

Anniken Greve*

“I’ll teach you differences.”

A meta-theoretical approach to narrative theory

<https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2019-0010>

Abstract: The article seeks to explore sameness and difference in narrative theory by way of shifting the emphasis from the narratives themselves to the research acts we perform on narratives. It proposes a model for analyzing research acts. Applying this model to various research acts in narrative theory it shows that what it implies to look for sameness and difference within narratives will vary with the kind of research act in question. Highlighting the difference between research acts that make theoretical claims about *groups* of narrative and research acts that seeks to explore the meaning of *individual* narratives, the article is critically geared both towards theories that stress the fiction/non-fiction divide and towards theories that seek to formulate a narrative theory that encompasses narratives of all kinds. It argues for the place in narrative theory of interpretive working procedures that allow us to focus on the individual narrative, in order to grasp its potential contribution to the human conversation.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, object of study, research act, theoretical diversity vs theoretical unity, nomothetic vs. idiographic research, method, interpretation, conversational context

1 Introduction

What do we mean when we speak of sameness and difference in narrative theory? Where in this area of study are we supposed to look for samenesses and differences? And how does what we find depend on what we look for?

In this article I will not take for granted that the answers to such questions are at all clear, and I will explore several ways of thinking about the terms and their application to narrative theory. The aim of the article is to bring out the benefits of distinguishing between various research acts, and to try to illuminate the ques-

*Corresponding author: Anniken Greve, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Department of Language and Culture, 9037 Tromsø, Norway, E-Mail: anniken.greve@uit.no

tion of sameness and difference in narrative theory by the help of a model that guides us in describing and comparing such research acts. While the main line of argument is inspired by the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the article concludes, perhaps controversially, with a note on the importance of giving *the act of interpretation* a central place in narrative theory.

2 Theoretical unity or diversity?

While narrative theory started as the concern of literary scholars, it has now become the concern of scholars in a wide range of disciplines and media: law, medicine, the social sciences, game studies, etc. This development is very much the result of a growing trust in narrative as a mode of expression. As James Phelan puts it, in an overview of what has happened to narrative theory since the first publication of Scholes and Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative* in 1968: "Doctors, lawyers, psychologists, business men and women, politicians, and political pundits of all stripes are just a few of the groups who now regard narrative as the Queen of Discourses and an essential component of their work" (Phelan 2006: 285).

This narrative turn in non-literary areas of study has left literary scholars in a potentially awkward position. Their own particular object of study – literary narratives – becomes a minority interest within this growing field of research, and the *diffentia specifica* – the literariness – of literary narratives tends to be ignored by scholars who are more interested in what all narratives have in common. The worried literary scholar may ask: Is it really possible for the same theory to account for all narratives? What about narrative fiction as an art form? Can fiction and non-fiction be accounted for by the same theory?

This way of posing the question assumes that difference on the level of research object requires diversity on the level of theory, and that it is the nature of the object of study that determines our theoretical needs.¹ The natural way to proceed is to look for categorical differences between e.g. fiction and non-fiction. Is it possible to establish differences between the two that ought to make such a difference to narrative theory? If it can be shown that "signposts of fictionality" (Cohn 1990) may be found also in non-fictional narratives, a categorical difference between literary and non-literary narratives seems to be hard to establish.

¹ I want to emphasize that throughout this article my use of the term "object of study" is neutral with respect to how different theories regard the *nature* of the object of study within narrative. I speak of the object of study also in connection with theories that regard narratives as acts rather than things or objects.

Ironically, moves that are meant to defend the importance of the notion of literariness by broadening its scope, may serve to weaken the position of those who argue for the need for a special theory for literary narratives. Gérard Genette's suggestion that there are two ways to literariness, by *fiction* or by *diction*, is a case in point. While fiction, according to Genette, is literary *per se* (or constitutionally), literature of diction is literary only conditionally in virtue of its qualities as diction. "The literature of fiction is literature that imposes itself essentially through the imaginary character of its objects. The literature of diction is literature that imposes itself essentially through its formal characteristics" (Genette 1993: 21). However, if a narrative can qualify as literary in virtue of its diction, we will have to include many in that category that are non-fictional, and the door seems open for all kinds of narrative, everyday narratives of all kinds, to enter and blur the distinction between literary and non-literary narratives.

Rather than discussing possible rescue operations for the *differentia specifica* of literary narratives, or looking into other ways of challenging the very distinction between fiction and non-fiction, I will point to the wider theoretical context that at least some aspects of this discussion belong to. It is worth noting that the divergent attitudes sketched above often depend on theoretical assumptions brought forward by traditions such as rhetoric, linguistics, hermeneutics and aesthetics, and/or from modern theoretical schools such as formalism, structuralism and New Criticism. Those who argue for the importance of differentiating between fiction and non-fiction, or between literary and non-literary narratives, typically do so with reference to Russian formalism and New Criticism, which in turn were inspired by Kantian and post-Kantian aesthetics, with its emphasis on the difference between works of art on the one hand and everyday utterances (or objects) on the other. Conversely, adherents of the idea that all narratives are fundamentally alike and can be approached by the same theory, may work from theoretical assumptions informed by linguistics, such as the structuralist conception of language system, language rules and conceptual schemata, or they may take their inspiration from rhetoric, classical or modern, within which the distinction between the literary and non-literary utterance may not be at the forefront.

