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Narrative, Volume 23, Number 1, January 2015, pp. 101-111 (Article)

Published by The Ohio State University Press

DOI: 10.1353/nar.2015.0000

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Fictionality As Rhetoric: A Response to Paul Dawson

We thank Paul Dawson for his well-informed, thoughtful, and collegial response to our “Ten Theses about Fictionality.” We would like to respond in kind, especially because doing so gives us an opportunity to expand on and clarify key points of our essay. We shall proceed by making a few global points about the relationship between his Ten Theses and our Ten Theses and then turning to specific comments on his Ten.

As Dawson states, our approach to fictionality is informed by three moves: distinguishing between the genre of fiction and the quality of fictionality; approaching fictionality as rhetoric, that is, as a communicative strategy; and asserting the pervasiveness of fictionality deriving from a fundamental human ability. In this response our main goal is to further develop the consequences of our second move, and in so doing, show how our rhetorical approach to fictionality informs and is informed by other points we make.

Dawson’s general strategy is to locate our “Ten Theses” within his larger argument about the problems with fictionality studies. Indeed, his introduction frames our essay within his take on the rise of fictionality studies, and his commentary fol-

lowing his theses typically moves either from points we make in the essay to the work of other scholars of fictionality or vice versa. As a result, Dawson does an admirable job of situating our work in relation to larger conversations, and we are grateful to him for providing this larger context. But we note that his strategy has three important consequences for understanding the relation between his *Ten Theses Against* and our *Ten Theses About*. (1) While Dawson quite rightly points out that some of our views coincide with or have been anticipated by other scholars, his account of the provenance of fictionality studies embraces a number of quite distinct perspectives on it and how it is to be defined. In consequence there are a number of points in his essay, both where he is endorsing such earlier work and where he is dissenting from it, which actually provide additional support for our views, or ways to extend them, rather than arguments against them. See, for example, his commentary at the end of thesis two, at the end of thesis three, and through much of thesis five. (2) Dawson's observations about overlaps help us clarify our broad claims: we regard our main contribution to the conversations about fictionality to consist less in the originality of any one of our theses and more in the overarching rhetorical conception of fictionality that underlies each of them. (3) In some of the places where Dawson takes issue with other fictionality scholarship, his arguments do not apply to our rhetorical position on fictionality. We shall note specifics below.

Dawson's Thesis 1. "Semantics versus pragmatics is borrowed and boring."

As Dawson indicates, our position has roots in Walsh's *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, which engages with the well-established debate between semantics and pragmatics (epitomized by fictional worlds approaches and speech act theory, respectively). Walsh engages with this debate in order to demonstrate the inadequacy of both sides of it, and he invokes the cognitive re-conceptualization of speech acts provided by relevance theory to extricate fictionality from the terms of the debate and place it squarely in the domain of rhetoric. (See also our comment on thesis five below.) Concerned ultimately with communicators (speakers, writers, graphic artists, directors, and so on), their audiences, and their purposes, we view language (phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics) and other media of communication as means to ends rather than ends in themselves. To put the point another way, language and other media are resources that communicators draw upon in different ways on different occasions in order to accomplish different purposes. Hence, like Dawson, we recognize that semantics and pragmatics are "not mutually exclusive" (78), and a rhetorical perspective transcends the opposition. Our main point is that fictionality is not finally a matter of formal features, reference, or conversational rule-following but rather of a communicator's intent to deploy invention in the service of some ends in relation to particular audiences.

Dawson's final paragraph on his first thesis acknowledges that we are not perpetuating a false debate between semantics and pragmatics, though he muddies the

water somewhat by picking out a couple of instances in which he thinks we contradict ourselves about the ontological basis of fictionality. Just to be clear: we do not regard fictionality as an ontological modality but as a rhetorical choice to employ invention either locally or globally. And we do not conceive fiction in terms of *reference* to non-actual states of affairs, but have tried to consistently employ terms like “the use of invented stories” and “imagined scenarios” which are precisely not matters of reference.

