

## ADVANCING AN ONTOLOGY OF STORIES: SMUTS' DILEMMA

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### I. INTRODUCING STORIES

Narratologists commonly draw a distinction between the *story* and those things that tell the story- the *tellings*, as I will call them here. Here is an example intended to highlight that distinction. *The Parable of the Sower* is a parable found in the New Testament books of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas. Though the relevant pieces of text in the Gospels are remarkably similar, no two of the four are identical. The verses in Matthew, Mark and Luke, have been translated and paraphrased, along with the rest of the Bible, into literally thousands of different languages and versions, all of which include the *The Parable of the Sower*.

*The Parable of the Sower* is the story told, and the Gospels, paraphrases and translations are the various tellings of that story. At the heart of the distinction, and presupposed in the example above, is the idea of the 'transposability' of the story: the thought that the *same* story can be told by *different* tellings. The same story is told by numerous children's picture bibles, and animated cartoons, and could be recounted here with little trouble. If I told the *The Parable of the Sower* here, I would not thereby increase the number of parables, though I would increase the number of tellings. Jonathan Culler describes this distinction (under its various terminological guises) as the "indispensable premise of narratology."<sup>1</sup>

While the narratologists' approach focusses on the structural features of narrative, very little has been said about the *ontology* of this distinction. In a recent paper, Aaron

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<sup>1</sup> Culler (2001) p. 171

Smuts (2009) has opened up this long overdue issue for debate by considering the identity conditions for stories. Smuts sets out the question as follows:

[...] what exactly constitutes the “story” that is retold? Although it is plausible to say that the same story can be retold, it is difficult to say exactly what this means. The primary difficulty for proponents of the transposability thesis is to come up with an acceptable theory of story identity.<sup>2</sup>

Smuts then goes on to set out a dilemma that anyone attempting to answer this question will find themselves in. According to Smuts, either we accept an account of story identity that means that the same story is hardly ever told twice, or, escaping that horn, we end up with an account that collapses any distinction we might want to keep between genuinely telling the same story and just having two tellings which exhibit the same story *type*. In sections 2 and 3 I will set out the two horns of Smuts dilemma, before arguing, in section 4, that an account stories as *abstract historical individuals* offers a way of avoiding the dilemma.

## II. SMUTS’ DILEMMA: THE FIRST HORN

According to narratologists, the distinction between the story and that which tells the story is something like the distinction between the *content* of a representation and the *form* of a representation. Seymour Chatman, for example, writes that the story is “that content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what might be called the existents...”<sup>3</sup> This suggests that we might understand the story as the collection of all those things described by the telling. From this idea Smuts proposes the “strict theory of story identity” such that the story is “the complete set of event, character, and setting details that are presented in the work.”<sup>4</sup>

There is some ambiguity here between claims about *identity conditions* and claims about *ontological categories*. That is, Smuts initially sets out to offer a theory of story identity, but in doing so offers the stronger suggestion that stories belong to the ontological category of *sets*. At this stage I want to focus only on the identity conditions, and I will suggest that the “strict theory” can be tightened up somewhat as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Smuts (2009), p. 5

<sup>3</sup> Chatman (1978), p. 19

<sup>4</sup> Smuts (2009), p. 6

**Strict:** Two tellings,  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , tell the same story iff the set of propositions true according to  $t_1$  is the same as the set of propositions true according to  $t_2$ .<sup>5</sup>

The ‘propositions true according to the telling’ are just all those things made out by the telling to be the case, and are intended to correspond to Smuts notion of “details presented in the work”. It might be thought that there is some disparity between that which is (perhaps implicitly) true according to a telling, and that which is ‘presented in the work’, but short of a detailed discussion of how one would make that distinction in a principled way (and which one would be more appropriate for story identity), it will do to overlook it for our purposes. Various accounts can be found in the literature of precisely how to determine what is ‘true according to the telling’ (or as it is often put, ‘true in the story’) but, again, we need not look into those here.<sup>6</sup> All that we require for now is the somewhat intuitive notion that Smuts is working with, for that is enough to show how unattractive an account it seems to be. The problem starts when we realise that while **Strict** gives us precision, it makes it that case that we *hardly ever* tell the same story twice. As Smuts puts it, “it makes it practically impossible to transpose the story”.<sup>7</sup>