So, perhaps the question of whether we should seek unity or diversity in the field of narrative theory should be posed as a question of how we handle diversity on the level of theoretical assumptions or approaches? It has become commonplace to speak of different co-existing theoretical schools in literary studies as *paradigms* in a Kuhnian sense. Different theoreticians adhere to different paradigms, one might argue, and thus live in different theoretical worlds. The possibility of meaningful exchange across paradigms is rather limited. Could we bring the dispute over the problem of theoretical unity or diversity in narrative theory to a close by accepting that there are different paradigms within this field of re-

search? Is this a way to resolve the conflict between the two camps, the “sameness” camp and the “difference” camp?

Before accepting this way of bringing peace among adversaries in narrative theory, it is worth reminding ourselves that Kuhn used the term “paradigm” to account for the historical process through which theoretical diversity in the natural sciences, e.g. physics, *is done away with*. A field of research becomes a paradigm science, a mature science, exactly at the point when this diversity is overcome, when people stop running in all directions. That this actually happened in the history of the natural sciences, is for Kuhn a source of astonishment. “What is surprising, and perhaps also unique in its degree to the field we call science, is that such initial divergences should ever largely disappear” (Kuhn 1972: 17).

In other words, if we use the term to account for the fact that in a humanistic discipline such as narrative theory we *do* run in different directions, the notion has been given a function that is very much the opposite of the one it was given by Kuhn in his account of the history of the natural sciences. It is used to account for and give legitimacy to theoretical diversity within the same discipline, and to grant each theoretical camp a large degree of immunity to criticism from other theoretical camps. And very little is left of Kuhn’s project: to replace a self-glorifying image of the activity of science based on its splendid achievements with a self-critical historical account of the dynamics of change within the practice of the sciences.

In order to prepare the ground for a more self-reflective critical approach to the diversity of narrative theory, I want to suggest an alternative meta-theoretical approach to that offered by importing Kuhn’s notion of paradigm. Moving beyond differences both in the object of study and theoretical approaches to the object of study, I suggest we pay attention to differences between the *research acts* that we perform in narrative theory.

It should be noted that this shift of attention will not make theoretical assumptions go away. Firstly, the theoretical assumptions of each research act itself will reappear in the description of the research act, a point to which I will return. Secondly, in making this shift I am making a number of theoretical assumptions. Most significantly, my emphasis on *acts* is a way of heeding the later Wittgenstein’s call to view *words as action*. “In the beginning was the deed,” he says, quoting Goethe’s *Faust* (Wittgenstein 1980a: 31). And he wants us to notice the *multitude* of actions we perform in virtue of our use of words. He famously considered a quote from Shakespeare as the motto for his *Philosophical Investigations*: “I’ll teach you differences” (Rhees 1984: 157). As I understand him, teaching us differences means teaching us *to look for* differences, and to look in the right place. To look in the right place in narrative theory, I want to suggest, requires a fundamentally different way of looking at our theoretical endeavour. Instead of

continuing to discuss our different and differing answers to theoretical questions, we may turn our attention to the questions themselves, so as to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the differences between us, regarding both points of agreement and points of conflict.

3 Differentiating between research acts: A model

How can we arrive at a clearer picture of the multifarious research acts we perform in narrative theory? I have developed a model consisting of a set of questions that we might address to *any* research act, with a view to grasping its salient features. The model suggests that we should ask:

1. What is the *telos* of this act of research?
2. What object(s) of research does this act pick out?
3. What theoretical/philosophical assumptions does it depend on?
4. What methods/procedures are needed to carry it out?
5. What is the status of the results of our act of research?
6. How are we asked by this act to relate to the object(s) we study?

The order of the questions in this model is not entirely incidental. It should be read as giving a prominent place to the first question: It is the *telos* of the research act – what the research act seeks to establish, the question it asks – that decides the overall thrust of the research act.² On the basis of this question we might differentiate between *three kinds of research acts* that frequently occur in narrative theory: the act of explaining, the act of defining, and the act of interpreting.³ Let me give a short characterisation of each of these three kinds, based on the two first questions of the model (*telos* and object of study):

3.1 Explanation

The explanatory thrust of much of what goes on in narrative theory is characteristically revealed in the *whys* and *hows* of the research questions: Why do we read narratives? How do we make sense of narratives? Why do we engage in fictional

² Note that the *telos* is not the answer that the research act produces, but rather the main question it seeks to answer. Two numerically different research acts may ask the same question, despite delivering conflicting answers.