Dawson’s Thesis 2. “How many degrees of fictionality does it take to change a genre?”

With this thesis and its discussion, Dawson raises two main issues, one about degrees of fictionality and the other about the utility of the term “fictionality.” We start with the second issue. Dawson gets to the crux of his objection in this passage:

The amount of theoretical work required to include Obama’s joke [about Mitt Romney suffering from Romnesia] as an example of fictionality alongside fiction suggests to me one may as well coin a different term. In other words, “extricating” fictionality from fiction requires a scale of degrees of fictionality with generic fiction at one end and a single joke in a presidential debate at the other, but unless the two can inform each other, the theoretical problem of degrees of fictionality becomes replicated at the disciplinary level in any attempt to forge a unified theory of fictionality. (80)

Ultimately, we care more about the concepts signified by terms than terms themselves, but for now we want to defend our use of “fictionality.” We believe that the term effectively designates a recognizable quality shared by a very wide range of discourses—or parts of discourses (narratives, arguments, descriptions, and more)—that employ invention as part of their rhetorical strategies. We see an advantage in having a single term for this quality, and we prefer “fictionality” to other contenders for several reasons. It is superior to “imagination” because acts of imagination need not be communicated, and it is better than “invention” because that term covers territory beyond this shared quality (e.g., “Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone”). In addition, “fictionality” connects the shared quality nicely to one of its most well-known and most refined manifestations, fiction. In sum, although we are open to considering other terms for our concept, we are quite happy with “fictionality” and find “[t]he amount of theoretical work required” to comprehend its range less onerous than Dawson does—and, even more important, well worth whatever effort that comprehension requires.

At the same time, we find that Dawson raises helpful questions when he invokes the idea of a “scale of degrees of fictionality” and asks how items at each end (e.g., Obama’s joke about Romnesia and a generic fiction such as *The Hunger Games*) can illuminate each other and how such items can be part of “a unified theory of fictionality” (80). From our rhetorical perspective, Obama’s joke and *The Hunger Games*

belong on the same scale of fictionality because they have something significant in common: a turn away from a direct concern with actual states toward a concern with invented, nonactual states in order to influence an audience's understanding and response to actual states. In other words, the two ends of the scale share a rhetorical strategy and, at the most general level, purpose. But where one end (Obama's joke) involves a quick round-trip between the actual and the imagined, the other (Collins's trilogy) involves a sustained departure itself framed by the technology of the codex book. Between these two ends of the scale lie many other deployments of fictionality, including utterances that seek to be ambiguous about what is invented and what is not. In this way, our answer helps advance the project of developing a unified theory of fictionality.

Dawson's questions also lead us to emphasize another consequence of our rhetorical view. We distinguish between fictionality as an either-or quality (though again individual communicators can be deliberately ambiguous about the status of their communications) and the degrees of fictionality within the large class of texts employing invention. Fictionality, in and of itself, does not allow for degrees. Either a (piece of) communication employs invention or it does not (or it plays with the line between the actual and the invented). If the text employs invention, it has fictionality, and if it doesn't, it lacks fictionality. Obama's joke is not any less fictional than Collins's trilogy. Nevertheless, one can say that *Hunger Games* has a greater degree of fictionality than "Romnesia" in the sense that Collins's invention is more elaborate and more sustained. In other words, the fictional status of a communication is not a matter of degree but rather the consequence of the communicator's intent to use invention (or not). Further, the degree of fictionality in a given case follows from how elaborate and sustained the invention is. An analogy with a light switch and a lamp may be helpful. The switch is either off (no light in the lamp) or on (some light in the lamp). At the same time, the lamp will give more light if it has a 100-watt bulb than if it has a 60-watt bulb. (We acknowledge that a light switch can't play with the "off-on" positions in the way that, say, autofiction plays with fictionality, but we believe that the analogy is still, well, illuminating.)

