UNDERSTANDING NARRATIVE

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We all know how to tell narratives more or less well; we tell them more or less frequently; and we distinguish them from non-narratives more or less strictly. In other words, we have certain intuitions (or have internalized certain rules) about what constitutes a narrative and what does not. Moreover, we often agree as to whether or not a given set of symbols is a narrative. Thus, *Treasure Island*, Perrault's «Little Red Riding Hood,» the Gospel passages about the Good Samaritan (Luke 10, 25-37), and even such insignificant texts as:

> (1) Mary was in excellent health then she got married and she became ill

or

> (2) It was seven o'clock and the birds were singing and the bells were ringing but John felt lousy, then he saw Mary and he felt great

are usually taken to be narratives. On the other hand, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the Constitution of the United States, the 1980 list of MLA members, and even such interesting texts as:

> (3) Electrons are constituents of atoms

or

(4) There are no vitamins, minerals or shampoos that can
stimulate hair growth

are usually not. In fact, people with widely different cultural
backgrounds often identify the same given sets of symbols as nar-
ratives and consider others as non-narratives, and they often tell
narratives that are very similar. Russian and North American In-
dian folktales, for instance, were shown to have many features in
common[1] and, more generally, any narrative is the representation
of real or fictive situations and events in a time sequence.

Besides, and this is saying much the same thing as the above,
we can all understand narratives more or less fully. Specifically, we
can answer correctly at least some questions about a given narrative
and we can determine that at least some answers to these questions
are incorrect (What was Little Red Riding Hood bringing her
grandmother? A girdle cake with a little pot of butter and not fish
and chips or corn on the cob! Who, according to the Gospel,
helped the man lying half dead on the road? A Samaritan and not a
Levite!); we can also retell that narrative, paraphrase it, summarize
it, or expand it. Now, it is often—not to say always—the case that
different individuals provide different retellings, paraphrases, ex-
pansions, or summaries of the same narrative. If we asked a
number of people to read a certain narrative and recount it to us or
give us a summary of it,[2] for example, some of them might present
the narrated situations and events in the order of their original tex-
tual presentation and others might not; some might mention certain
situations or events that others wouldn't; some might even in-
troduce data not explicitly supplied in the original narrative; and
some might give a very brief summary while others might provide a
rather detailed one. Given (2), for instance, one account might look
like:

(5) It was quite early in the morning and the bells were ringing
and the birds were singing and everything was beautiful but
John felt lousy; then he saw Mary and he felt great

while another might simply be

(6) John felt very bad but then he felt very good because he
saw Mary

and given the story of «The Good Samaritan,» we might get

> (7) A man was lying half dead in the road and a Samaritan came along and helped him

or

> (8) A man was lying half dead in the road but nobody helped him until, finally, a Samaritan came along and helped him

or

> (9) A man was lying half dead in the road and a priest came along but he did not help him; then a Levite came along but he did not help him either; then, finally, a Samaritan came along and helped him. [3]

The variety of (possible) responses is clearly enormous. Yet certain kinds of response will most probably not occur; certain stretches of discourse will most probably not be advanced as retellings or summaries. Few people, if any, will offer:

> (10) It was seven o'clock and John felt great then he saw Mary and he felt lousy

or

> (11) The birds were singing and the bells were ringing

as a retelling of (2) and few will give:

> (12) A man was lying half dead in the road

or

(13) Fried rice is excellent

as a summary of «The Good Samaritan.» Furthermore, not-withstanding the many differences to be found among the various responses, the latter will always carry some of the same information: (5) and (6), for example, both refer to an improvement in John's mood; (7), (8) and (9) all refer to somebody helping somebody else; and any retelling/summary of Perrault's «Little Red Riding Hood» would surely allude to the heroine's ultimate fate.