³ This list is not meant to be exhaustive. There might be more kinds of acts, and important distinctions to be made between the three that are not captured by the list.

characters? This explanatory thrust dominates cognitive narrative theory, and its leading practitioners (e.g. Fludernik 2003; Herman 2002; Zunshine 2006) seek, in one way or another, their answers in the cognitive make-up of the reader. What research object do their respective research acts pick out? As Monica Fludernik sees it, the theoretical challenge is to “find a model able to deal with a maximum number of narrative texts” (Fludernik 2012: 358). In other words, she aspires towards comprehensiveness; to explaining (the functioning of) all and every narrative. However, there is nothing inherent in the very act of explaining that forces one to aim at this kind of maximum comprehensiveness. One can imagine explanatory projects within narrative theory that have a narrower aim, as do the narrative theorists who want to explain the unnatural as opposed to the natural narratives. In other words, the disagreement between Fludernik (2012) and Alber et al. (2012) over the importance of the difference between natural and unnatural narratives, is not one that concerns the nature of the research act. Both parties have explanatory ambitions. They differ, however, in the object of study they pick out.

3.2 Definition

The act of defining is a very different research act from that of explaining, and it is guided by a different question pronoun: what, rather than why. It seeks to bring out fundamental characteristics of its research object; to identify necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being (regarded as) a narrative, or for some sub-group or class of narrative, or it may seek to define some specific feature of or element in (some sub-group of) narrative.

It follows from this that acts of definition within narrative theory are not a homogeneous group. As with the explanatory project, the act of defining may or may not aim for the same kind of comprehensiveness as Fludernik does in identifying its research object. Gerald Prince follows Fludernik in aiming for maximum comprehensiveness when he claims that narrative theory should identify “what all and only narratives have in common” (Prince 2003: 66). In other words, he wants to differentiate narratives from everything else. However, the act of defining may have a narrower aim; it may try to bring out grammatical or logical differences *within* the category of narrative, such as the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, as e.g. Käte Hamburger (1973) and Lars-Åke Skalin and the Örebro school (Skalin 2005) have done.

Some definitions in narrative theory aim at clarifying historically evolved categories. Not surprisingly, such attempts run into all sorts of problems typical of categories that evolve and change through time. Attempts to define the novel genre may serve as an example. Did it come into being in Spain in the 17th cen-

tury? Or in England in the early 18th century? Or does its birth date back to classical Greek and Roman literature? Not surprisingly, what one takes to be the defining features of the novel will vary with one's view of its origin.

Other definitions in narrative theory are more local, in the sense that they pertain to certain aspects of narrative, and they can be logical or more pragmatic. Examples of local and logical definitions abound in Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, pertaining to order, mood and voice, many of which are meant to account for the logic of the channeling of information in narrative, and some of which are attempts to clear up mistakes in earlier definitions. Other local definitions may be regarded as pragmatic rather than logical; they are meant to make distinctions that are useful in describing our involvement with narratives rather than aiming at revealing inevitable features of narratives. Many of the theoretical concepts developed by James Phelan within the framework of his rhetorical theory of fiction, e.g. his differentiating between different levels of progression and his concept of instability (Phelan 2005, 2007) seem to be of this kind.

This sketchy outline of the research act of definition cannot do justice to any of the theories involved. Each one of them has important characteristics that have been ignored. The Örebro school, for instance, even if they regard the difference between fiction and non-fiction as fundamental, work with a Wittgensteinian non-essentialist conception of grammar. In other words, they assume that there are family resemblances between different kinds of narrative (and between narrative and other human forms of expressions) rather than absolute distinctions, and that differences between fiction and non-fiction spring from (and express) differences in usage. In that sense they view the difference between fiction and non-fiction as pragmatic.

However, if our aim is to give a central place to the notions of sameness and difference in our understanding of narrative theory, this system of categorization brings out points of contact between theories that often are regarded as outright adversaries. Despite its limitations, it reveals that those who want to emphasize distinction between fiction and non-fiction (e.g. Skalin) actually share something important with theorists who want a definition that encompasses all narratives (e.g. Prince). Both parties deal with both commonality and difference, but the "difference" camp believe that the commonality of *fiction* is more important than the commonality of *narrative*. Furthermore, the outline above reveals that the explanation people and the definition people, of whatever persuasion, share something important: They are category-oriented. They pick out objects of study that they claim are "the same."

3.3 Interpretation

The third kind of research act I want to comment on is that of interpreting narrative texts. Unlike the two kinds of research acts considered above, this research act moves out of the category-oriented study of narrative completely. It is an individualising research act; it is concerned with this particular narrative (or any particular narrative), not with a group of narratives, large or small. To speak in the language of numerical identity, as opposed to qualitative identity: It treats the narrative as being identical with – the same as – itself only.⁴ Or, to put it in the terms of Wilhelm Windelband: It is an *idiographic* research act (Windelband 1894). The act of interpretation picks out *one* narrative as its object of study, and the aim, the *telos* of this research act, is to connect with this narrative as an act of communication; to see oneself as spoken to by this particular narrative as fully as possible.