Suppose, for example, that I want to retell *The Parable of the Sower* using a comic strip, and I draw the sower as having brown hair. Then by most accounts it will be true according to my telling that the sower has brown hair. However, it is no part of the original tellings that the Sower has brown hair, and so according to **Strict** I will have failed to tell the same story. Examples can be multiplied almost *ad infinitum*, especially when we see, as Smuts points out, that any move from print to stage or screen will involve significant changes in the information represented, due to the unavoidable introduction of visual details. Could we really accept that no production of *Hamlet* could ever tell the same story as the the play script of *Hamlet*?<sup>8</sup>

It should be noted that **Strict** will still allow us to tell the same story in the sense of reading the same text aloud to an audience multiple times, but what we are specifically interested in here, rather, is our ability to re-tell the same story across

<sup>5</sup> This strict account of story identity is apparent in Zalta (1983) p.91

<sup>6</sup> The conversation generally starts with Lewis' paper 'Truth in Fiction' reprinted in Lewis (1983) and amendments have been put forward by, for example, Currie (1990), Byrne (1993) and Hanley (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Smuts (2009), p. 6

<sup>8</sup> What if one were tempted to just 'bite the bullet' on this and answer 'yes' here? I return to this possibility in section 4.

different texts, or across different mediums (to transpose the story). It is little consolation that reading the same text aloud involves telling the same story if two productions of the same play, or a production and a play script, do not.

Smuts goes on to consider, and reject, some possible ways of avoiding this unintuitive result whilst holding on to the strict theory. However, those details need not concern us here. What is important is the outcome: **Strict** is just *too strict* as an account of story identity.

### III. SMUTS' DILEMMA: THE SECOND HORN

Given this result, Smuts sensibly considers looking for a more lenient approach to story identity. Smuts suggests that in reaction to the problems of the strict view, we may want to develop an account of stories that view them instead as something like a higher-level *type*. Types, understood along the lines of 'token-binders',<sup>9</sup> are entities that admit of instances (their tokens) and are individuated by the conditions necessary for something to count as a token of that type. Two particular tellings then count as telling the same story (type) if they have a certain set of shared 'essential attributes' – attributes specified by the identity of the story type in question. On this type-token view, the story is identified by the conditions that must be met by a telling to count as a telling of that story.

This certainly has some *prima facie* plausibility. We can intuitively distinguish between events, details and characters that are essential to the story for it to be *that very* story, and those that are relatively unimportant. We might deem it essential to telling the story of Romeo and Juliet that two people from opposing groups fall in love and that their plans to be together end in tragedy, but we are unlikely to be bothered by colour of Romeo's hair. Thus we might propose the following account as an improvement to **Strict**:

**Lenient:** Two tellings,  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , tell the same story, S, iff there is a core set of propositions essential to story S true according to  $t_1$  and true according to  $t_2$ .

In other words, we can retell any story as long as we include in our retelling all of the essential details or features of the original story.

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<sup>9</sup> See Dodd (2007) p.54

Smuts raises two problems for this account. Firstly Smuts claims that this view causes serious problems for the original distinction between the telling and the told. He argues that “the elements that are essential for any given story will be highly idiosyncratic”<sup>10</sup> and will likely come down to *salience*. Those elements that we deem essential to a story will often be just those that are most salient. However, salience, for the most part, will be a feature of the *presentation* – a feature of how the story is told. (Michael Corleone's first killing in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* is a salient event in the film in part because of the intense camera work and attention to detail during that scene.) This is a problem, Smuts thinks, because what the story is will no longer be independent of how the story is told. He writes that