Thus, in spite of the undeniable variations that obtain in understanding narrative (especially among people with different backgrounds, capacities and interests), we can point to a considerable amount of agreement (even among very different people). It seems, therefore, that not only do we all have certain intuitions (or know certain rules) about the nature of narratives and what they mean but also, to a certain extent at least, we all have the same intuitions and know the same rules. It is this set of rules and intuitions—which I will call, from now on, narrative competence—that allows us, along with other competences (for instance, a linguistic one: I could not recount or understand a narrative in English if I did not know English), to produce and process narratives, to tell, retell, paraphrase, expand, summarize, and understand them in like manner.

As an example of how narrative competence helps account for our understanding of narratives, I should first like to describe at least one or two of its features and focus on the operation of summarizing.[4] Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of narrative competence lies in the knowledge that narrative is, among many other things, a collection of signs which can be grouped into two main classes. Specifically, some constitute signs of the narrating (or narrating, for short) and represent the narrating activity (narration), its origin (narrator) and its destination (narratee). The others constitute signs of the narrated (or narrated, for short): they represent real or fictive events and situations in a time sequence. More specifically, the narrated represents a change or changes in one or more situations from a time t_0 to a time t_1. We all make a distinction between the two sets of signs (this is, in part, what allows us to read a text «for the story» and not for the style, the wit, the ingenious commentary, etc.) and, in order to arrive at an adequate summary of a narrative, we need only reproduce its narrated.[5]

Given:

(14) Mary, whom I am longing to discuss, had a lot of money, then Mary met a nasty man; then Mary—poor old Mary!—lost all of her money,

for instance,

(15) Mary had a lot of money, then Mary met a nasty man, then Mary lost all of her money

constitutes an adequate summary. Of course, any paraphrase of the narrated would constitute an acceptable summary too:

(16) Mary had a lot of money, then she met a nasty man, then she lost all of her money

(17) Mary was very rich, then she met a nasty man, then she became poor.

Knowing that the narrated describes changes of situations in time also has several consequences. Above all, it means that any summarizing (or expanding, or paraphrasing) requires the preservation of the chronology of situations and events depicted: (14) and

(18) Mary was very poor, then she met a nasty man and became very rich

tell rather different stories because their chronology differs and they consequently describe different changes; likewise, any summary of «The Good Samaritan» such as

(19) A Samaritan helped a man and then the man lay half

dead in the road

would surely not be thought acceptable whereas any summary indicating the original sequence of events would: consider (7), (8), (9), or

(20) A Samaritan helped a man lying half dead in the road after several people had gone by without helping him.

Furthermore, since the changes are very important, any situation or event that is not particularly relevant to them can be eliminated from the summary (this is, in part, what allows us to skip, say, long descriptive passages in a novel which we are reading for the action, for the story). Specifically, any situation which is not modified, or is not the result of a modification, and any event or situation which is not (related to) a modifier are not very pertinent in terms of change depiction and can thus be eliminated. For example, I can summarize (5) by producing

(21) John felt lousy, then he saw Mary and he felt great,

that is, by preserving the change depicted while eliminating those parts of the narrated that are not particularly relevant to the change.[6]

Note that the very same features of narrative competence help account for the fact that a given narrative can be expanded and still «tell the same story»: after all, I can add many elements to its narrated, or its narrating, or both, without essentially altering the change(s) it describes. Given «The Good Samaritan,» for instance, and at the risk of turning it into a duller story, I could double the number of people who pass by the half dead man without helping him:

(22) A man was lying half dead in the road and a priest came along but he did not help him; then a Levite came along but

he did not help him; then another priest came along and he did not help him; then another Levite came along and he did not help him either; then, finally, a Samaritan came along and helped him;

and given (14), I could develop its narrating without crucially affecting the nature of the change depicted:

(23) Mary, whom I am longing to discuss, had a lot of money then she met a nasty man whose name I don't even care about; then Mary—poor old Mary!—lost all of her money, yes, all of it.