Does this focus on the individual text imply that the interpreter isolates the narrative in question from its larger textual landscape, and thus reveals a disregard for its connections with other texts? Definitely not. Such inter-textual connections, established through conventions, references or allusions, may be highly pertinent to the interpretation of a particular narrative. The interpreter will seek to bring out the significance of the way Dante's *Comedy* refers to Homer's *The Odyssey* and to Virgil's *The Aeneid*, or the way Primo Levi's (1979). See also correction in References an auto-biographical account of the author's experiences in Auschwitz during WWII, refers to Dante's reference to *The Odyssey*. However, the act of interpretation will pay attention to these intertextual references only in so far as they contribute to the communicative import of this particular text. In the case of *If This Is a Man* (1979) the inter-textual references to Dante's reference to *The Odyssey* have deep and far-reaching implications for the communicative import of the work, informing both the very description of the world in the camp and, especially through the chapter "The Canto of Ulysses," its vision of hope in a world constructed as a sheer denial of a common humanity on which such hope rests.

Does it matter for the act of interpretation whether the narrative in question is fictional or not? No general answer can be given. In most cases it does matter. One marked difference between most, if not all works of fiction and most, if not all works of non-fiction is that works of fiction rarely seek to give an account of what

⁴ In the philosophical literature on the notion of sameness, it is standard procedure to distinguish between qualitative and numerical identity. That is, two things may be the same in the sense that they share some quality or property. A may have some property in common with B, and in virtue of that quality A is the same as, or identical with B. But any one thing, A or B, is numerically identical only with itself.

happened in the past; it does not participate in what Wittgenstein calls "the language game of information" (Wittgenstein 1980a: § 888). Furthermore, in most cases fiction typically communicates through the way the entire text is organised. In other words, the full significance of the various features of the text will be brought out by seeing how these features interact so as to establish the communicative import and force of the entire narrative. All its features, whether they pertain to the world and action of the narrative, any of its various levels of narration, its rhetorical apparatus, its composition, its value system, the dynamics of the textual progression and the readerly progression, its para-textual features, its inter-textual references or allusions, or its extra-textual references: all these features potentially gain their significance in virtue of how they enter into the organisation of the narrative as this particular communicative totality. And the importance of identifying this organisation of the entire text is not limited to fictional narratives that conform to ideals of unity or harmony in art. However incomplete the action, fragmented the world or characters, or chaotic the diction of a specific fictional narrative may be, it still matters for the act of interpretation that these incomplete, fragmented or chaotic elements form part of the totality of this particular narrative. On the other hand, the interaction of all such features may also be significant in a non-fictional text. So, no matter how important this organisation may be in works of fiction, it does not serve as a sufficient ground for generalizing about the significance of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction for the act of interpreting.

Furthermore, in the case of both fiction and non-fiction one might find that to see oneself as spoken to by a narrative text is to read with a view not only to participate in the narrative action, but also to participate in the conversational and reflective space the narrative establishes; what we might call, with reference to Rush Rhees (1998), its conversational context. (For a reading of Rhees along these lines, see Greve 2012.) In the case of fiction this conversational space clearly cannot be envisaged as a context in which the author tells the reader that such and such is the case. To identify the conversational context of a work of fiction we might have to ask: What question does the work address? What is at stake? What issue is it engaged in exploring? We might also think of it as its more abstract theme, the reflective process it invites the reader to engage in, or, more ambitiously, the idea it seeks to explore or illuminate.

No matter how we conceive of the challenge of interpreting works of fiction, we should keep in mind that the *telos* of the research act of interpretation, unlike the act of definition, is *not* to distinguish between this and that category of narrative. Its *telos* is to engage in the text with a view to appreciating its communicative import as fully as we are able to, and to respond to it as fully as we can. This much the interpretation of fiction shares with understanding non-fictional texts.

4 Theoretical assumptions

So far, I have characterised the three research acts merely by reference to the two first questions of the model presented above: their *telos* and their object of study. I have found that people in the “sameness” camp and the “difference” camp actually share a lot more than the initial sketch of their disagreement led us to believe: Both groups are category-oriented. The act of research standing out as the different one in virtue of inviting a text-individualising approach, is that of interpretation. What differences and similarities between the three research acts will the four next questions of the model presented above reveal?

When we ask the model’s question of the research act’s theoretical assumptions, the differences between the “sameness” camp and the “difference” camp return with full force. I have already indicated some of the differences in my introduction. However, a fully-fledged account of them would have to treat questions pertaining not only to literary theory and its various schools and traditions, but also to e.g. philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. The advantage of such an inquiry into the theoretical assumptions of a particular research act is that these assumptions no longer can simply be assumed, as the notion of paradigm invites us to do, but need to be argued for and discussed.

