Reconsidering Narrative Theory Rhetorically

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Richard Walsh, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction*, Ohio State University Press, 2007. x + 194 pp.

What is frustrating about this book is that it contains good material—in the way of textual analyses as well as theoretical discussions—but presents it in a needlessly puzzling way. At almost every point, in order to understand what Richard Walsh was saying, I found myself glossing, assuming, inferring, and in various ways translating what I read into more intuitive terms, worrying all the while that I was being obtuse.

The difficulty begins with the title, which led me, at least, to expect some kind of general account of fictionality. This is a topic that has received much attention from philosophers and some from literary theorists, resulting in a large dossier of work by John Searle, David Lewis, Gérard Genette, and many others; yet Walsh exhibits no particular interest in the problem or the controversies connected with it. Indeed, fictionality is not really the subject of the book, which is concerned—as its less misleading subtitle indicates—with the theory of narrative. Walsh advocates a rhetorical approach to thinking about narrative, and here again the title itself creates some expectation that he will start by explaining his conception of rhetoric, either expressly, by setting out his understanding of this notoriously broad and versatile term, or implicitly, by citing rhetoricians whose practice he admires, as when in his introduction Walsh almost immediately jumps into a discussion of Wayne Booth. But Walsh's aim here, it turns out, is to distinguish his book from the similarly titled *Rhetoric of Fiction*, and though I

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have some sense of what Walsh finds unsatisfactory in Booth's position, I could not easily state what alternative is contemplated. This puzzlement extends to *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* as a whole. Its thesis is that following a rhetorical line will resolve (or, if need be, dissolve) all the conceptual issues that have been raised in connection with fictional narrative. But I do not see *which* line that is.

It was the first chapter that threw me completely offtrack, however. Walsh begins with a consideration of relevance theory. All the indications are that he does so because he plans to take it as a kind of model for rethinking the critical and theoretical questions associated with fictional narrative. That would certainly be an interesting idea. Relevance theory is an adaptation, proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, of Paul Grice's treatment of the pragmatics of conversation (and linguistic exchange generally) in terms of four "maxims"—roughly, speak truthfully (quality), speak sufficiently (but no more: quantity), speak clearly (manner), and speak to the point (relevance). While Grice himself toyed inconclusively with the idea that the maxim of quality might have priority, Sperber and Wilson claim that relevance subsumes all the other maxims, and within this framework they have elaborated a theory of linguistic use. Nowhere in their many publications have they, to my knowledge, indicated in detail how their account would handle fictional discourse. (They make one comment in passing, duly quoted by Walsh [29].) At the very least, I expected that Walsh would offer a proposal as to how this gap might be filled. But once raised, the theory is dropped and plays very little role in his book, as a glance at the index will confirm.

I now think that *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* appears to best advantage if read as a set of critical essays on primary topics in narrative theory (author, narrator, reader, plot, and so on) rather than as developing a theory. If that is at all correct, it might have been stated on the first page. In any case, that is how I am going to come at the book in what follows, trying to work out Walsh's general position inductively from what I take to be a series of related analyses.

For Booth, rhetoric concerns persuasion; his approach to narrative fiction involves identifying and describing the forms of persuasion in a given work. This is not Walsh's guiding question. Judging by his tendency to associate notions like function, context, interpretation, pragmatics, ideology, and semiosis with it, he holds a broad rather than a narrow view of rhetoric, as involving the communicative situation generally and the way any discursive activity may affect its audience. How else to understand these passages from chapter 2?

> 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. (44)
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> 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 . . . because the interpretative operations applicable to a narrative text are globally transformed . . . by the extrinsic matter of the contextual frame within which it is received. (45)

No doubt I am only describing Walsh's position roughly, but something like this assumption seems to guide the way he responds to the issues he discusses.

In some cases, Walsh's rhetorical approach involves him in a debunking operation. He professes skepticism about an idea as widely accepted as the claim that every fictional narrative has a narrator, whether overt or not. Against this, Walsh asserts that "fictions are narrated by their authors, or [else] by characters" (84) and that there is no middle position that can be held by an uncharacterized character. He rejects the claim that in some narratives—those traditionally called third-person omniscient—there is a "covert" narrator who can be assigned responsibility for the narration. For Walsh, the communicative situation of fiction entails that an author use various devices to produce various effects: an overt narrator is one such device, but it is wrong to take this "representational effect" for a "structural principle" (69). "If a . . . 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" (81). Here is an example of the good material to be found in this book. The idea of the "wholly uncharacterized" narrator is indeed a very suspicious one, and I admire Walsh's critique of it. And yet his alternative remains vague. Or rather, the general program is clear enough: we should talk about narratives in terms of rhetorical effects. But how specifically can we do this? What is the alternative to the familiar practice of talking about narrators as one type of character?