So far so good. Yet it might be pointed out that understanding a narrative is not only (or merely) being able to retell it, paraphrase it, expand it, and summarize it but also (and perhaps even more so) being able to give an account of its «message,» describe what (more or less) general subject or truth it illustrates, specify what «it is getting at,» put forth its point.[7] For example, it might be claimed—quite appropriately!—that, regardless of how many adequate summaries or expansions of «Little Red Riding Hood» I could produce, I still could not be said to understand the tale if I could not tell what practical lesson(s) it carried, what fundamental meaning(s) it developed («It is dangerous to stop and listen to a wolf»; «Little children should not talk to strangers»; and so on). Now, there may be perfectly well-formed narratives that (under most circumstances) have no «message,» illustrate no truth, make no point. Thus, something like

(24) I got up then I went out and walked through the city for half-an-hour

does not seem, in the present context, to illustrate very much else than the notion of pointless narrative and would not, I think, be considered particularly enlightening and exciting. Besides, there may be narratives whose only raison d'être is to report something worth reporting, something unusual, entertaining, terrifying, or

wonderful, and whose only lessons are the lessons of narrativity itself (there are beginning and ends; what comes before determines what comes after and derives significance from it; distinct situations and events can be linked in time and made to constitute a whole; they can also be detotalized into other situations and events; and so forth). ' Yet there are undoubtedly many narratives which, like «Little Red Riding Hood,» teach other lessons. Understanding these narratives entaiis understanding their lessons.

Accounting for how we reach such understanding might, in some cases, be possible without any recourse to a specifically narrative competence: simple linguistic competence would do. In La Fontaine's «Le Loup et l'Agneau,» for instance, the moral of the fable is presented at the very outset and anyone who reads French can understand it: «La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure»; similarly, (much of) what «The Good Samaritan» illustrates is stated quite explicitly in Luke 10, 25-37: the meaning (and importance) of loving one's neighbor as oneself; and, towards the very end of *All the King's Men*, several paragraphs summarize the novel for us and specify at least some of its lessons («This has been the story of Willie Stark, but it is my story, too. For I have a story. It is the story of a man . . .»). Indeed, what Labov calls an abstract, a short summary provided by the narrator and encapsulating the point, is found relatively often in narrative.

In numerous cases, however, no such abstract is supplied, no such explicit identification of the point is made. Consider «Little Red Riding Hood,» for example; nowhere in the body of the tale does the narrator present his moral directly. How is it, then, that we can understand this moral? Once again, certain aspects of our narrative competence can help provide an answer. Just as our ability to focus on the situations and events depicted (the narrated) partially accounts for our summaries and expansions, our ability to concentrate on what I have called the narrating or on what Booth would call the rhetorical dimension of narrative, Genette the narrator's ideological function, Suleiman the interpretive function, and Labov evaluation allows us to get the point. ' Evaluation consists of all the elements in a narrative indicating why it is worth telling (what is special about it, important, remarkable), how the situations and events depicted should be interpreted, which ones are most deserving of attention, what the goals of the narration are. In other words, evaluation is the sum of those elements that guide our understanding. As is well known, such elements and, more particularly, direct statements by a narrator (what is also referred to as

direct commentary) abound in many narratives. They may remind us of information given previously; they may explain how newly-provided data are consistent with older data; they may take the form of an abstract, summarize a series of events, give the gist of a complex argument, indicate the relative significance of various actions, reveal the symbolic properties of different situations, and so on. Simply by following these narrative guides, we can often discover the point. In «Little Red Riding Hood,» for instance, we are told not only that the heroine is exceedingly pretty, how she got her name, and why the wolf does not eat her when he meets her in a wood, but also that it is «dangerous to stop and listen to a wolf.» Now, the tale presents a little girl who listens to a wolf and is eaten by him: her fate must be the result of her transgression.

