of their idealist temper—an inheritance from romanticism, but wound up to a higher pitch in reaction against Benthamite Utilitarianism and advancing industrialization and commercialism. The resultant cult of sentimental benevolence helped promote early Victorian charity and social legislation, and in this respect it was perhaps as significant as the sterner ethic of moral earnestness, grounded in Evangelical Puritanism and the general sense of religious crisis that emerged at the same time. The latter, however, was ultimately influential in a general repudiation of overoptimistic appeals to the sentiments, in favour of the rule of conscience. These aspects of the context within which The Old Curiosity Shop was written obviously need to be kept in mind, as do other matters more directly relevant to the story. Death in the family, and in particular the death of a child, was a relatively common experience. It is striking to note how many of those moved by the death of Nell had themselves mourned the early death of a favourite. The tears of both W. C. Macready and Lord Jeffrey, two well-documented instances, might be ascribed to such a source. Macready recorded in his diary that “I never read printed words that gave me so much pain. I could not weep for some time. Sensation, sufferings have returned to me, that are terrible to awaken [probably the death of his three-year-old daughter Joan in November 1840]; it is real to me; I cannot criticise it” (Collins 1971: 99). Jeffrey, found weeping in his library, exclaimed “I’m a great goose to have given way so, but I couldn’t help it. You’ll be sorry to hear that little Nelly, Boz’s little Nelly, is dead” (Young 1871: 2:111); he had himself lost a son a few weeks old in 1802. Dickens himself, of course, had lost Mary Hogarth; and he claimed to reckon by dozens the letters he had received from mothers, telling him they had lost “such a child at such a time, and where she is buried, and how good she was, and how, in this or that respect, she resembled Nell” (Collins 1971: 144). The idea that such children were possessed of an inno-
cience and purity too good for this world was a commonplace of consolation: Dickens expressed it himself in a letter of condolence written in 1839 which also strikingly anticipates the sentiments of The Old Curiosity Shop (House et al. 1965–2002: 1:515–16). Ruskin noted the general belief and its prevalence as a literary subject, but also that “the power of the fiction rests, I suppose, on the fact that most persons of affectionate temper have lost their own May Queens or little Nells in their time” (Collins 1971: 101). In this view, then, modern readers ought to bear in mind the cultural and social context within which Dickens was writing. His sentimentalism was perfectly attuned to the emotional needs of his age, and to condemn him for it would be a failure of historical imagination.

Sentimentality and Realism

But the objections to Nell are a little more forceful than that. Literary appeals to the emotions are not subject only to the cultural relativities of emotion and its expression, but also to the rigours of specifically literary criteria. Sentimentality is perceived to be not just a culturally specific response to particular social circumstances but also an artistically crude appeal to reflex emotions. It is quite possible to grant the former and still condemn on the basis of the latter, and so damn both the author and his readers for the vulgarity of their taste. Dickens can be dismissed as the “Mr. Popular Sentiment” of Trollope’s caricature. But although Nell was certainly an extraordinary popular success in the 1840s, she also delighted and distressed many sophisticated readers and critics. Even Margaret Oliphant, later so scathing about Dickens’s pathos, could write in 1855: “Poor little Nell! who has ever been able to read the last chapter of her history with an even voice or a clear eye?” (Collins 1971: 331). It is inappropriate to assume that those who wept for Nell were not serious readers; criticism should be able to do justice to their response. The use of the first-person plural in literary criticism can be invidious, especially when discussing such matters as emotional responses to literature; but I have used it in the title to this chapter, not to assert the universality of any particular affective response to Dickens’s novel, but to insist upon the continuity (up to a point) of the history of literary competence. However unaccountable Nell’s initial reception may appear to modern critical assumptions, it cannot be dismissed by confusing cultural remoteness with critical benightedness. If a whole age appears critically naïve and subliterary in its tastes when judged against a later standard, then the standard, not the age, is called
into question. My title acknowledges, in its use of the past tense, our historical distance from Nell’s first readers; it resists, in its first person, the temptation to look down upon their literary competence.

Nell’s reception is a problem to the extent that the term “sentimental” involves a pejorative literary evaluation rather than a cultural description. It would be possible to argue that such a literary evaluation is in itself historically located, and that it merely reflects the assumptions of another cultural moment. But the larger issue here is that of fiction’s capacity to appeal to the emotions, and a positive answer to the problem of Dickens’s sentimentality will need to address that issue in such a way as to accommodate Nell. Nell’s case is important, then, because it exposes in an acute form the problem of emotional response to a fictional narrative, a problem which is central to an understanding of the relation between fictional discourse and its cultural context.

The common assumption of Dickens’s detractors is that emotional responses to fiction are conditional upon certain criteria of mimetic adequacy. Aldous Huxley, for example, complains that “whenever he is in the melting mood, Dickens ceases to be able and probably ceases even to wish to see reality. His one and only desire on these occasions is just to overflow, nothing else. Which he does, with a vengeance and in an atrocious blank verse that is meant to be poetical prose and succeeds only in being the worst kind of fustian” (Ford and Lane 1961: 154). It is taken as axiomatic that the reader’s emotional involvement with fiction must be with its represented reality, and that the strength of feelings aroused therefore depends on the adequacy with which this reality is conveyed. If involvement depends on representation in general, then a fortiori it depends on the representation of character: character is the emotional focus of the novel, because caring about characters is the fictional equivalent of caring about people. In general, mimetic models of fictional character take characters to be imitation people about whom the narrative is understood to be offering, in various guises, pertinent information (a name, a description, words spoken, or deeds done). Of course, it is well understood that this fictional information is itself all there is to the mimetic illusion. But however sparse the information may sometimes be, imagination will augment it at least as far as the minimal assumption of fictional being: the unit of mimesis, as it were, must be the whole individual. The merits of this model of character are not slight. It seems commonsensical, and would probably gain the assent of most untheoretical readers today. It also provides an intuitive framework for explaining emotional responses to a fictional narrative: emotional involvement with the fate of a character is analogous to involvement with
a real person. But at this point, some criteria of representational adequacy must necessarily be brought into play: the intensity of the emotion will be conditional upon the intensity of the mimetic illusion.

This is the fundamental cause of Dickens's (supposed) artistic failure, the crude sentimentality of his appeal to the emotions of his readers. As a character, Nell is not sufficiently realized to carry the emotional burden with which the prose seeks to load her. Nonetheless, the strong emotional response of Dickens's contemporaries was, emphatically, a response to character. Almost without exception, they couched their emotional involvement in terms of a concern for Nell herself, for her trials and her fate. Dickens's sentimental prose, for his first readers, was a natural expression of the pathos inherent in his protagonist's story. The problem cannot be addressed by challenging the validity of any particular set of criteria by which a realist perspective may judge characterization: any plausible formulation of such criteria would give low marks to a large proportion of Dickens's characters. Where these are humorous or minor figures he escapes censure, but that evasion will not help in Nell's case. Rather, the object of scrutiny should be the necessity of associating emotional involvement with a mimetic model of character at all. A vindication of the literary competence of Dickens's first readers requires that the relations of character, representation, and fictionality to emotional involvement be called into question.