In our view, then, Dawson's thesis two asks the wrong question, because degrees of fictionality don't lead to a tipping point at which a previously nonfictive discourse becomes fictive. Instead, the fictionality of a communication is part of the communicator's intent, and the degree of fictionality refers to how elaborate and sustained the invention is. One can't make the lamp go on or off by changing the wattage of its light bulb.

These points form the basis of our response to a related pair of Dawson's questions: "What degree of fictionality does a work of fiction possess? And depending on the answer, would that be enough to distinguish fiction by degree, if not kind?" (80). The short answers are "it depends" and "no." *The Hunger Games* has a greater degree of fictionality than Jane Austen's *Persuasion* because Collins's invention includes, among other things, a setting in a future world whereas Austen's invention occurs within a representation of England in the early nineteenth century. But this answer has no bearing on whether either of these novels is fictional in a way that

distinguishes it from “Romnesia.” In all three cases the switch is in the on position, which is another way of saying that fictionality is not about tipping points but about the intentional deployment of invention.

Dawson’s Thesis 3. “Fictionality is a signifier without a referent.”

Dawson’s objection here is that we are “asking the word fictionality to perform too many different functions” (82), and the result is a conceptual muddle. But the senses and usages he runs together are actually related to each other in clear and distinct ways, and do important work in our characterization of the uses of fictionality in fiction and nonfiction. So, while Dawson piles up several quotations from *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* to make his case, these passages are in fact clarifying different dimensions of the concept. To reiterate in brief, fictionality is a rhetorical *quality*: the quality of a certain set of rhetorical moves involving the inventing of possibilities rather than the reporting of actualities, and one that functions as a distinct communicative *resource*. The *assumption* of fictionality is an auditor’s or reader’s inference that a communicator intends such a rhetorical move, and that the stretch of discourse concerned is best understood as fictive in *mode*. *Fictionalization*, for us, is not the act of turning something nonfictive into something fictive but the act of signaling fictionality. Signposts are of course one way to do such signaling (but see also our response to Dawson’s thesis five below).

In the context of our essay, an especially salient consequence of this approach to fictionality is the distinction it draws between the rhetoric of fictionality and the generic frame of fiction. This distinction allows us to recognize that different rhetorical orientations may be in play within the same text, and that we resolve these differences by inferring hierarchies of rhetorical intent. So, for us, generic frameworks signal the *global status* of a text as either fiction, nonfiction, or ambiguous: for example, “novel” signals global fictionality, “autobiography” signals nonfictionality, and, though no widely agreed upon term exists for the large class of texts that play with the line between reporting and inventing, “auto-fiction” refers to one subclass of such texts. But any such global frame may subordinate stretches of discourse in a mode at odds with that frame, such that we recognize, for example, local invocations of a rhetoric of fictionality within a text that otherwise adheres to a nonfictive mode as the vehicle of its global rhetoric.

Thus, Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* has the generic framework of “novel,” and that signals its fictionality, but when McEwan reports on the anti-war rally in London on Saturday, February 15, 2003, he embeds a nonfictive (informative) mode within his generic fiction (or, alternatively, the reports on the rally have the rhetorical quality of nonfictionality). David Small’s *Stitches* has the generic framework of “graphic memoir,” but when he draws his therapist as the White Rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland*, he embeds the fictive mode within his generic nonfiction (or, alternatively, the representation of the therapist as the White Rabbit has the rhetorical quality of fictionality).

Dawson's Thesis 4. "The new approach to fictionality is an old approach to fiction."

Yes and no. Yes, because the general idea that fiction seeks to comment on the actual world is as old as Aristotle, and Dawson does a nice job of showing how that idea gets taken up and adapted by theorists as different as Michael Riffaterre, Didier Coste, Barbara Foley, and Wolfgang Iser. We're happy to be part of this company.

