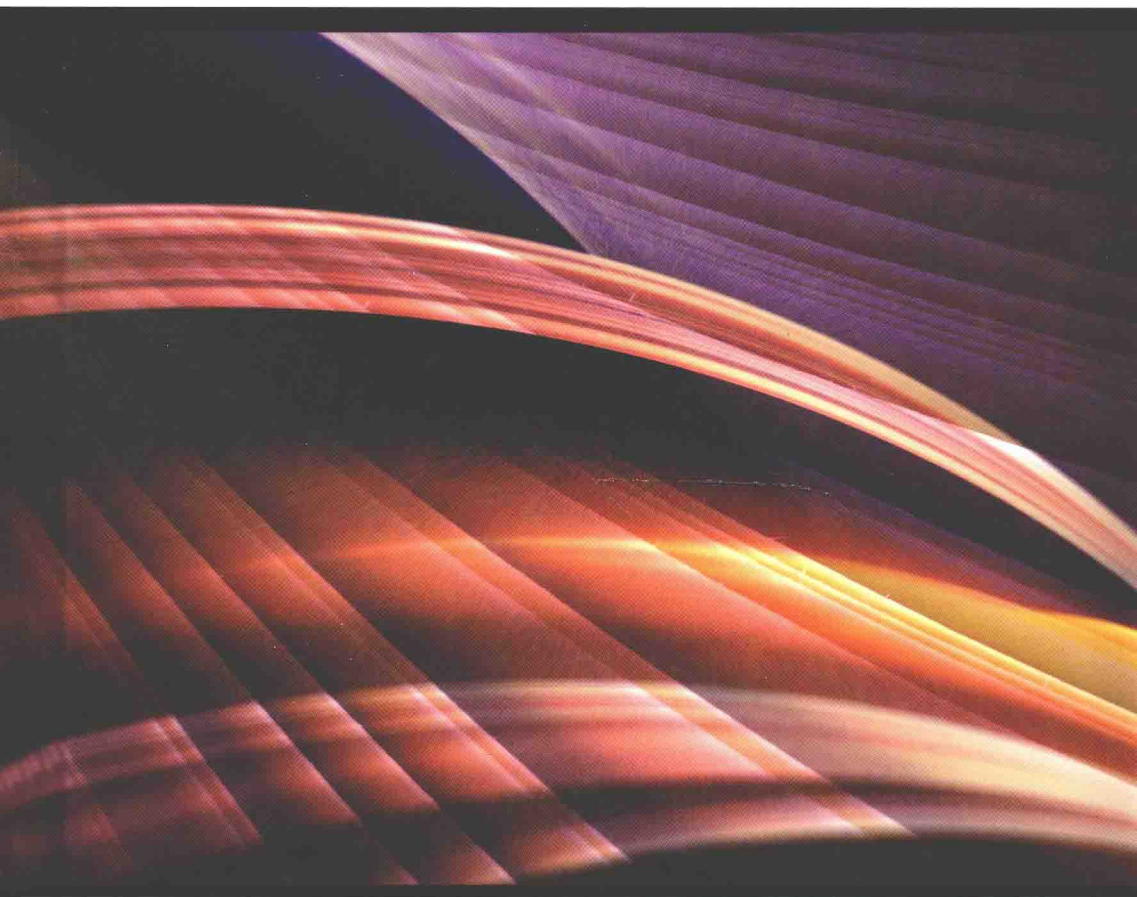




THE Rhetoric *of* Fictionality

NARRATIVE THEORY *and the* IDEA *of* FICTION



Richard Walsh

— The Rhetoric of Fictionality —

Narrative Theory and the
Idea of Fiction

Richard Walsh



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I've already alluded to some of the intermediate stages in the realization 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 arguments 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 Imagination 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).

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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 counterproductive 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

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 omniscience 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 fictionality 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 profiction, 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