The very transposability of the story is called into question if the defender of the theory of story identity as an abstract type must make reference to elements of salience, since salience is at least partly determined by the discourse from which the story is supposed to be independent.<sup>11</sup>

However, I think that Smuts is mistaken in supposing that this is a real problem for an account of story individuation along the lines of **Lenient**. This is simply because it is no part of the distinction between the story and its telling, as understood here and as understood by narratologists, that the story be *entirely independent* of its tellings. On the contrary, the story that is told by any telling will be in many ways *dependent* on features of the telling, including salience and emphasis. What is salient will depend on the presentation just as much as the story told will depend on the presentation, so there is no problem with essential elements of the story told coinciding with salient features of the telling. Thus I think that reliance on salience is no real problem for this account of story identity.

The second problem raised by Smuts for this account has more bite. The argument here is that if we accept **Lenient**, or something similar, we lose our grip on the distinction between two tellings that tell the same story, and two tellings that merely tell the same *kind* of story. Arguably this distinction is very important to critics. Using Smuts example, while we surely want to say that Wooster Group's production of *Hamlet* and Laurence Olivier's production tell the same identical story, the film *Maid*

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<sup>10</sup> Smuts (2009), p. 10

<sup>11</sup> Smuts (2009), p. 10

*in Manhattan* and Disney's *Cinderella* only tell the same kind of story. We might predicate of these latter two that they both tell Cinderella stories, and we don't mean here that they tell the exact same story, but just that the stories that they do tell are of the same general kind or type.

However, kinds, like types, are individuated by the conditions something must meet to be a member of that kind. Hence an account of what it is to tell the same *kind* of story is going to look very similar to **Lenient**, with perhaps only a more relaxed or more minimal set of core propositions put in as the requirement. The upshot of this, for Smuts, is that our account “risks failing to be able to make the distinction between story identity and story type in a non-ad hoc manner.”<sup>12</sup> Telling the exact same story will be merely a limiting case of telling the same kind of story, but intuitively genuine identity and sameness of kind are ontologically distinct.

#### IV. AVOIDING THE DILEMMA: STORIES AS HISTORICAL INDIVIDUALS

At the end of the paper Smuts suggests a preference for choosing the first horn and accepting the consequences. But this ‘bite the bullet’ response would have much of our ordinary practice about story identification to have been mistaken. I suggest such a move would demand significantly more theoretical motivation than has been offered. One might reluctantly accept it if it was the only card on the table.<sup>13</sup>

However, I want to put forward a third option that avoids this dilemma. The problem, I want to argue, is that both of the above accounts make the mistake of viewing the story as a kind of ‘generic entity’. This is a common move in ontology when faced with entities that are not ‘concrete’ – that is, that are not spatially and temporally located physical objects. Such ‘generic entity’ accounts have been given for words, properties, propositions, works of music, novels, and photographs (to name a few). As generic entities, these are then understood in terms of a set of conditions that an ‘instance’ of the entity must meet in order to be an instance of *that* entity. For example, it might be claimed that a musical performance is a performance of such and such a work if, and only if, it sounds like so and so. The musical work is a generic entity that demands that its instances sound a certain way.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Smuts (2009), p. 12

<sup>13</sup> My worry, briefly, is that accounts that take us to have been significantly in error with our identification practices risk ‘changing the subject’ of the enquiry all together. See Thomasson (2009).

<sup>14</sup> For example, see Dodd (2007)

The claim I want to make here, though, is that this is the wrong model to apply to stories. Instead, I argue that we should view stories as *historical individuals*.<sup>15</sup> There is only time here to offer the beginnings of such an account, but I hope to show that even a brief description will mark it out as a serious contender for the ontology of stories, and one that also avoids Smuts' Dilemma.