Gearing one’s attention to the theoretical assumptions of each research act may also promote (and in turn be helped by) a very different understanding of the theoretical plurality than the Kuhnian talk of paradigms, transferred to the humanities, invites. While the latter plays up the difference between schools and theories, it plays down the *functional* diversity within literary (and narrative) theory. It gives the impression that the one overriding function of theory in literary studies is to supply us with a filter or perspective through which we can approach the literary text. This is one, but not the only function of theory in literary studies.

Let me present a graph (Figure 1) that might give us a start in grasping the nature and role of this functional diversity of theories in literary studies.

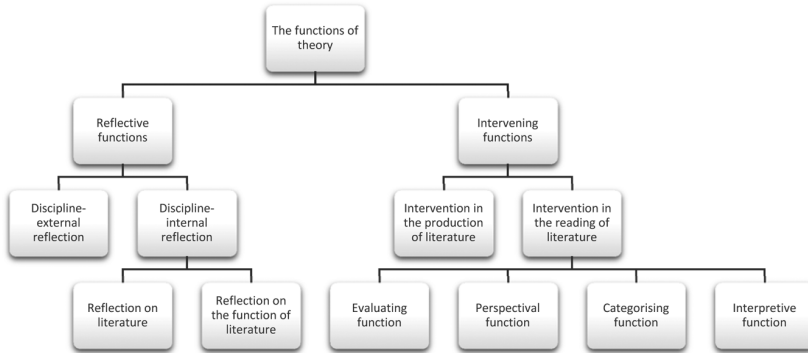


Figure 1: Functional diversity of theories in literary studies

Acknowledging that it is impossible to explain this function graph in all its details within the framework of this article (for a further discussion, see Greve 2009), and also that much of the work needed to make full use of the graph has not yet been done, let me comment on a few of its features and potential uses. It is a tool that may be used to analyse a variety of theoretical contributions: individual theoretical schools, individual theoreticians, individual theoretical texts and individual research acts, with a view to seeing more clearly what functions each one of them potentially encompasses. Hardly any theoretical contribution will serve only one function, and one and the same theoretical statement may serve several functions.

The first and overarching functional distinction in the graph is that between the reflective and the intervening function. This distinction helps us differentiate between contributions that reflect on the object of study and/or phenomenon related to it, and contributions that function as practical tools in our actual study of our object. Some theoretical propositions and terms function as assumptions we proceed from in our study of narrative, and they may be highly influential in determining the way in which we identify and define the research object and the method and *telos* of the research act. (Cf. my discussion above.) However, they may play no role whatsoever in our commentary on the text; they may not supply us with a single term to be applied to the text in our commentary on it. Wittgenstein's notion of "language game" is a case in point: It may be crucial to help us see a text as action, but we may make no use of the term in our analysis of the text. Other theoretical propositions and terms may come into play exactly in our analysis and commentary on the texts, e.g. Genette's terms such as focalisation, prolepsis, analepsis, homodiegetic, heterodiegetic, intradiegetic etc. Some theoretical propositions and suggestions concerning the composition, such as Aristotle's

Poetics, may also give us the terms with which to describe e.g. the composition of a given work, while others, such as Peter Brask's system for compositional analysis (Brask 1974), may give us no such terms, but instead a procedure for generating our own vocabulary with which to comment on and illuminate its composition. And how fundamental are the terms James Phelan (2005, 2007) has generated for a rhetorical approach to narrative for his analyses, such as narrative audience, tensions and instabilities, disclosure functions etc.? Phelan himself uses them as a part of his analytical commentary vocabulary, but are they essential to his interpretations? And to what extent are his analytical terms also evaluative terms, i.e. serving the function of passing judgments of aesthetic value on the narrative analysed? As this brief sketch indicates, getting a clear view of the diversity of the functions of theory is a work that hardly has begun.

On the reflective side of this graph of functions we find terms that seek to define what literature is. The term "literariness" is a case in point. However, this is also a term with an evaluative function, belonging to the intervening side of the graph. It is also illuminating to distinguish, as the graph suggests, between reflective contributions that are discipline-internal and those that are discipline-external. It seems clear that contributions within cognitive narrative theory are heavily dependent on theoretical notions and assumptions that are at home in primarily philosophy, linguistics and e.g. neurology, and thus require a very different competence than what the study of narrative within the tradition of literary studies will provide. This dependence on discipline-external assumptions cognitive narrative theory shares with e.g. psychoanalytical approaches to literature and narrative, and also with ideologically oriented schools and traditions, such as post-colonialism. The functional graph may help us map the home of such assumptions in a systematic manner and help us get a clearer view of the claims and commitments outside our field of competence that we as practitioners of narrative theory may be invited to adopt and make use of.