No, because these various approaches to fiction are importantly distinct from ours (and from each other). A rhetorical approach to fictionality departs significantly from semiotic, thematic, mimetic, referential, or phenomenological approaches. Furthermore, we believe that reconceiving the theoretical understanding of generic fiction as continuous with rather than sharply distinct from nonfiction does open up new ways of thinking about how fiction works and about its functions and purposes. To take just one example, the work that Dawson cites on the relation between fictionality and the history of the novel by Catherine Gallagher and by Simona Zetterberg Gjerlevsen dovetails nicely with our approach. Recognizing a distinction between the rhetoric of fictionality and the genre of fiction fosters research into both the generic promiscuity of that rhetoric and its historical and cultural variation, within the history of the novel and beyond. We look forward to contributing to and learning from other efforts to develop the consequences of locating generic fictions at one end of the scale of fictionality. (See also our response to Dawson's thesis ten.)

Dawson's Thesis 5. "Signposts are signposts."

Dawson argues that "a pragmatic approach would recognize that a signpost is a signpost if it is taken by readers as a signpost, regardless of whether it is necessary or sufficient and whether it is 'in' the text or not" (85). Here we have a genuine disagreement, one that points to the difference between our rhetorical approach and Dawson's characterization of a pragmatic approach. First, we regard textual features as resources that authors can use in different ways on different occasions for different purposes. Second, readers are not the agents who determine whether something is a signpost. It takes an interaction among authors, readers, and textual features in a historical context to establish something as a signpost. That is why we say that "*within certain cultural and historical contexts* certain features can become strong conventional indices of a fictive communicative intent" (66). Also, our whole framework, as mentioned above, entails an extrication of fictionality from fiction. This move means that we recognize that there can be signposts of fiction as a genre as well as of fictionality as a feature, and that these need in no way be totally overlapping. Zetterberg Gjerlevsen and Skov Nielsen ("Distinguishing Fictionality") argue that "under some contextual circumstances signposts indicate that the communication is best apprehended as a species of the conventional genre of fiction such as when paratextual signals, as 'novel,' point in that direction. Under other contextual circumstances as in a political speech, signs of fictionality need not point to a generic relationship but rather to the employ-

ment of fictionality as part of a communicational intent, not partaking in the genre of fiction.” So yes, signposts are signposts, but their meanings are context-dependent, and some indicate fiction, some nonfiction, and still others fictionality.

Dawson’s Thesis 6. “Fictionality both inherits and undermines the unnatural.”

Dawson does a very fine job of tracing many lines of contiguity between work on fictionality and earlier work on unnatural narratology. Since the latter is not really an integral part of our Ten Theses, we will just briefly clarify that for us the (global) narratives addressed by unnatural narratology are a subset of fictional narratives (but again, a local instance of the unnatural can occur within a global nonfiction narrative). This understanding means that for us, all (global) narratives that may be classed as unnatural are also fictional, but only some fictional narratives may be considered unnatural. At the same time, for unnatural narratologists both natural and unnatural narratives come in conventional as well as unconventional shapes and forms. The use of zero focalization in traditional works of realism is a good example of conventional narration that is unnatural in the sense that it does not conform to the rules and norms of conversational storytelling. For these reasons, we don’t see any necessary contradiction between fictionality and realism (see Zetterberg Gjerlevsen, “A Novel History”) or between realism and unnatural narrative.

Dawson’s thesis ends as follows:

Unnatural narratology began as a local skirmish with movements within narrative theory, and its approach was to draw attention to the non-naturalizable features that distinguish literary fiction from natural language, hence to study these “unnatural” features in natural language works against its very premise. And to carry the unnatural into a study of fictive discourse founded on a challenge to the distinction of fiction seems to be more trouble than it is worth. (88)

While we appreciate Dawson’s concern for the work and the trouble we have to go through, this characterization is not entirely accurate. Unnatural narratology had as a point of departure the view that not *all* narratives, and not *all* instances of literary fiction could be best apprehended by using the same cognitive and interpretive procedures as one does when hearing real life conversational stories. Studying fictionality as rhetoric has as a point of departure the view that there has been too sharp a divide between the categories of fiction and nonfiction with the result that the pervasive use of invention in so-called “natural” uses of language has been largely overlooked. Work on unnatural narratology and work on fictionality share an interest in calling attention to the heterogeneity of narrative and other kinds of discourse and of identifying the different kinds of interpretive assumptions and operations receivers can legitimately and fruitfully apply to which kind of discourse.