Models of Fictional Character

I say this in recognition of the fact that one strong current of narrative theory in recent years has tended to consolidate the mimetic model, in terms of the quite literal notion of fictional being. Narrative semantics and fictional worlds theories have made fictionality into an abstract ontological category, and novels into the means by which worlds in this category—and the beings inhabiting them—are constructed. As a rationalization of the mimetic model, fictional worlds accounts of character also make involvement consequent upon the imaginative realization of fictional beings, and they take this imaginative collaboration in the mimetic illusion to considerable lengths: “We, too, visit fictional lands, inhabit them for a while, intermingle with the heroes. We are moved by the fate of fictional characters, since, as Kendall Walton argues, when caught up in a story, we participate in fictional happenings by projecting a fictional ego who attends the imaginary events as a kind of nonvoting member”
This is symptomatic of a philosophical debate on emotional responses to fiction which has been almost exclusively confined to negotiations of the problem of belief in imaginary events and characters.\textsuperscript{2} The mimetic premise is also shared by empirical approaches grounded in cognitive psychology, which tend to maintain a sharp distinction between emotional responses to the literary artefact and to its representational content. Debate here centres on the extent to which the reader’s emotional involvement with characters is that of a witness, or a (more or less Freudian) form of identification.\textsuperscript{3}

In all these instances, emotional involvement is subordinated to a mimetic model of character, which inherently introduces the notion of involvement too late. It is made dependent on a sense of the character’s being—on, that is, the achieved mimetic product of representation—and the adequacy of this depends on criteria of realism which devalue such characters as Nell. There are competing views of character, notably within the formalist and structuralist traditions of criticism. A striking early example of the former was Edgell Rickword’s declaration that “‘character’ is merely the term by which the reader alludes to the pseudo-objective image he composes of his responses to an author’s verbal arrangements” (Rickword 1974: 233). The principle is an important one: the discussion of characters as if they existed independently is a critical repetition of the literary act, rather than an explanation of it. But merely insisting that novels are made of language is a rather unhelpful truism, a purely negative dissent that simply consists in the refusal to frame critical discourse in collaboration with the mimetic illusion. More radically, early structuralist models of narrative, concerned with the analysis of plot, reduced the concept of character to that of “actant.” The procedural move, however, was inseparable from an ideological motive: conventional notions of character were repudiated as the products of a delusively anthropocentric humanism. This position tended to conflate descriptive poetics with advocacy for the \textit{nouveau roman} and its attendant aesthetic dogma—character having been declared moribund by Alain Robbe-Grillet himself (1965: 60–61)—and might easily be dismissed as such, were it not for the fact that realist perspectives upon character would be vulnerable to analogous charges. But the problem with these approaches to character for my present purposes is that they devalue involvement in proportion as they devalue fictional being. The emphasis is rather hermeneutic, with the affective aspects of interpretation more or less dismissed as irrelevant by-products of a fallacious (mimetic) mode of reading. This is not to say that such approaches exclude affective response in any form, but that they can hardly account
for the sort of response represented by grief for the death of a character. As such, they offer no real alternative account of involvement at all.

Formalist approaches to character, then, do not go far enough to provide any basis for involvement and are in that respect reductive; the role of character is confined to the deployment of narrative meanings in a complex thematic, textual framework. And the early structuralist plot models are guilty of a similar refusal of the problem. However, later structuralist and structuralist-influenced accounts rediscovered character, as a semiotic product. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes acknowledged the need for this rapprochement: “From a critical point of view, therefore, it is as wrong to suppress the character as it is to take him off the page in order to turn him into a psychological character (endowed with possible motives): the character and the discourse are each other’s accomplices” (1975: 178). He accordingly offered a view of character as the combination of “sèmes”: “Sarrasine is the sum, the point of convergence, of: turbulence, artistic gift, independence, excess, femininity, ugliness, composite nature, impiety, love of whittling, will, etc.). What gives the illusion that the sum is supplemented by a precious remainder (something like individuality, in that, qualitative and ineffable, it may escape the vulgar bookkeeping of compositional characters) is the Proper Name, the difference completed by what is proper to it. The proper name enables the person to exist outside the sèmes, whose sum nonetheless constitutes it entirely” (191). Seymour Chatman developed an influential position along similar lines, describing character as a “paradigm of traits” where “trait” is used “in the sense of ‘relatively stable or abiding personal quality,’ recognizing that it may either unfold, that is, emerge earlier or later in the course of the story, or that it may disappear and be replaced by another. In other words, its domain may end” (1978: 126). Chatman grants more to a mimetic notion of character than Barthes does, but both perspectives recognize the effect of being that characters create without making it a priori: they are less a repudiation of the idea of fictional being than a demystification of it. I want to suggest that by invoking this tradition it becomes possible to account for emotional involvement without unwarranted concessions to realism or evasions of fictionality.

**Emotion and Belief**

In the fictional worlds model, a novel is the equipment for the reader’s game of make-believe. But if involvement in fiction is an act of make-
believe, then either the emotions aroused are also make-believe, framed and qualified as part of the game, or they remain irreducibly paradoxical. Make-believe is not belief, but one of those expressions (of which “suspension of disbelief” is the archetype) designed to reconcile the irrelevance of belief to fiction with its apparent centrality to involvement; likewise, Walton’s appeal to “quasi-emotions” merely extends this strategy of mystification into the domain of emotional response itself (1990: 194–204). Such terminological hedges (“pretence” and “mimetic illusion” also have some currency) tacitly acknowledge that belief is not an option for any but the most naïve or misinformed reader of fiction. From such a perspective, emotional involvement in fiction can only be understood as pretended emotion—or conversely, as a confusion of fiction and reality. But while this assumes an irreducible conflict between a sense of character as being (which facilitates belief and hence emotional involvement) and a sense of character as narrative construct (which inhibits both), these two attitudes seem to have been unselfconsciously combined by Dickens’s readers. This is especially clear in some of the more indignant responses to Nell’s death, which tended to frame their reaction against this event as an attack upon Dickens’s narrative artistry. These readers’ responses strongly suggest a feeling that their emotional investment in the character had been betrayed, whether through incompetence or cynical sensationalism, by the author’s handling of his narrative. There is a shade of this in Ruskin’s accusation that Dickens killed Nell “for the market, as a butcher kills a lamb,” in which much hangs upon that emotionally charged simile. Daniel O’Connell, who flung the book away in disgust, seems to have similarly displaced his feelings: “It was obvious that the author had not sufficient talent to maintain Nell’s adventures with interest to the end and bring them to a happy issue, so he killed her to get rid of the difficulty” (House et al. 1965–2002: 2: x). It is hard not to read into these rather hot repudiations a similar emotional reflex to that betrayed by a less sophisticated reader, who “suddenly sprung from his chair, flung the book violently on the ground, and exclaimed ‘The Villain! The Rascal!! The bloodthirsty scoundrel!!!’ [ . . . ] ‘Dickens,’ he roared, ‘he would commit murder! He killed my little Nell—He killed my sweet little child!’” To object here that it is “only a story” would not help at all: he could hardly blame the author without being well aware that it is a story. It is as a story—as one given such an ending—that it upsets him; Nell’s unreality is no impediment at all. This reader was certainly naïve compared with O’Connell and Ruskin, but it seems to me that their more carefully rationalized responses have essentially the same emotional import.
“Make-believe” and other such formulations fail to distinguish between two aspects of involvement: the evaluation of emotional significance, and belief in the actuality of an object or state of affairs bearing that significance. This is because in the mimetic model it is the represented actuality itself that is evaluated, so that some substitute for belief is necessary for there to be any occasion for emotional involvement. Evaluation does not have to be subordinated to representation, however. Affective responses to discourse need not wait for narrative; in fact, they may be brought into play by a single word in isolation (consider the emotional freight of the word “murder,” or the word “gentle,” or less obviously, the word “obviously”). The emotional power of narrative lies in its ability to draw out and particularize the affective charge of words (or images), but that charge is first generated in semiotic rather than narrative terms. Emotional response should be understood not as an effect of illusion, but as a corollary of the fundamental processes of textual comprehension. It is inherent in one of the most basic tasks of interpreting a text, which is the naturalization of its language—the evaluative placing of its language—in terms of the discursive contexts available to any given reader. Representation follows from, rather than precedes this comprehension—no longer as the means to a mimetic illusion, but merely as the product of the interpretative (and therefore tacitly evaluative) process. The concept of character as a unity, then, represents the complex of evaluative interpretations that arise directly from its discursive elements. Narrative puts these elements into play as the functional terms of its affective argument.