However this may be, Walsh's treatment of the venerable concept of *fabula* is only slightly less skeptical. As everyone knows, narrative theory virtually begins (at least when the narrative is fictional) with the distinction between what the Russian Formalists called the *sujet* (Walsh's spelling), the story as presented in a work, and the fabula, the story as it stands in itself. This makes no sense to Walsh. The contrast depends on the fantasy that, at

some level of abstraction, there can subsist an essential, undistorted story of which any actual narrative is merely a version. Here Walsh is mounting—quite effectively—what philosophers call a regress argument: to recount, summarize, or even imagine a story is to imagine *something*, so any attempt to state, describe, or otherwise characterize a particular fabula (story in itself) unavoidably results in a *sujet* (story as represented). But though based on a false distinction, the concept has some use, Walsh suggests, as a pragmatic notion. A reader's grasp of the fictional story is the result of that reader's interpretive activity; maybe the best way to put it is that the theoretical use of fabula is as a way of describing how a reader understands a narrative. (At least this is my understanding of Walsh's rather opaque statements: "Fabula . . . is a function of interpretation . . . it reduces [*sujet*] to the simplest terms consistent with the needs of the interpretation" [66].) In this sense, it is "a means rather than an end in itself" (68), a dimension of the communicative situation rather than the subsistent but inherently unrepresentable structure which, for Walsh, is what fabula has amounted to in the hands of narrative theorists in the formalist-structuralist tradition.

Walsh's dissatisfaction with some of the commonplaces of narrative theory—for example, notions like "pretense" and "suspension of disbelief"—is certainly bracing. Why do theorists so often find themselves falling back on compromises amounting to paradoxes, claiming that fiction does and does not assert or that readers do and do not believe it? Particularly toward the end of the book, this leads Walsh to suggest entirely fresh approaches to some phenomena, as he does with fiction writing and creativity in chapter 7. He provides a way of describing novelists not as world creators (as in most versions of narrative theory) but as discourse channelers, who recognize the motifs and values circulating in the surrounding culture and marshal them in a narrative work and whose effectiveness depends less on verisimilitude and more on the aptness, vividness, and in short, the rhetorical effectiveness of the creative adaptation of discourse that a novel represents.

The correlated discussion of readers and reading in the eighth chapter is equally striking. Walsh proposes new treatments of a variety of phenomena. He argues that, rather than conceiving of fictional characters mimetically, we might instead think of them as rhetorical effects, which, as I have mentioned, is for Walsh a matter of semiosis and interpretation. When he says that every character is "a complex of evaluative elements that arise directly from its discursive elements" (157), I take it he is proposing that a character is a construction that readers put on what they read, indistinguishable from the responses that this construction produces. And what holds true

for character applies as well to readers' ability to respond to everything else in narrative, to become immersed in it. This model explains variations in reader responses to a narrative over time as a result of changes in the culture. (Walsh's example is the contemporary outpouring of grief—shared by Charles Dickens—over the death of Little Nell, which now seems so absurdly sentimental.) "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" (168).

I have mentioned some of the ideas in a book overflowing with them, and they seem to me important ones, if I have understood them correctly. That is the problem, however: these are my own attempts to grasp what I take to be valuable discussions in Walsh's book, and I may have gotten it all wrong. My summary of his critique of the notion of fabula, for instance, was quarried out of chapter 4, most of which is taken up with a variety of side controversies with Searle and Genette on indirect speech acts, with Dorrit Cohn on unreliable narrators, and with Booth and Seymour Chatman on the implied author. The thread becomes difficult to follow in this chapter as in others. Or take the next chapter on voice, which features discussions of Genette on focalization, of various theorists on free indirect discourse, of Mikhail Bakhtin on polyphony, and of Louis Althusser on interpellation. When the dust of analysis and discussion settles, where does that leave us? It would be helpful to have at least a summary of results.

I have wondered if Walsh might have organized the book differently, beginning with straightforward statements, first, of his conception of rhetoric and, second, of his theory of narrative, or at any rate of some guiding principles, after which he would go on to draw out the consequences of this theory in a series of critical responses to other treatments of the topics he wants to cover. The difficulty with this, however, would be that, aside from the centrifugal tendency of his writing, Walsh's strength lies very much in critique: he inclines to woolliness when he attempts to set out a claim in positive terms, as at the end of chapter 7, which can stand for too many other such passages.

> 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 con-

> comitants, is what implicates the communicative act of fiction in an irreducible sense of its rhetorical situation and occasion. (147; emphasis in original)

It is very possible that on some issues in the theory of narrative Walsh has made decisive interventions. That is, it will perhaps be necessary for all future discussants to address the ideas developed in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*. My only regret is that they will find it so difficult to do so.