What light might such a model for differentiating between theory functions throw on our three different acts of research: explanation, definition and interpretation? Much more analysis of the functional diversity of narrative theory, both in its entirety and the individual contributions, is needed before one can draw any conclusions. However, it seems to be a tendency that explanatory acts of research depend heavily on external reflective resources. And the graph might be helpful in reminding the interpretation-oriented people of where their terms of analysis and commentary actually spring from. The richest potential for the graph may therefore be connected with my next question in the model for describing research acts. It might help us detecting pitfalls in the methodical support each and every research act needs.

5 Methodical support

The overarching distinction between the reflective and intervening function helps us recognise the differences in methodical support and underpinning needed by the different research acts. If explanations within cognitive narratology are going to have any real explanatory power, they probably should meet the well-established demands in the natural sciences for testing such explanations: precisely formulated hypotheses from which one can extract empirical consequences that in turn can be put to test. It is an open question whether the major contributions of cognitive narratology actually meet these standards.

Definitions, on the other hand, depend on the articulation of well-defined criteria, on applying them consistently, but also on avoiding confusion between historical and logical distinctions. The major methodical pitfall, though, is probably of a different kind, namely the tendency to generalise about the effect of the distinctions made. One may assume that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction works in the same way in all cases of fiction and non-fiction. However, in order to establish how this distinction functions, we have to look at particular cases. Functional definitions are for that reason methodically suspicious; they tend to represent generalisations not supported by investigation, or supported by a one-sided diet of examples.

What about the act of interpretation? Contrary to what is often assumed, I will suggest that interpretation is an act of research that should be conceived of as dependent on a highly developed methodical procedure.⁵ Due to the wide range of features that might influence the interpretation, it is in need of a methodical procedure that brings us to look for all the features of the text that may influence the way the narrative establishes and communicates its concern,⁶ and that might help us to see how they interact in establishing its communicative force. The methodical procedure should help us avoid a series of typical pitfalls, such as the *selection fallacy* (picking out only a limited set of features that we base our inter-

⁵ Perhaps due to the anti-interpretive thrust of much modern literary theory on the one hand (as in Sontag 1961), and the strong anti-methodical thrust of modern philosophical hermeneutics on the other (as in Gadamer 1989), little collective work has been done to establish such a reading procedure for the act of interpretation. My own attempt at establishing such a procedure, together with my colleague Rolf Gaasland, should be seen as merely a first step in this direction. (For a presentation of this methodical procedure, see Greve 2009).

⁶ The term "concern," as I use it here, is at the heart of the theoretical understanding of literary texts that the methodical system mentioned in the previous footnote is grounded in. For a presentation of this idea of concern as applied to fiction, see Greve (2012), in which it is illuminated through a reading of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. The notion of concern, as it is used here, is also illuminated later on in the present article, in Section 6.

pretation on because they strike us as important at early stages of the reading process); *the projection fallacy* (projecting terms that are external to the text on to the text in the process of reading), *the autonomisation fallacy* (assuming that the concern or communicative import of the text can be established quite independently of extra-textual context); and *the generalisation fallacy* (generalising about the effect of any specific feature of the text). Generalisations about effect or function are context-blind, or blind to use, or thriving on a one-sided diet of examples, to use a series of expressions from Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Taken together, awareness of these pitfalls will take us some steps towards avoiding what I take to be the most serious methodical problem in modern literary studies: one applies concepts that belong to the reflective side of the graph and apply them to the text at hand, thus providing utterly selective and predictable readings, readings which are determined by the theoretical/philosophical interests of the reader rather than proper attention to the text in all its complexity. This widespread and seldom criticised interpretive strategy may be characterised as a combination of the selection fallacy and the projection fallacy as these are defined above: the projection of theoretical terms leads to a selective reading.

6 The status of the research results

The model also asks us to clarify the status of the different research acts. The act of explaining, in so far as serious testing of hypotheses is taking place, can merely achieve some degree of corroboration, no final verification, as we know from Popper (Popper 1959). The definition act of research, at least as long as one works with logical and grammatical distinctions, may give very stable results, given that one arrives at stable and well-defined definitions, and given that one avoids undue generalisations about effects. Definitions of historically evolved categories, such as the novel, will probably always be open to questioning.

The interpretive research act is different from both the explanation and the definition act. If we take the act of interpretation to be an act of seeing ourselves as spoken to by the text, and as exploring its dialogical possibilities in the deepest and widest sense, the process of interpreting is non-final. There is no obvious end point to the process of understanding the communicative import and force of the text. It leads to open-ended, non-final, in principle unconfirmed and perhaps even "inconfirmable" results.⁷ When the text we interpret is of the highest quality, we cannot

⁷ I use the terms "unconfirmed" and "inconfirmable" rather than "corroborated" and "unverifiable" in order to keep clearly in view the distinction between explanatory and interpretive research acts.

repeat the interpretation. Our previous reading will be part of our preparation for our next reading, so as to allow the second to reveal shortcomings of the first. In other words: In virtue of the first interpretation we are able to go beyond it the second time we read. This points to the conversational dimension of interpretation. A conversation cannot be repeated because it is an event in a life, in *our* life, in *my* life. As such it potentially brings with it human growth (see Rhees 1998: 205).