If representation is conceived of as the means to mimetic illusion, then character is a mimetic achievement, the product of characterization, held up for appreciation and response in holistic terms of identity, personality, consciousness. I want to acknowledge the legitimacy of this as a literary objective or effect, but at the same time to resist the tendency to make it a necessary and preliminary condition of emotional involvement, because to do so is to make involvement conditional not just on mimesis but also on the kind and degree of mimesis that broadly constitutes realism. If instead the process of representation is understood as already rhetorical, then character itself represents the value-laden terms which are operative in a particular case, and in which the reader’s involvement is already invested. This model does not make mimesis into a substitute for belief, but only an effect of the evaluative engagement that constitutes interpretation—and which in itself is the process of emotional involvement.

The model of involvement I am proposing, and the model of character it assumes, follow from the proposition that the reading of fiction requires
evaluative interpretation, but not belief or any simulacrum of belief. Emotional involvement is the recognition of values inherent in the discursive information given by a narrative rather than in the actuality of the characters this information generates. It is a response founded upon the idea of innocence, for example, rather than upon the innocent girl to which that idea contributes. Narrative representation is crucial to the articulation of this emotional freight, and it can acquire particularity only in narrative terms (indeed, different narratives may take it in radically different directions), but because it is grounded in semiosis rather than representational illusion, the issue of belief is irrelevant. Whereas mimetic models of character imply the priority of represented fact to evaluative response, this approach regards discursive information as already value-laden, and hence rhetorically charged in the offering. In this sense, character can be understood as integrating the mimetic paradigm of being with the textual paradigm of meaning: fictional being follows, and is itself the realization of, the evaluative emotional dynamic of fictional narrative. Character, viewed from a rhetorical perspective, is in fact no more than characterization itself. Fictional being might be described as the “objective correlative,” in global terms, of the affective argument of a novel, if that phrase were not burdened with too much critical resonance already. Fictionality itself would then be the generative means by which “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events . . . shall be the formula of that particular emotion”—to address an issue entirely neglected by Eliot himself (1951: 145).

I do not think this account can be accused of being too indirect or counterintuitive. Instead of saying that readers’ emotional responses to the fortunes of a character are the result of involvement with a represented person, it assumes that their emotions attach to the particular complex of meanings constituting that character. Of the two, it is the mimetic model that is indirect. It involves an interpretative movement from textual meaning to an extrapolated fictional world, which is then itself evaluated in order to charge it with emotional significance. Better to avoid this division between interpretation and evaluation, and say that the emotional significance is grounded in textual meaning, or the semiotic means of representation, rather than the conceptual product of representation. The fictional “world” is not the occasion of that emotional significance, but an effect of its articulation. This involves no radical distinction between the way our emotions are involved with fictional characters and the way they are involved with real people, but instead regards the latter as a special case of the former. In life, as in fiction, involvement is an accumulation of emotional significance; but whereas in life someone or something usually
exists as the object upon which that significance is bestowed, in fiction the significance itself suffices. This is not to deny that being has value in itself, only the logical priority of this value. In connection with an argument about the irreducibility of identity to attributes, Thomas Pavel cites Pascal’s *Pensées*, fragment 688: “if someone loves me for my judgment or my memory, do they love me? me, myself? No, for I could lose these qualities without losing myself” (1986: 154). But if this line is pursued, how would it be possible to love him at all? It’s asking too much of our lovers to be appreciated for a selfhood without qualities. In general people do not appreciate qualities in the abstract, either; they need to be instantiated. My suggestion is that representation provides for emotional investment in the rhetorical process of instantiation, irrespective of whether the product is assumed or imagined to exist. The equivalence of our ideas about actual and fictitious people does not work in terms of being, but in terms of evaluative meaning. While accounts founded upon mimesis tend to make involvement conditional upon the fulfilment of realist criteria, this line of thought leads to a more broadly rhetorical account that is able to accommodate Little Nell and her readers without convicting them of literary naïveté.

**Nell’s Rhetorical Force**

Nell is one of the few literary protagonists who really justify E. M. Forster’s reductive distinction between flat and round characters, which was itself never much more than the expression of a realist aesthetic (1962: 73–81). Nell is flat because the operative values of Dickens’s art are in general simple rather than complex, and they are particularly so in Nell’s case, where purity is at a premium. It is not that Nell is “idealized”—there is no original of more humanly mixed qualities (Mary Hogarth, for instance) behind the representation; rather, it is an ideal that she represents. In this respect, the mode of characterization involved here is continuous with the idealistic culture of sentiment with which Dickens was engaged, and it is recognizably within the romance tradition in allowing literal and symbolic representational imperatives to predominate alternately (see Eigner, 1978). The happy coexistence of these requires that the reader respond to characterization not as a mimetic objective but as a rhetorical means. Its priority is not character in its own right, but as the site of the reader’s evaluative alignment. Nell’s characterization is not lacking an essential dimension because it is fully commensurate with the literary ends it serves—which
have very little to do with convincing mimetic realization. And the “roundness” of a character such as Joyce’s Bloom is, in terms of rhetorical means, a difference of degree, not kind: a difference of kind only obstructs in the sense that mimetic realization is here a literary end in itself, and this is something achieved by a *sophistication* of means rather than being itself a categorical transformation of means. My claim is that such paradigmatically “flat” and “round” characters are a result not only of the same basic principles of characterization, but also of the same process of emotional involvement. Bloom, like Nell, does not invite emotional involvement as a character; he secures it in achieving characterhood. I should emphasize that my interest is not in Nell as a paradigm case, but as a marginal case: I am arguing for the superiority of a view that can incorporate her over one that excludes her. A mimetic perspective requires her expulsion from the class of characters—round characters—who are capable of eliciting the reader’s involvement. By taking seriously the evidence to the contrary, I want to see her as integral to a rhetoric of characterization which subsumes the mimetic tradition, without denying its predominance. My position can be usefully contrasted with that elaborated by James Phelan (1989), which is also rhetorical, but aligned with mimesis. Although I shall be going on to discuss Nell as an ideal of innocence, I am not arguing that Phelan’s “thematic” component of character always subsumes the mimetic. I prefer to make the distinction with reference to the terms “dimension” and “function,” by which Phelan contrasts an attribute of character “considered in isolation from the work” and “the particular application of that attribute made by the text through its developing structure” (9). He is careful to dissociate the logical priority here from any sequential model of the reading experience, but it remains a priority of representational means to rhetorical ends. This is true of thematic dimensions as of mimetic dimensions of character, since these are conceived of as, precisely, “representative” (rather than individual). My claim is that these dimensions of character are always rhetorical from the outset, and that rhetorical means are logically prior to any representational ends whatsoever.