**Dawson's Thesis 7. "Narrativity is always already fictionality,
except when it's not."**

As Dawson points out, we don't directly address this point in our essay (though there is a substantial discussion of it in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*), but we're happy to do so here. For us, narrativity is *never* already fictionality, since narrativity, that which makes something a narrative, is a scalar quality that applies to both fictional and non-fictional narrative. To say that a discourse possesses a high or low degree of narrativity does not entail anything about its status as fictive or nonfictive. Similarly, identifying a text as a narrative does not entail anything about its status as fiction or nonfiction.

We think that much confusion about the relation between narrativity and fictionality (and narrative and fiction) could be avoided by recognizing the difference between the statement "all narratives are constructed" and the statement "all narratives are fiction" (for more on this point, see Phelan). We endorse the first statement and disagree with the second. As stated in the quotation Dawson provides from *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, the constructed nature of narrative only merits the term "fictive" in a very restricted (indeed etymological and non-idiomatic) sense. That is not the sense in which we use "fictive" or "fictionality" in our essay, and we reject the conflation of narrativity and fictionality. Instead, we contend that while all narratives are constructed, some are fiction, some are nonfiction, and some play with the distinction.

**Dawson's Thesis 8: "Fictionality wants to have its postmodern cake
and eat it too."**

Not surprisingly, the crux of Dawson's objection here has two parts. (1) We seek to have our postmodernist cake and its frosting that spells out the message "fiction and literature are not privileged forms of discourse." We do that, according to Dawson, by doing what poststructuralists such as Paul de Man did with the concept of literariness. Just as de Man sought to show that literature is not a privileged discourse because language in general does what de Man claims literary language does—that is, privilege rhetorical functions over grammatical functions—we seek to show that fiction is not "a privileged form of discourse" "by addressing the rhetorical and tropological function of language in nonliterary discourse" (91). Unlike de Man, we then seek to eat our cake and thus allow the privilege of fiction and literature to re-emerge. And we do that by a "pragmatic" appeal to global generic frameworks that say a work of nonfiction retains its referential status "even when it has local elements of fictionality" (91).

We give Dawson credit for this clever argument by analogy, but we have trouble recognizing ourselves in it. We have trouble, first, because our conception of rhetoric is significantly different from de Man's. De Man's conception is rooted in tropes—in what we regard as the means of textual signification—whereas ours, as we have noted in response to Dawson's thesis one, is rooted in communicators, audiences, and purposes. Thus, we don't recognize ourselves as especially concerned with "addressing

the rhetorical and tropological function of language in nonliterary discourse” (91). We have trouble, second, because our conception of rhetoric means that we have no interest or investment in privileging fictionality over nonfictionality or the literary over the nonliterary (or, indeed, the respective vice versas). We do call attention to what we believe is the neglected pervasiveness of fictionality throughout multiple forms of discourse, but this “privileging” is what any researchers do when they focus on one set of phenomena rather than countless others. Our goal, again, is to offer a rhetorical understanding of the nature and functions of this pervasiveness.

Dawson’s Thesis 9. “Fictionality has become the bastard child of the narrative turn.”

Again Dawson works to his objection by means of an extended analogy: the three key claims of the narrative turn are analogous to the three key claims of fictionality studies. Just as narrative is (1) found throughout discourse, (2) a fundamental cognitive faculty for meaning-making, and (3) in need of an interdisciplinary approach to its workings, so too is fictionality (1) pervasive, (2) a fundamental cognitive faculty, and (3) in need of an interdisciplinary approach. From Dawson’s perspective, the problem is that where fictionality studies “once promised to rescue fiction from the narrative turn . . . it has since turned into another version of the narrative turn by seeking to identify fictionality in all narratives, and beyond” (93).