What is the natural ending point of the interpretive effort? There is no such natural ending point. As long as we are concerned with understanding the text, and engaging in serious conversation with it, our readings should be seen as having only a provisional ending, as if we concluded with the statement "This is how far I got." How far we get, may to a large part be a consequence of how seriously we engage with other readers' interpretive efforts. In most cases, our interpretive engagement with the work will end where and when our interest in the work and in its conversational or dialogical possibilities peters out.

Will the interpretive research act, as I have outlined it here, isolate the literary text from other literary texts? Definitely not. To search for the work's dialogical possibilities may require that we recognise its central concerns but also that we recognise the wider dialogical possibilities opened by the concerns, against the background of which we might understand differently both the nature of the concerns in question and what they may mean for us. Only the continual process of interpretation and reinterpretation, in dialogue with other texts, can tell us where this search for connections will lead. And there is no reason to assume that we should restrict its conversational potential to *narrative* texts. It may be conversationally connected with communicative contributions from all genres and media.

7 Our relation to the object of research

The three research acts I have presented above also differ in how we are invited to relate to the research object. The act of explaining can be undertaken in the attitude of investigation similar to that of the natural sciences. We are invited to relate to the narratives as objects, the nature of which is independent of our investigation. The act of defining, on the other hand, especially when it illuminates logical and grammatical differences, brings us in touch with concepts that may hold an existential value for us; and our reflecting on them is an aspect of our caring for them. If no one cares about the fiction-non-fiction divide, it will in the long run not matter to us; and our lives will change accordingly. The third, the interpretive act, demands that we involve ourselves as persons in the research act. To engage conversationally with the text requires that we bring to the text the

understanding of ourselves and the human situation we have stored up and allow the text to play on and challenge all this.

8 Does the act of interpretation belong to narrative theory?

In the company of the act of explanation on the one hand and the act of definition on the other, the act of interpretation stands out as the odd one, with its emphasis on the individual text. It seems that the act of interpreting is the one that has been given least attention in both earlier and more recent developments in narrative theory. To refer again to the distinction from Windelband: Most schools and traditions within narrative theory have given priority to nomothetic acts of research, at the expense of idiographic ones.

One might respond that narrative theory really should not be concerned with the interpretation of individual narratives. It seeks to understand *understanding*, or to understand interpretation in more general terms. The act of interpretation as such should be relegated to hermeneutics. However, understanding interpretation requires an intimate connection with the act of interpreting. And all sorts of narrative theory tend to make all sorts of interpretive claims; interpretations that are nowhere near meeting the methodological standards for the act of interpretation outlined above.⁸

Seen from the point of view of retaining a sense of narrative theory as a humanistic field of study, special attention needs to be paid to how interpretation typically is handled by cognitive narrative theory. Ignoring what the act of interpretation requires typically goes together with conceiving of interpretation as something that the brain or the mind does. This seems to be a version of *the homunculus fallacy*: we ascribe to the organ of the human being the activity of the human being itself, on the basis of the tendency to elevate the organ to a little human being within the human being. Anthony Kenny offers a succinct criticism of this tendency:

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein says: ‘Only of a human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious’ (I, § 281). This dictum is often rejected in practice by psychologists, physiologists and computer experts, when they take predicates whose

⁸ For a criticism of interpretations of Kafka’s “Die Verwandlung” by cognitive narrative theorists in these terms, see Greve (2015).

normal application is to complete human beings or complete animals and apply them to parts of animals, such as brains, or to electrical systems. This is commonly defended as a harmless pedagogical device; I wish to argue that it is a dangerous practice which may lead to conceptual and methodological confusion. I shall call the reckless application of human-being predicates to insufficiently human-like objects the 'homunculus fallacy', since its most naïve form is tantamount to the postulation of a little man within a man to explain human experience and behaviour. (Kenny 1984: 125)

In contrast to the tendency in cognitive narrative theory, interpretation should be regarded as something we as *human beings* are engaged in, as a part of our conversation with each other and our struggle with ourselves. It is the fully-fledged, historical, uncertain, fragile, but also comprehension-seeking human being that reads narrative texts with a view to understanding them and understanding herself as fully as possible. A narrative theory that loses touch with the act of interpretation, loses touch with the nature of its research object, understood as something that plays an important role in our lives. So, rather than asking whether or not we can dispel interpretation from the field of narrative theory, we might ask if any *other* act of research within this field can remain true to its object without integrating into its research endeavor interpretive attention to particular narratives, however different or similar they may be to one another.