In this light, it is possible to begin to make sense of certain late nineteenth-century tributes to Dickens that seem to fly in the face of the twentieth-century consensus. Adolphus Ward observed of him that “To no other author were his own characters ever more real” (an observation which, superficially at least, is borne out by several of Dickens’s remarks about Nell); while John Forster, referring specifically to the success of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, credited not just the pathos but also “the grasp of reality with which character had again been seized” (1969: 1:123). The pull
of realism and its privileged terms can be felt in these remarks, but their awkward fit with modern evaluations (can they really be touting Nell’s verisimilitude?) also suggests something at odds with realist assumptions, that what is “real” is the affective vitality of the characters—their “life” not as plausible beings but as rhetorical gambits. Reality is grasped not in terms of representational correspondence but in terms of truth of feeling (see Bell 1983).

Direct evidence for the compatibility of emotional involvement with the sense of a nonrealist, allegorical dimension of character is provided in an early review of *Master Humphrey’s Clock* by Thomas Hood. Commenting on the scene with which the first chapter of *The Old Curiosity Shop* ends, he observes that “it is like an Allegory of the peace and innocence of Childhood in the midst of Violence, Superstition, and all the hateful or hurtful Passions of the world” (Collins 1971: 96). The remark evidently flattered Dickens’s own conception of the novel. He later wrote to Hood saying how much he had been pleased by the review, and referred to it by way of tribute in the 1848 preface. He had also added, for the 1841 edition, four paragraphs at the end of the chapter to reinforce Hood’s impression (which was indeed originally formed more in response to Samuel Williams’s accompanying illustration than the text itself). Here, Dickens emphasizes the importance of allegory to the imagination: “We are so much in the habit of allowing impressions to be made upon us by external objects, which should be produced by reflection alone, but which, without such visible aids, often escape us; that I am not sure I should have been so thoroughly possessed by this one subject, but for the heaps of fantastic things I had seen huddled together in the curiosity-dealer’s warehouse. These, crowding upon my mind, in connection with the child, and gathering round her, as it were, brought her condition palpably before me. I had her image, without any effort of imagination, surrounded and beset by everything that was foreign to its nature, and furthest removed from the sympathies of her sex and age. . . . she seemed to exist in a kind of allegory” (1972: 1; 55–56). With this mediation of the image, Dickens virtually instructs his readers in the reading of the narrative that follows. That is not to say that *The Old Curiosity Shop* is to be read as allegory: the appeal of the term to Dickens is not as a mode of literary representation, but as an indicator of the diagrammatic simplicity of the emotional allegiances with which he is working. Allegory is conceived of here primarily in affective rather than hermeneutic terms: its appeal is to sentiment, in the context of a positive model of sentimentality. *The Old Curiosity Shop* does not offer a realist mode of characterization *debased* by sentimentality, but
romance characterization dedicated to sentimentality. Sentimentality, that is, as the communal affirmation of moral idealism against the prevailing materialistic forces of philosophical and scientific realism in an increasingly secular industrial age. This predisposition in Dickens is not escapist but embattled; it is not an unexamined emotional premise vulgarizing his representational means, but a rhetorical end to be gained only in the face of contrary emotional impulses. Dickens goes on to set his allegorical tableau in motion, anticipating the future course of the novel: “It would be a curious speculation,” said I, after some restless turns across and across the room, “to imagine her in her future life, holding her solitary way among a crowd of wild grotesque companions; the only pure, fresh, youthful object in the throng” (1; 56). This opposition of values accumulates an emotional charge the dangers of which are even here intimated by Master Humphrey: “I already saw before me a region on which I was little disposed to enter” (1; 56). The simplicity of the value scheme in The Old Curiosity Shop does not mean that its argument is without complexity. It does make for a very strong appeal to emotional allegiances; and the complexities follow hard upon that.

The Emotional Argument of The Old Curiosity Shop

The exact nature of the emotional danger is not immediately apparent, however. The terms of the narrative are simple in the extreme: the purity and innocence of Nell are set against all that contradicts them, the forces of the grotesque and malign that will by the third chapter be epitomized in the figure of Quilp. The narrative invites obvious allegiances and seems to promise that they will be vindicated by its own future course. But the first seeds of an uneasiness have already been sown. Master Humphrey, as host and narrator in the opening chapters, is the authorized mediator of concern for Nell’s vulnerability—yet he himself, within moments of their meeting, is provoked by his interest into deceiving her. “I really felt ashamed to take advantage of the ingenuousness or grateful feeling of the child for the purpose of gratifying my curiosity,” he protests. “As I had felt pleased at first by her confidence I determined to deserve it” (1; 46). In spite of these scruples, somewhat double-edged in themselves, he takes her home by an unfamiliar route to prevent her running ahead, so that he might gain admittance to her home and learn more of her circumstances. It is significant that his interest is also the narrative interest: even after his retirement as narrator, the story itself continues to risk complic-
ity with the threats to Nell that constitute its interest as a story. Master Humphrey withdraws as narrator at the end of chapter three, with a matter-of-fact directness quite disarming to realist cavils about the narrative transmission: “And now that I have carried this history so far in my own character and introduced these personages to the reader, I shall for the convenience of the narrative detach myself from its further course, and leave those who have prominent and necessary parts in it to speak and act for themselves” (3; 72). Dickens’s original conclusion, which identifies Master Humphrey with the single gentleman, is only an exacerbation from this point of view. The real logic of this withdrawal is rhetorical: Master Humphrey, having served to invest the reader’s interest a little ambiguously in Nell, has become an encumbrance as a character in his own right. Dickens immediately avails himself of his new narrative freedom by turning to the domestic and inner life of Quilp. The contrast between Quilp and Master Humphrey, superficially absolute, is muted by the discordant possibility that Quilp’s monstrosity is just Master Humphrey’s deformity writ large. Quilp’s appeal as a literary creation is obvious enough: he is a Richard III, an Iago, yet more bestial, more exuberantly physical. It is a critical commonplace to suspect Dickens’s own unconscious sympathy with his character, but this is to say too much and too little. There is no sympathy here, but antipathy constantly undermined by a fascination that is not at all unconscious, but open and freely indulged. Although Quilp’s role in the plot is motivated by a range of vices (lechery and greed with regard to Nell and her grandfather; a trumped up jealousy with regard to Fred Trent and Dick Swiveller; petty rivalry and malice with regard to Kit), he is essentially a malign principle, awaiting its occasions. This undermotivation keeps him open to imaginative appropriation; it renders his malevolence more sinister, but also harder to disown. The extent to which the novel insinuates the reader’s complicity with Quilp is apparent in the frequency with which he articulates opinions of Nell that demand assent, even as they acquire sinister overtones in his mouth: “‘Such a fresh, blooming, modest little bud, neighbour,’ said Quilp, nursing his short leg, and making his eyes twinkle very much; ‘such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell!’” (9; 125).

While Nell and Quilp represent opposite poles, the novel takes every opportunity to discomfort the simple emotional alignment this would seem to invite. “Everything in our lives, whether of good or evil, affects us most by contrast,” Dickens declares (53; 493); but a little later, expanding on this theme as Nell emerges into the sunlight on the tower of the ancient church, he writes, “It was like passing from death to life; it was drawing
nearer heaven” (53; 496). As the affirmation of life is appropriated to the ideal, beyond death, so the terms of the contrast collapse and the way is paved for Nell’s ascension. The power of Dickens’s effects of contrast depends in large part on the instability of the extremes, on the difficulty of keeping them isolate from each other. Every solicitous interest in Nell is itself turned into a threat to just that innocence and purity for which she is valued. These are qualities to be preserved, to be left well alone: Nell develops so little as a character because, in her, development is fatal. Her grandfather’s fond ambition to make her a lady itself already constitutes a threat, and when their relationship is inverted following the collapse of his affairs, it establishes the fundamental tension that fuels her pathos, loading her with cares that constantly testify to her goodness and constantly threaten her innocence. While her grandfather continues to endanger her with his renewed gambling and intentions of theft, others who would rescue her are rendered dangerous to him, and so to her. Quilp’s machinations make Kit potentially fatal to the old man’s health: the mysterious single gentleman, in his enquiries after the fugitive pair, becomes the embodiment of those well-meaning pursuers they fear would pronounce the old man senile, and part them (19).