Our first response here should by now be no surprise: we reject the third point of the analogy. While we remain open to the insights of other disciplines, we are not calling for an interdisciplinary study of fictionality but a rhetorical one. The extended scope of fictionality studies pertains to the object of study rather than to the methodology. Such a project leaves to one side the question of whether or not there might be genuine intellectual reasons for interdisciplinary dialogue on narrative in general. Our second response is that our approach never claimed to rescue fiction from the narrative turn in any respect other than our rejection of postmodern panfictionality (see our comments above about Dawson’s thesis seven), so Dawson’s thesis doesn’t apply to our essay. But more than that, we want to make it clear that our calling attention to the pervasiveness of fictionality is not designed to flatten out differences among the natures and functions of diverse uses of fictionality. Instead, as noted above, we believe that attending to similarities and differences among various uses can shed light on both the distinctiveness of individual uses and the larger phenomenon of fictionality.

Dawson’s Thesis 10. “Who cares why we read fiction(ality)?”

Here Dawson extends the argument of thesis nine in a two-step move. First, he links our claim that “For better and for worse, fictionality changes the world and the ways we perceive it” (94) with the justifications for reading fiction offered by literary

Darwinists and cognitive narratologists (Brian Boyd, Jonathan Gottschall, and Lisa Zunshine). For them, reading fiction changes us for the better by enhancing our capacity for empathy (Boyd and Gottschall) or increasing our ability to process complex sociocognitive information (Zunshine). Second, he points to what he regards as a negative consequence of this way of thinking about why we read fiction:

Rather than offering a new philosophical perspective on fiction, or a new mode of textual analysis, the rhetoric of the fictionality turn offers a way to understand the use-value of fiction. Like the narrative turn, it simultaneously seeks to expand the significance of fiction while undermining its specificity. (94-95)

Our response to Dawson's thesis nine applies here as well, but we have three additional points to make.

1. The rhetorical view of fictionality offers a more open-ended view of why we read fiction; we talk about the range of purposes for which fictive rhetoric may be used, not about the fundamental human or evolutionary value of invention or imagining. Our approach is more open-ended because it emphasizes that different fictional works may have different purposes: some may seek to enhance our empathy or our sociocognitive complexity but not all do. Furthermore, among the ones that do, such enhancement may not be their primary purpose. Our approach is also more open ended because our last sentence, which Dawson quotes, makes it quite clear that we do not assume fiction is intrinsically beneficial.
2. The concept of purposes does indicate that we regard fiction as having use-value, but the emphasis on the range and diversity of purposes means that we also want to expand the meaning of "use" in that phrase. Sometimes the "use" can be an entertaining escape from the ordinary or familiar; at other times the "use" can be a pointed commentary on the world in which we live; and of course there are many other uses between these two.
3. We notice that as opposed to theses one through nine, Dawson's question here leads less to an individual thesis than to the assumption informing Dawson's entire essay: one *should not* ask the question "why read fiction(ality)?" (because no one cares, and the answers are either boring, distracting, misleading, or otherwise unhelpful). No offense, but we don't think that the best defense is no defense. When something, like the use of fictionality, is extremely pervasive yet understudied, it seems to us very worthwhile to inquire about its significance, especially when an existing theory can help us understand its connections with other phenomena that have been well studied. In our view, the rhetorical approach to fictionality we have proposed, with its attention not just to fictionality's ubiquity but also to the how, when, why, and where of specific cases, promises to give us considerable insight into the broad realm of human communication concerned with more than describing the actual.

In conclusion, although we find much to disagree with in Dawson's case against fictionality, we remain grateful to him for his spirited and thoughtful engagement with our work. His arguments have led us to re-examine and, we hope, clarify some key points about our conception of fictionality as rhetoric. We also hope that our exchange with Dawson can itself spark some new insightful work in the ongoing project of fictionality studies.

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