But what about narratives—there are quite a few of them!—in which the narrator refrains from evaluative statements altogether or, at any rate, from such statements as indicate the meaning (rather than the importance) of an event or series of events. We then look for statements by (trustworthy) characters. Imagine, for example, a version of «Little Red Riding Hood» in which the narrator does not say anything about the danger of talking to a wolf but in which the heroine's mother does. And what about narratives in which no statements appear that comment directly on the meaning of the narrated? Consider a version of «Little Red Riding Hood» in which neither the narrator nor any of the characters mentions the danger of talking to a wolf; or a version of «The Good Samaritan» in which no reference whatever is made to loving one's neighbor as oneself (in which the frame provided by Luke 10, 25-29 and 36-37 is eliminated). We then concentrate on the characters that are most important (because they are textually prominent; because their situation and actions are foregrounded; because they are agents rather than patients) and we study their actions, their goals and the changes in their situation as well as the causes for these actions and changes or for reaching/not reaching these goals. In «Little Red Riding Hood,» two characters are particularly important and each has a specific set of goals. The little girl wants to get to her grandmother's and deliver to her a girdlecake and a little pot of butter. The wolf wants to eat the little girl. She fails because she stops to talk with him and, following his advice, takes the longest way to arrive at her destination, «having a good time gathering hazel-nuts, running after butterflies, and making bouquets out of the little flowers she saw.» He succeeds because, after resisting his impulse to eat her in the forest («he felt very much like

eating her; but he did not dare because of some woodcutter»), he learns of her plans, persuades her to follow the longest way, takes the shortest way, arrives at the grandmother's first, manages to eat the good woman thanks to a disguise, and finally eats the heroine thanks to another disguise. Assuming a capacity for generalization, at least some of the possible lessons are rather clear:

(25) It is dangerous to stop and listen to a wolf

(26) Having too good a time on the way to your goal can make you lose sight of it

(27) The ability to delay instant gratification and to disguise oneself can lead to fruitful results

In «The Good Samaritan,» two of the three characters who see the man lying half dead in the road—the Levite and the priest—are said to be on that road by pure coincidence; furthermore, whatever goal they may want to reach is not specified. On the other hand, the Samaritan (the hero of the parable) is on a trip. The former do not stop to help. The latter does, dresses up the man's wounds, carries him to an inn, and takes care of him. One obvious message to be derived from this set of oppositions would be something like

(28) Some people will stop and help you when you are in trouble even if it is an inconvenience for them; others won't even if there is no inconvenience

But there is at least one more source or opposition in the parable. Of the four main characters, three are depicted in terms of social status or ethnic origin: the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan. The fourth character is simply described as a *man* (in need of help). A further lesson can be derived when this opposition is added to the earlier ones:

(29) Some people think that their greatest bond with other people is their common humanity and they act accordingly (they are right since they are like the Samaritan, that is, like the hero). Others do not (and they are wrong).

In other words, a relatively simple contrastive analysis of the attitudes, situations and events depicted in «Little Red Riding Hood» and «The Good Samaritan» yields lessons that are quite close to those explicitly provided in Perrault's text and in the Gospel. More generally, the processing of the narrated in other narratives along similar lines of analysis allows us to get to the point even when no abstract or commentary is provided to guide our interpretation.[10]

Note that many narratives do not lend themselves (well or at all) to such an analysis. In (14)-(17), for instance, we can contrast Mary's initial situation with her final one, but we cannot compare either of them with another character's situation; and in (24), there is even less to compare or contrast. Such narratives may not have any (inherent) point (apart from the points of narrativity itself) and, if they do, their point can be grasped only through an examination of the context of their production/reception or through a (partial) generalization of the particulars they describe. Given (14)-(17), for example, we can generalize Mary's experience as

(30) Women who have money lose it because of men

or

(31) Some women with money are the victims of nasty men;

and given (24), a context in which it is claimed that nobody dares to walk through the city anymore would yield something like the following point:

(32) Some people (I!) still dare to walk through the city.

Note also that the ability to derive (some of) the point(s) of a

narrative through a constrastive analysis of the narrated or a generalization of the changes it describes partly explains how we know whether or not the narrative can appropriately be told in a particular context: given a situation in which several people are trading stories about car accidents, it would not be very cooperative to tell (14)-(17); and given a situation in which every participant is supposed to extol the acumen of children or the kindness of Levites, it would not by quite friendly to recount the events of «Little Red Riding Hood» or those of «The Good Samaritan.» Furthermore, the same ability explains in part how we assess the coherence of a specific narrative and how we determine the reliability of a particular narrator. If the lesson provided by evaluative statements and the lesson derived through an analysis of the narrated are similar, the narrative will be judged more superficially coherent (but not necessarily better!) than if they are not. Likewise, if the point explicitly made by the narrator is repeatedly contradicted by the narrated, we will conclude that we cannot take his statements at face value.