The sexual aspect of the threat to Nell is always close to the surface of the narrative—unsurprisingly, given that sexuality is a major element of what is at stake in the idea of innocence. Critics have noted the dominance of the male perspective, from Master Humphrey’s slightly ambiguous interest right through to the all-male group of mourners at Nell’s funeral. The sense of her sexual vulnerability is strongly intimated in the account of her grandfather’s predatory intrusion into her bedroom (30); it is there also in the advice of the woman at the races who from bitter experience bids her to “keep at home for God’s sake” (19; 214). Quilp, of course, is very aware of Nell’s emergent sexuality and knowingly commits the symbolic violation of sleeping in her bed. Interest from other quarters is happily turned aside: Kit’s is distracted by Barbara before it takes on a sexual character; Dick’s is diverted to the Marchioness, allowing his subplot a comic resolution in which extremes are reconciled, a meagre reality successfully glossed over by unbridled fantasy. But there remains the passage of time, against which Nell’s childhood is not proof. Time is the responsibility of the narrative itself, and once again the reader’s interest is implicated.

In these terms, the necessity of Nell’s death is clearly intimated. Forster, who claimed to have first perceived it, recalled that her fate was sealed by his appeal to essentially the same logic: “I asked him to consider whether it did not necessarily belong even to his own conception, after taking so
mere a child through such a tragedy of sorrow, to lift her also out of the commonplace of ordinary happy endings, so that the gentle pure little figure and form should never change to the fancy. All that I meant he seized at once, and never turned aside from it again” (1969: 1:123). The readers of *Master Humphrey’s Clock* were sensitive to Dickens’s foreshadowings of this end, although Hood, writing at the beginning of November 1840, too optimistically exclaimed “How soothing the moral, that Gentleness, Purity, and Truth, sometimes dormant but never dead, have survived, and will outlive, Fraud and Force, though backed by gold and encased in steel!” (Collins 1971: 96–97). But by the 24th of November, after the appearance of chapters 52 and 53, Dickens recorded in a note to his publishers “I am inundated with imploring letters recommending poor little Nell to mercy.—Six yesterday, and four today (it’s not 12 o’Clock yet) already!” These letters convey something of the extent of readers’ emotional involvement with the story, as well as their strong sense, enhanced by serial publication, of the author’s control of its as yet indeterminate outcome.

That Dickens himself was emotionally involved, his letters of the period amply testify. But he repeatedly couples his expressions of distress with cool assessments of the artistic necessity of the painful denouement: “All night long I have been pursued by the child; and this morning I am unrefreshed and miserable. I don’t know what to do with myself. . . . I think the close of the story will be great”; “I am slowly murdering that poor child, and grow wretched over it. It wrings my heart. Yet it must be” (House et al. 1965–2002: 2:144, 180). The exact nature of the necessity is never articulated, but there is no denying that it took emotional strength to adhere to it: there is no case for cynical hackery or sentimental self-indulgence on Dickens’s part. The memory of Mary Hogarth was bound up with his feelings for Nell, of course, but emotion and artistic self-consciousness coexisted throughout: “Old wounds bleed afresh when I only think of the way of doing it: what the actual doing it will be, God knows. I can’t preach to myself the schoolmaster’s consolation, though I try. Dear Mary died yesterday, when I think of this sad story. . . . I have refused several invitations for this week and next, determining to go nowhere till I had done. I am afraid of disturbing the state I have been trying to get into, and having to fetch it all back again” (2:181–82). The editors of the Pilgrim letters are surely right to cite this as evidence against an emotional obsession (2:xii): Dickens’s literary objectives are distinct from and more general than his grief for his sister-in-law.

The “schoolmaster’s consolation,” from chapter 54, is that “there is not an angel added to the Host of Heaven but does its blessed work on earth
in those that loved it here” (54; 503); it anticipates the sentiment of the (as yet unwritten) passage Horne set as verse. Both formulations are concerned with the effect on the bereaved, and both, despite the gesture towards a religious vocabulary, frame the consolation in strikingly secular terms: the world is better for the tender feelings that arise out of grief. Dickens’s neglect of specifically Christian sentiments here is obtrusive enough to have provoked censure: the reviewer for the Christian Remembrancer objected that “not a single Christian feature is introduced.” Dickens’s presentation of Nell’s death is “one tissue of fantastic sentiment, as though the growth of flowers by one’s grave, and the fresh country air passing over it, and the games of children near it, could abate by one particle the venom of death” (Schlicke and Schlicke 1988: 41). Christian consolation, as understood by the Christian Remembrancer, focusses on dying rather than being bereaved. It is irrelevant to Dickens here because the “venom of death” is not at all his central concern. Certainly, one of the functions of the deathbed scene in the Victorian novel was to present an image of the gentle death, most particularly when an angelic child is concerned, and Dickens does provide such a scene in The Old Curiosity Shop. It is the death of the schoolmaster’s favourite, who passes on with all due demonstrations of goodness and serenity. Nell is present at the occasion, and the schoolmaster later quite explicitly transfers his emotional allegiance to her (46; 435), but this exemplary deathbed scene proves not to be a dress rehearsal for her own. It must come as a surprise to anyone for whom the notoriety of Nell’s death precedes acquaintance with the novel itself, that Dickens provides her actual dying with no scene at all, treating it only in a couple of brief, retrospective paragraphs in chapter 72. Nell doesn’t die as an exemplar but as a loss, and Dickens’s attention is wholly taken up with the experience of loss: for her grandfather; for the schoolmaster, Kit, and the single gentleman; for himself and his readers.