The willingness to base one's search for sameness and difference within narrative theory on interpretations of individual texts, may be the real test of our willingness to acknowledge differences among the objects of narrative theory. This in turn may rest on our willingness to explore the possibilities of closer contact between a methodical hermeneutical practice and narrative theory. Given the explicit anti-hermeneutical thrust of classical narratology, the implicit scientism of cognitive narrative theory, and the anti-methodical thrust of philosophical hermeneutics of the 20th century, this may be too much to ask for. If not, a good starting point might be a closer scrutiny of the basis for these attitudes. What notion of interpretation did the structuralists base their attitude on? What notion of method did e.g. Gadamer base his rejection of hermeneutical method on? Can cognitive narrative theory retain its attractiveness if its methods are judged by the standards of the natural sciences for hypothesis testing? Rethinking of such questions and issues may grant interpretation the place in narrative theory that it in my view deserves.

References

- Alber, Jan, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen & Brian Richardson. 2010. Unnatural narratives, unnatural narratology: Beyond mimetic models. *Narrative* 18(2). 11–36.
- Alber, Jan, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen & Brian Richardson. 2012. What is unnatural about unnatural narratology? A response to Monika Fludernik. *Narrative* 20(3). 371–82.
- Brask, Peter. 1974. *Tekst og tolkning: Bidrag til den litterære semantikk [Text and interpretation: Contributions to literary semantics]*. Roskilde: RUC boghandel og forlag.
- Cohn, Dorrit. 1990. Signposts of fictionality: A narratological perspective. *Poetics Today* 11(4). 775–804.
- Fludernik, Monika. 2003. Natural narratology and cognitive parameters. In David Herman (ed.), *Narrative theory and the cognitive sciences*, 243–267. Stanford, CA.: CSLI.
- Fludernik, Monika. 2012. How natural is “unnatural narratology”; or, what is unnatural about unnatural narratology? *Narrative* 20(3). 357–370.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1989. *Truth and method* (2nd rev. edn.). London: Sheed & Ward.
- Genette, Gérard. 1983. *Narrative discourse: An essay in method* (Jane E. Lewin trans.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Genette, Gérard. 1993. *Fiction and diction* (Jane E. Lewin trans.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Greve, Anniken. 2009. *Litteraturens meddelelse: En litteraturvitenskapelig tolkningsmetodikk i teoretisk, praktisk og skeptisk lys. [The communicative import of literature: A theoretical, practical and skeptical perspective on a method of interpretation]*. Tromsø: University of Tromsø.
- Greve, Anniken. 2012. Fiction and conversation. *Philosophical Investigations* 35(3–4) [special issue]. 238–259.
- Greve, Anniken. 2015. Fiction as a source of self-knowledge: Cognitive narrative theory meets the demands of Franz Kafka. *Knowledge Cultures* 3(6). 62–86.
- Hamburger, Käte. 1973. *The logic of literature* (2nd rev. edn.) (Marilynn J. Rose trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Herman, David. 2002. *Story logic*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Herman, David. 2013. Cognitive narratology. In Peter Huhn, Jan Christof Meister, John Pier & Wolf Schmid (eds.), *The living handbook of narratology*. Hamburg University. <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/cognitive-narratology-revised-version> (accessed 22 Sept., 2013).
- Holtz, Barry W. 2006. Introduction on reading Jewish texts. In Barry W. Holtz (ed.), *Back to the sources: Reading the classic Jewish texts*, 11–30. New York, London, Toronto & Sydney: Simon & Schuster.
- Kenny, Anthony. 1984. *The legacy of Wittgenstein*. Oxford & New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Kuhn, Thomas Samuel. 1972. *The Structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd edn.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Levi, Primo. 1979. *If this is a man* (Stuart Woolf transl.). London: Abacus.
- Phelan, James. 2005. *Living to tell about it: A rhetoric and ethics of character narration*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Phelan, James. 2006. Narrative theory, 1996–2006: A narrative. In Robert Scholes, James Phelan & Robert Kellogg, *The nature of narrative* (40th anniversary edn.). Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.
- Phelan, James. 2007. *Experiencing fiction: Judgments, progressions, and the rhetorical theory of narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Popper, Karl. 1959. *The logic of scientific discovery*. London: Hutchinson.

- Prince, Gerald. 2003. *A dictionary of narratology* (rev. edn.). Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Rhees, Rush (ed.). 1984. *Recollections of Wittgenstein*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rhees, Rush. 1998. *Wittgenstein and the possibility of discourse* (Z. D. Phillips ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Skalin, Lars-Åke (ed). 2005. *Fact and fiction in narrative. An interdisciplinary approach*. Örebro: Örebro studies in literary history and criticism.
- Sontag, Susan. 1961. *Against interpretation and other essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Windelband, Wilhelm von. 1984. *Geschichte und naturwissenschaft*. Strassburg: Heitz.
- Wittgenstein Ludwig. 1958. *Philosophical investigations* (2nd edn.) (Elisabeth Anscombe trans.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1980a. *Remarks on the philosophy of psychology*, vol. 1. (Elisabeth Anscombe & Georg von Wright eds.) (Elisabeth Anscombe trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1980b. *Culture and value*. (Peter Winch trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zunshine, Lisa. 2006. *Why do we read fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.