Finally, note that my (very sketchy) analyses of «Little Red Riding Hood» and «The Good Samaritan» have in no way been said to have yielded all of the points made by the parable and by the tale. Nor have I claimed that different people's understanding of these (or other) narratives would necessarily be the same. Indeed, I have tried to suggest otherwise by listing (25)-(27) as possible lessons derived from Perrault and (28)-(29) as possible truths presented in Luke. Similarly, it should be clear from my presentation that different contexts for the production/reception of a narrative, which function as so many different sets of evaluative statements, may lead to different conclusions about the point(s) made by the narrative: recounting «Little Red Riding Hood» to a pack of wolves is not quite the same as recounting it to a group of little girls; and «The Good Samaritan» might very well illustrate rather different truths in different circumstances (though I cannot imagine too many contexts in which it would be considered an indictment of compassion for our fellow human beings). In other words, my discussion attempts to explain how it is that we understand stories in similar ways but it also attempts to make room for divergences.

In short, our narrative competence, our ability to understand narratives—that is, our capacity for retelling them, paraphrasing them, summarizing them, expanding them, and specifying (at least some of) their points—includes the following set of knowledges

and abilities: (1) the knowledge that narrative is made up of narrating and narrated and the ability to distinguish between the two; (2) the knowledge that the narrated describes changes of situations in time and that the preservation of its main chronological features is important for the preservation of its meaning; (3) the ability to focus on the narrating and, more particularly, on those evaluative statements pointing to a narrative lesson; (4) the ability to process the narrated in terms of what I have called a contrastive analysis; and (5) the ability to generalize the particulars depicted in the world of the narrated. Undoubtedly, there is much more to narrative competence than what I have said; but what I have said undoubtedly describes part of that competence.

NOTES

1.　See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958) and Alan Dundes, *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* (Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1964).

2.　Such experiments have actually been devised. See, for example, Teun A. van Dijk and Walter Kintsch, «Cognitive Psychology and Discourse. Recalling and Summarizing Stories» in Wolfgang Dressler, ed., *Current Trends in Textlinguistics* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), pp. 61-80; Christine G. Glenn, «The Role of Episodic Structure and of Story Length in Children's Recall of Simple Stories,» *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 17 (1978), 229-247; and Jean Mandler and Nancy Johnson, «Remembrance of Things Parsed: Story Structure and Recall,» *Cognitive Psychology*, 9 (1977), 111-151.

3.　Cf. Janet Schlauch Knapp, «Narrative Syntax,» *Rackham Literary Studies*, No. 7 (1976), 9-18.

4.　For a partial formalization, see Gerald Prince, «Aspects of a Grammar of Narrative,» *Poetics Today*, 2, No. 3 (1980), 49-63.

5.　The amount of narrating per narrative varies considerably and it is sometimes minimal. In this case, reproducing the narrated would not yield very much of a summary.

6.　Sometimes, of course, such summarizing is not possible: consider (1), (6) or a narrative like «I ate rice then I ate beans.»

7.　On the point of narrative, see William Labov, *Language in the Inner City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972); Livia Polanyi, «Story and Text» in D. Tannen, ed., *Written and Spoken Language* (to appear); and Mary

Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).

8.   On this subject, see Gerald Prince, «Narrativity» in Karl Menges and Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, eds., Axia. Davis Symposium on Literary Evaluation (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag, 1982), 61-76.

9.   See Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972); Susan Rubin Suleiman, «Redundancy and the 'Readable' Text,» *Poetics Today*, 1, No. 3 (1980), 119-142; and William Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, op. cit.

10.   On this subject, see among others A.J. Greimas, *Du Sens* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970) and Nomi Tamir-Ghez, «Binary Oppositions and Thematic Decoding,» *PTL*, 3, N°. 2 (1978), 235-248.