Forster’s biography records that he “never knew him wind up any tale with such a sorrowful reluctance as this” (1969: 1:122). The reluctance clearly arose from the emotional significance attached to Nell, yet the necessity of her death also arises from this emotional significance. She embodies an ideal of pure and innocent goodness which is under threat, not only from the malevolent force of Quilp, but also from those who care for her; from the interest of Kit and the single gentleman, pursuers whose well-meaning intent is to reintroduce her, ruinously, to society and the city; and from the interest of his readers, in their complicity with that narrative prospect. Dickens kills her to save her. The burden of his description of her corpse is one of danger averted, of an ideal innocence restored,
preserved from the encroaching corruption of life: “Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose” (71; 654). The emotional challenge of the novel is to accept the rightness of this, despite all it does to make that hard to do, including the expression of a directly contradictory view of death: “Where, in the sharp lineaments of rigid and unsightly death, is the calm beauty of slumber . . . ?” (12; 146). In spite of this and other foregrounded discords (the bird thatpresumes to have life when she does not; the grotesque injustice of the old outliving her), Dickens invites his readers to respond not with an immoderate grief like her grandfather’s, which itself tends only towards death, but “with a softened feeling, and with consolation” (House et al. 1965–2002: 2:188). That is, to live up to the sentiment that moves Dickens to blank verse in chapter 72, and take to heart the hard lesson that, “Of every tear that sorrowing mortals shed on such green graves, some good is born, some gentler nature comes” (72; 659). Nell’s death is right because she is too good for this world, she is ideal—unrealistic, if you like. To accept it is to admit the power of Quilp and the fallen state of human nature (or more specifically, perhaps, of male affections), but in doing so also to affirm and cleave to the ideal. The precondition for the sacrifice of Nell is the death of Quilp: its necessity at this level accounts for and supplies the striking lack of motivation for the event in realistic terms. When his time comes, he merely stumbles and falls into the dark river, but a villain was never more openly pushed. His dying is ruthlessly punitive and is followed by the mortification of his body, described with an intensity that underlines its emotional significance: the river “toyed and sported with its ghastly freight, now bruising it against the slimy piles, now hiding it in mud or long rank grass, now dragging it heavily over rough stones and gravel, now feigning to yield it to its own element, and in the same action luring it away, until, tired of the ugly plaything, it flung it on a swamp . . . and left it there to bleach” (67; 620). Quilp is not defeated so that Nell may be restored—he is repudiated so that she may be renounced. One of the most cool-headed contemporary literary assessments of the novel was that of Lady Stanley, who wrote to her daughter-in-law, after reading Quilp’s death, “Will Nelly die? I think she ought” (Mitford 1938: 2). Dickens himself felt strongly for Nell and found it hard renouncing her, but he held fast to his design for the same reason and demanded as much of his readers. He concludes the fatal chapter with a direct challenge to waverers: “say, if one deliberate wish expressed in solemn terms above this bed could call her back to life, which of us would utter it!” (71; 654). The
emotional power of the novel was much more than a sop to popular sentiment: it was a demanding struggle through a widespread contemporary experience of grief in order to secure a humane consolation; and it was a vindication of idealistic sensibilities in the face of an inevitable complicity with the debased forces opposing them. Forster’s response is a fitting tribute to its rhetorical achievement: “It is little to tell you that I think it is your literary masterpiece. The deeper feeling it has left with me goes beyond considerations of that kind. . . . I was about to say that I had felt this death of dear little Nell as a kind of discipline of feeling and emotion which would do me lasting good, and which I would not thank you for as an ordinary enjoyment of literature” (House et al. 1965–2002: 2:187n).

Dickens’s success in engaging the emotions of his readers with Little Nell was not based on a crude manipulation of vulgar sentimental clichés, but on his ability to shape a rhetorical argument to the end of a powerful achieved sentiment. He was able to do this because those readers were receptive to a treatment of character in which mimetic objectives are subordinate to rhetorical objectives, the idealist temper of which in this case was incompatible with realist representation. This does not imply a need for two separate models of reading: realist representation, too, is a rhetorical end of fiction, and the same account of emotional involvement can accommodate both realist and romance characterization. The inaccessibility of Nell’s emotional power to modern readers is a consequence, beyond the cultural remoteness of the sentiments themselves, of the subsequent collusion between realist literary programmes and critical assumptions about character and representation. Once the explanation of emotional involvement in fiction is put upon a broader footing, in terms of fictional rhetoric rather than mimetic representation, the Little Nell phenomenon falls into place, and (if we are so inclined) we can weep freely again.

Of course, we are probably not so inclined. I have argued for the integrity of Dickens’s literary engagement with early Victorian sentimentality, not for the revival of that sentimentality itself. This account has sought to show that Little Nell’s reception can be justified, not by treating it as symptomatic of the emotional climate of a particular cultural moment, but by understanding this novel, and fiction in general, as a direct and deliberate contribution to cultural discourse. Fiction is not a second-order phenomenon of the kind which a mimetic framework necessarily implies, but an integral part of a culture’s discursive exploration of itself. Fictionality is the inaugurating move of a specific rhetoric, which enables a process of imaginative exploration of values; in this case, a process which pursues the logic of sentiment beyond its specific occasions towards a principled
idealism. Dickens does not simply invoke or exploit the sentimentality of his culture but addresses it and works through it. This is why the emotional response to this novel is a touchstone for the cultural role of fictional discourse in general: it enforces the recognition that the means of fiction’s relation to its readership are rhetorical rather than representational, and that representations are therefore not the object of the reader’s engagement, but rather a corollary of that engagement.  

An account of fictionality as a rhetorical orientation properly ends with the reader, though I have only addressed one key element of the theoretical implications of such an account for our understanding of narrative reception. I hope, however, that I have done enough to show that the view of fictionality advanced throughout this book can indeed accommodate, in principle, the range of theoretical issues that accompany the reception of narrative fictions, from the emotional involvement of individual readers to the role of fictions in culture at large, and that in doing so such a rhetorical account offers significant conceptual advantages. Necessarily, what I have said can only gesture towards the global reconceptualization and redescription of fictionality in context that it implies, and highlight a few of the more obvious points at which that effort secures a critical dividend. But if the gesture carries any conviction, then perhaps you’ll agree that the approach itself merits further consideration.
There is an important respect in which the argument of my last chapter can be seen to epitomize one of the guiding principles of the whole project, which I would like to reaffirm in closing. My attempt to explain the emotive force of Little Nell is founded upon a proper recognition of those readers who found her story so moving, and of the literary competence—in particular, the understanding of fiction—exhibited in their responses. This respect for the experience of lay readers does not lead me to embrace the terms in which they articulated that experience, however, nor to a theoretical perspective grounded upon their mode of expression. Instead, I have tried to formulate an explanation that accounts for, and vindicates, their sense of the power of fiction without merely restating it. In the same spirit, I have been at pains throughout this book to show that my theoretical perspective does not fly in the face of critics’ and readers’ intuitions about fiction, even where it most appears to do so, but on the contrary often provides a better foundation for those intuitions than representational or referential models of fictionality can offer.

This principle follows partly from my sense of the object of inquiry, as defined by my theoretical perspective, and partly from my sense of what the function of theoretical discourse should be. The object of inquiry, as far as I’m concerned, is discursive and rhetorical, and inextricable from its function as a communicative process—hence from the production and reception of fictions. As for theoretical discourse in general, I assume that it should try to offer an optimally descriptive account of the set of phenomena to which it addresses itself; that is, it should capture maximum detail with maximum efficiency. These two criteria are not really commensurate, so there is always room for different views of what an optimal
description should look like; but if the object of inquiry is of any complexity at all, it will necessarily involve some degree of abstraction.

So my approach is accountable to ordinary experiences of fiction because it is indeed the experience of fiction, rather than fiction or narrative as an ideal object, that constitutes the focus of my inquiry; that much is a given of my methodology and premises. On the other hand, this fact itself means that my theoretical discourse is bound to be abstracted from the ways in which lay readers describe the experience of fiction, because that is a condition of its explanatory power—whereas an account of fiction that conceives of its object in isolation from the communicative process may well feel free to draw upon the common terms of description used by readers in its own descriptive enterprise. The limits of my theoretical analysis, too, are dictated by this relation of accountability. Redescription, to be efficacious at all, must connect with ordinary intuitions at some level; it must ultimately be vraisemblable. For that reason, it is also inherently contingent—it is always a provisional, figurative gesture towards its object, and so always open to further analysis and redescription.