Chairs, tables, paintings, pets and people are all historical individuals. They come into existence at a certain time (they are created or born), they change through time (grow older, get damaged), and they can be destroyed. Stories, I want to argue, share all of these characteristics with familiar objects. One important respect in which they differ is that stories are *abstract*.<sup>16</sup> By this I mean just that stories are not the kind of things that have a spatial location. To ask where a story is is just a category mistake on par with asking how much January 2<sup>nd</sup> weighs.

Stories come into existence: Unless we are tethered by some metaphysical constraints about abstract entities, it is not hard to be persuaded that stories come into existence. They are created by individuals when they are first told. The story of Romeo and Juliet did not exist before Shakespeare, and came into existence when *Romeo and Juliet* was written. Likewise *The Parable of the Sower* did not exist before Jesus uttered the relevant words.

Stories change through time: This is highly plausible, especially if we consider the folk tales and ballads of the oral tradition. As the story is passed on from one generation to the next, it changes in small (and sometimes large) ways as details are added and dropped. The development of the printing press has surely had a significant impact on story change, but change is still present even in the digital age. When the novelist drafts and re-drafts their book the novel changes and so does the story that is being told. Similarly, when a group of writers work on a series drama for television the story being told will undergo the radical change of growing considerably over time as new series are added.

Stories go out of existence: Stories go out of existence just when it is no longer possible for any tellings of the story to be produced. It is difficult to find examples of

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<sup>15</sup> The concept of an abstract historical individual is from Guy Rohrbaugh (2003) where he applies it to art works and to photographs in particular.

<sup>16</sup> On this point my account of stories differs from Rohrbaugh's account of works of art, which he suggests are not abstract, though non-material (see his 2005). A full discussion of this difference is outside the scope of this paper.

this, but we can imagine that the folk stories of a lost civilisation no longer exist in virtue of there being no records or memories of those stories.

If these are correct claims to make about stories, then it is a mistake to try and understand stories in terms of a set of conditions that a telling must satisfy in order to tell that story. Hence we need not accept either **Strict** or **Lenient** any more than we should accept that we have the same chair on two different occasions if and only if they both have the same appearance (surely the same chair can be red and upright one day, and blue and broken the next).

Instead, retelling a story will be (something like) a matter of being causally connected to a previous telling in the right kind of way, such that one is deemed capable of telling that story, and that one intends to tell *that very* story. We might also suppose that the audience must accept that telling *as* a telling of that story. Clearly this judgement will involve recognising important elements, but crucially it is no longer the inclusion of some fixed set of elements that make it *that* story being told (I may be recognised by my appearance, but I am not individuated by my appearance).

This view of stories as historical individuals, rather than as generic entities, does not immediately answer every question we might have about story identity and the nature of stories. However, it *does* help explain the apparent confusion over the distinction between genuine story identity and stories that are merely of the same story type (or kind). A story type *is* a generic entity, and for a story to be a member of that type it need only possess the required set of characteristics, as specified by that type (such as 'boy-meets-girl' or 'Cinderella story'). The confusion then arises due to the ambiguous nature of our language: sometimes we want to say that two stories are the same historical individual, and at other times we want to say that two stories are merely of the same story *type*. Consider my claim, for example, that you have the same watch as me. Here I mean the same type of watch. But I might also say that the watch I was wearing this morning is the same watch as the one you are wearing now, and here I perhaps mean to say that you have stolen my watch. As it is with watches, so it is with stories. Wooster Group's production of *Hamlet* and Laurence Olivier's production tell the same story as historical individual; the film *Maid in Manhattan* and Disney's *Cinderella* tell the same *kind* of story (as generic entity).



Clearly there is much more that needs to be said to flesh out an account of stories as abstract historical individuals,<sup>17</sup> but if we can let go of the assumption that stories are generic entities, a path is opened up via which we can navigate away from Smuts' Dilemma.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> And see Dodd (2007) p.143-166 for a criticism of a related view.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Julian Dodd and an anonymous referee from *The Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics* for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Needless to say, they are not responsible for any failure on my part to fully take on board their suggestions.

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