The pervasiveness of this mode of theoretical negotiation can be brought out by a review, chapter by chapter, of the main arguments that have arisen in consequence of the rhetorical concept of fictionality I propose in chapter one. In chapter two, for example, I am simultaneously engaged with and detached from the common assumptions of readers when I put forward the notion of fiction as the exercise of narrative understanding, or of the mimetic process in Ricoeur’s sense. So, too, throughout chapter three, where my reconception of fabula pointedly confronts the elision of theoretical and commonsensical discourse in the term’s more current synonym, story. My critique of the concept of the narrator, in chapter four, is in part an attempt to vindicate straightforward intuitions about narrative communication in the face of an unhelpfully convoluted and hedged theoretical orthodoxy. Chapter five is an analysis and defamiliarization of the concept of voice, another of narrative theory’s intuitive terms that conceals much complexity, and indeed, I argue, multiple senses. The principle of narrative’s medium contingency advanced in chapter six is equally apropos: it appears to defy common intuitions about narrative, but in fact does so only at a superficial level, in the name of a more fundamentally cohesive sense of narrative as a cognitive faculty. So, too, in chapter seven, the figurative conception of narrative imagination as mediation turns the standard communication model of narrative back to front, yet it captures something important that novelists have been telling us for years, and that makes theoretical sense of much else involved in the rhetoric of
fictionality. I might also add that my running dialogue with the idea of fictional worlds, and with fictional worlds theory, throughout the book is of the same kind, and always poised between the appeal of such a notion in intuitive terms and the (quite distinct) theoretical basis underlying that appeal.

The tenor of this brief recapitulation is that I think it is possible to theorize narrative, and fiction in particular, in a way that avoids any incommensurability between attitudes of direct engagement and critical knowingness; between participation in, and consciousness of, the game of fictive discourse. The theoretical approach required is synthetic and necessarily abstracted to some extent from more immediate descriptive models; but it connects with the most elemental experience of fiction, because it builds upon the perception that the rhetoric of fictionality absolutely requires that an awareness of its artifice is innate in any response whatsoever to fiction as such. No reader of this book, I’m sure, is going to be convinced by all of its arguments, but I hope that their cumulative effect is substantial enough to justify the perspective that underwrites them.
Chapter One

1. Note that the intentionality of this model need not be reductive. An informative intention is an intention to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions; but “to have a representation of a set of assumptions [in mind, as a precondition of this intention] it is not necessary to have a representation of each assumption in the set. Any individuating description may do” (58). This comment leads directly on to Sperber and Wilson’s discussion of “vague” forms of communication, exemplified by sharing an impression: narrative display would fit well into this class.

2. This is not always the case. There is the possibility with some characters, for instance, of assimilation to an existing framework of knowledge (e.g., Napoleon, as mentioned below); there are also nonliteral forms of mediation (e.g., in a psychobiographical reading of Kafka), and partial resolutions (e.g., in a roman à clef).

Chapter Two

1. See chapters one and seven of Cohn (1999).
2. Barbara Foley (1996) addresses several kinds of argument arising from just such borderline cases. See also Cohn (1999 ch. 2).
3. This is best explained in Jonathan Culler’s synoptic account (1975 ch. 7).
5. Ricoeur does effectively reintroduce correspondence when he comes to discriminate between fiction and history himself, which he does with reference to truth-claim criteria, but under the heading of transfiguration, not configuration (2:3).
Chapter Three

2. See the attempts to tabulate the various schemes by Cohn (1990: 777); and O’Neill (1994: 21).
4. Compare Barbara Herrnstein Smith on the Cinderella story (1980: 211–18). Her argument, however, seems to imply that “story” is indeed plot summary.
5. See Bakhtin/Medvedev on “The formalists’ basic tendency to see creativity as the recombination of ready-made elements” (1978: 140).

Chapter Four

1. The ubiquity of the narrator is a fundamental assumption for Gérard Genette (1980; 1988), Frank Stanzel (1984), Gerald Prince (1982), Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983), and, despite having entertained ideas of non-narration in Story and Discourse (1978), Seymour Chatman (1990). Notable dissenters, on linguistic grounds, have been Käte Hamburger (1973 [1957]), Ann Banfield (1982), and S.-Y. Kuroda (1976). My own objections to the narrator are based upon representational rather than linguistic criteria; hence, I shall be arguing that certain “narrators” are outside representation, not that certain narratives function outside communication.
2. For a far more systematic analysis of unreliable narration, see Tamar Yacobi (1981; 1987), who places it in the context of alternative means of resolving interpretative incongruities. I am in broad sympathy with Yacobi’s account, which I do not consider to be seriously undermined by my dissent from its declared premise: “Insofar as fictionality characterizes the discourse as well as the world of literature, literary communication is always mediated” (1987: 335). On the criteria for unreliability, see also Marie-Laure Ryan (1984: 127–28).
3. According to Yacobi, “To become unreliable, [the narrator] must be exposed as such by some definite norm of congruity and to some definite effect... In the absence of concrete grounds—or what appears to be so on the surface—even if the distinction between author and narrator still holds in theory, then for all practical reading purposes it gets blurred, almost to the point of disappearance” (1987: 346–47). This hedged dichotomy between the practical and the theoretical (which exercises Yacobi again on page 357) is obviated once it is admitted that the mediation of a narrator is not inherent in fiction.
4. The debate about the implied author rumbles on. A valuable overview is provided by James Phelan’s recent defence of the term (2005: 38–49). Phelan’s position, however, is closer to Genette than Chatman, or even Booth, and the remaining distance between his stance and my own can perhaps be suffi-
ciently accounted for by the view I present of the authorial relation to narrative in chapter seven.

Chapter Five

1. In this respect I am taking up the possibility of a transmedia model of narrative raised by Manfred Jahn (2001: 675–76) and Brian Richardson (“Voice and Narration” 691), though emphatically not by postulating the agency of a dramatic (or filmic) narrator, for the reasons set out in chapter four.

2. Susan Lanser discussed the relation between ideological and formal senses of “voice” (“interpellation” and “instance” in my scheme) in the introduction to Fictions of Authority (1992: 3–5), and I shall return to her below in my discussion of interpellation. Note however that Lanser frames her approach in terms of the “fruitful counterpoints” between two approaches to voice that she sees as being of “antithetical tendency: the one general, mimetic and political, the other specific, semiotic, and technical” (4), whereas I am proposing a synthetic view in which instance and interpellation are complementary concepts within a representational semiotics of narrative.

3. Contrast the position adopted by Jahn, for whom drama requires an extension of the literary framework of narrative voice, even if this usually defaults to “just a bodiless and voiceless show-er or arranger function indistinguishable from the author” (2001: 676).

4. Richardson mentions a number of canonical modern texts for which it is unhelpful to take this literalistic view of the extradiegetic narrative situation (“Inhuman Voices” 700–701); many more examples could be added.

5. These remarks on level and person may be too elliptical to carry conviction, but further elaboration of the matter would be a futile digression here. I can only note in passing that I think there are intractable logical inconsistencies between the two concepts, the full articulation of which must await another occasion.

6. Richardson’s discussion of memory plays (“Voice and Narration” 682–83) provides further support for this observation.

7. This is essentially David Bordwell’s point in Narration in the Fiction Film (1985), where he argues for a view of filmic narration as the set of cues from which the viewer constructs the fabula, but he denies that narration implies a narrator (62). His emphasis upon the viewer’s understanding of the representational product inevitably slights the communicative process, however, and arises from problems with the notion of fictionality that Bordwell does not explore, despite the prominence of “fiction” in his title. Edward Branigan does discuss communication in the context of fictionality, though preferring to “remain neutral” (1992: 107) on the merits of communication models he finds caught between, on the one hand, a sense of agency in narration—he himself speaks of “an implicit extra-fictional narration [. . . ] the ‘voice’ of an ‘implied author’” (91)—and, on the other hand, the “anthropomorphic fiction” of a narrator (108–10).

8. Monika Fludernik, discussing the relation between voice and focalization,
argues for the theoretical redundancy of the latter (2001: 633–35). I find it helpful to retain it, however, as an aid to discriminating between the different senses of voice, which are often in play at the same time.

9. Note that this is a special case of focalization. Not all represented perspective can be adequately described as discursive in its manifestations. See the further discussion under interpellation.

10. The basis for this remark can be inferred from the satirical description of the heroine in Austen’s “Plan of a Novel, According to Hints from Various Quarters”: “Heroine a faultless Character herself—, perfectly good, with much tenderness & sentiment, & not the least Wit” (1954: 428).

11. The possibility of analogies for FID in other media raises interesting questions. Consider the way in which Hitchcock represents the experience of vertigo in the film of that name, in the famous tower shot combining a zoom out and track in to maintain a constant image size, or frame range, in a view down a (model) stairwell. The device is clearly mimetic of James Stewart’s disturbed cognitive struggle to make sense of his perceptions, but at the same time it is an overtly filmic technique—a simultaneous track and zoom—which situates it as part of the representational rhetoric of the diegetic narrative itself.

12. The mechanism of presupposition underlying the interpellation of subjects has been explored by John Frow in relation to genre and Vološinov’s concept of the literary enthymeme, or argument with an implied premise (1986: 77–78).

13. The need to discriminate between senses of voice is apparent in the conclusion to which Aczel is led by a consideration of this specific Bakhtinian context: “Narrative voice, like any other voice, is a fundamentally composite entity, a specific configuration of voices” (483). If every voice is a configuration of voices, the term is being made to work too hard.


15. See the criticism of Lanser’s project by Nilli Diengott (1988), and the subsequent defense by Gerald Prince (1996).

16. Other theorists who have taken up the issue of feminist narratology include Robyn Warhol (1989), Sally Robinson (1991), Alison Case (1999), and Joan Peters (2002).

Chapter Six

1. I have already argued against the view that fabula is independent of discourse in chapter three. That discussion also takes account of arguments about different versions of the “same” story, and the transposition of the “same” story into different media.

2. Peirce’s sense of semiosis as process went hand in hand with an idea of internal reflection as social: “Your self of one instant appeals to your deeper self for his assent” (1935–58: 6:388).

3. My point here clearly relates to Monika Fludernik’s in *Towards a “Natural” Narratology* (1996: 12–13), though her definitional emphasis upon human experientiality is representational rather than semiotic.

4. There is scope for disagreement about who is who in this image. Positive
identification is inhibited by the fact that both Chantal and Zelda are almost always represented as veiled, but it is arguably possible to infer from some images that Chantal is slightly taller than Zelda, which would count against my interpretation here.

5. Life to those Shadows [1990: 243]. A little later he comments “the term ‘illusion of reality’ is a malapropism masking the existence of a rationally selective system of symbolic exchange” [246].

6. Also known as The Countryman’s First Sight of the Animated Pictures.

7. It is arguable that such a double response to the image is as necessary to the combination of shots as it is within the single shot, as R. Arnheim argued: “Film gives us simultaneously the effect of an actual happening and of a picture. A result of the ‘pictureness’ of film is, then, that a sequence of scenes that are diverse in time and space is not felt as arbitrary” [quoted in Heath 1976: 87].

8. The same perspectival confusion is evident in a newspaper report from 1896, which corrects a previous exaggerated account of two fainting ladies who were seated in a box to the left of the screen, but goes on to suggest, nonetheless, that “the right-hand boxes are better for nervous folk” (see Bottomore 1999: 181, 194).

Chapter Seven

1. A valuable overview of the concept can be gained from the introduction to, and articles collected in, Seán Burke’s Authorship: From Plato to the Post-modern (1995).

2. This passage comes from Charlotte’s preface to the 1850 edition (1981: 368).

3. Roussel, Perec, and Abish (among others) are discussed by Leonard Orr in “Random Verbal Generators and Verbal Constraints in Fiction” [1984].

4. See, for example, the legitimation of “the most romantic parts of this narrative” in the “Postscript” to Waverley [1978: 4–5].

5. The nature and extent of Trollope’s involvement with his characters is usefully discussed by Stephen Wall in Trollope and Character (1988).

6. The idea of fiction as an exercise in the tautological definition of its own truths has been explored to its limits by Michael Riffaterre in Fictional Truth (1990).

7. Indeed, a comment from James’s preface to The Princess Cassamassima could have supplied the epigraph to this chapter: “the teller of the story is primarily, nonetheless, the listener to it, the reader of it, too” [1962: 63].

Chapter Eight

2. See Damman (1992). A more nuanced position, from a narratological point of view, is provided by Peter Rabinowitz’s concept of “narrative audience” in Before Reading, though this still keeps one foot in the “belief” camp I am opposing: “The pretense [involved in joining the narrative audience] is closer to Coleridge’s ‘willing suspension of disbelief,’ except that I would argue not that disbelief is suspended but rather that it is both suspended and not suspended at the same time” (1987: 95).

3. These are the parameters which emerge from a special number of Poetics in volume 23 (1994), on “Emotions and Cultural Products.”

4. Several more recent approaches to character have sought to negotiate between mimetic and structuralist perspectives: Martin Price’s Forms of Life (1983) and Baruch Hochman’s Character in Literature (1985) both reassert the priority of the mimetic; Robert Higbie’s Character and Structure in the English Novel (1984) elaborates a syncretic model founded upon (early) structuralist premises; and James Phelan’s Reading People, Reading Plots (1989) advances an inclusive view which recognizes three components to character—the mimetic (as person), the thematic (as idea or value), and the synthetic (as construct). See also the special issue on fictional character in Style volume 24 (1990), which includes cognitive psychological and textual approaches.

5. An account by Mrs. Jane Greene of her uncle’s reaction, in a letter sent to Forster after the publication of the first volume of the Life (House et al. 1965–2002: 2:x). Forster endorsed the letter, “Kept for its comicality!”; but the humor must have lain more in its manner than its substance, if we are to judge by his own comment on the evolution of the novel: “I was responsible for its tragic ending. He had not thought of killing her . . .” (1969: 1: 123).

6. (Ward 1882: 215); the OED, rather unhelpfully for the present argument, cites this under the relevant meaning (17a.) of “character.”

7. See Kaplan (1987). I would want to insist upon the ambivalence of Dickens’s relation to this tradition: a too simple categorization of his fiction leaves no place for the powerful and disconcerting appeal of Quilp, to take an obvious example.

8. (House et al. 1965–2002: 2:153). The editors of the Pilgrim letters mistakenly attribute this response to the appearance of chapters 54 and 55 (Master Humphrey’s Clock number 35), thus unfairly reinforcing posterity’s low opinion of the literary competence of Dickens’s contemporaries: the crucial note (on p. 144) draws the moral that Dickens’s readers were too superficial to notice his foreshadowings in chapter 53. Hood, writing about three weeks earlier, may be excused his misplaced optimism; but the generality of Dickens’s readership clearly understood what he was about from the moment number 34 of Master Humphrey’s Clock appeared on the 21st of November, and their response (if he himself is to be believed) was prompt and vociferous.

9. An implication of my argument is that it ought to be possible for a clearly antirealist fiction to generate emotional engagement. I think it is, and I offer Donald Barthelme’s The Dead Father as a candidate. This is a playful and innovative exploration of the manifold cultural meaning of fatherhood, and despite being thoroughly antirealist and extremely funny (a quality that militates against emotional involvement in any context), it does indeed accumulate emotional resonance. See my discussion of the novel in Novel Arguments (1995).


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