

## Expectations and experientiality: Jerome Bruner's "canonicity and breach"

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The reception of Jerome Bruner's extensive theoretical work on narrative has been paradoxical. A substantial part of the commentary literature has confined itself to legitimatory uses of his texts, writers too often being contented with repeating a selection of Bruner's best known theses. A critical reception in the meaning of testing, challenging, and further processing of Bruner's thought has remained rather sporadic. Perhaps Bruner looms too large to actually be seen. His theory of folk psychology and the elements of canonicity and breach (1991, 11) in his narrative theory constitute a major exception to this tendency, they being extensively discussed by David Herman (2002, 2009, 2013) and Daniel D. Hutto (2004, 2007, 2008). Bruner's theory of canonicity and breach arguably constitutes a major theoretical contribution to the understanding of the pragmatics of everyday storytelling. As an intervention into this dialogue, I take Bruner's principal idea under closer scrutiny, and claim that it potentially contains an unsolved contradiction<sup>1</sup>.

I begin with a short summary of Bruner's idea of folk psychology, canonicity, and breach. For reasons of comparison, I extend my discussion into another major theoretical contribution of the 1990s, namely Monika Fludernik's (1996) model of narrativity. Then I further elaborate Bruner's theory about expectations and canonicity with the help of a German historian of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*), Reinhart Koselleck (2004), and his theory of expectation and experience. Julian Barnes (2013) and Primo Levi (1996) provide the prime text examples for the reflection of the role of expectations. Finally, I discuss a number of narrative modes – hypothetical narrative, habitual narrative (Riessman 1990), and prospective narrative (Georgakopoulou 2007) – that obviously depart from the narrative pragmatics suggested by Bruner's model.

Bruner's proposal

Right at the beginning of his *Acts of Meaning* (1990; hereafter AM), Bruner voices his deep disappointment with the development of the Cognitive Revolution, which was “intended to bring ‘mind’ back to the human sciences after a long winter of objectivism” (AM: 1). Bruner’s intention, I think, is less to articulate a full-blown confrontation with the cognitivist theory as such than to recover some of the original ideas of the Cognitive Revolution. Be that as it may, already in 1990, Bruner criticized the cognitivist approach that a decade later constituted one of the major trends in literary theory in the form of cognitive narratology (see, e.g., Fludernik 1996; Herman 2003; Jahn 2005; Palmer 2004; Zunshine 2006). From the very beginning, Bruner introduced his idea of folk psychology “as an instrument of culture,” not as an individual-cum-cognitivist capacity for mind reading. For this reason, as Bruner says, “culture is also constitutive of mind. By virtue of this actualization of culture, meaning achieves a form that is public and communal rather than private and autistic” (AM: 33). Because of his cultural emphasis, Bruner does not privilege any narrowly psychological version of folk psychology; instead, for him, folk social science and common sense would have been equally acceptable terms. By folk psychology, he denotes “a system by which people organize their experience in, knowledge about, and transactions with the social world” (35). Indeed, the instrument is cultural in the sense that the organization of experience takes place more or less interactionally.

FP was defined as an instrument of culture, yet Bruner proceeds to consider “what kind of a cognitive system is a folk psychology” (AM: 35). Obviously, we might be entitled to characterize it as a system of cultural cognition. Bruner’s answer offers in a concise form most of his key concepts: “Since its [FP’s] *organizing principle is narrative* rather than conceptual, I shall have to consider the nature of narrative and how it is built around established or canonical expectations and the mental management of deviations from such expectations” (35, italics added). Here we already have narrative, canonical expectations, and the deviations from expectations as basic elements of folk psychology. Even though Bruner uses the term “theory of mind,” in passing and with small letters, his previous formulation effectively claims that folk psychology does not rest on theoretical, conceptual knowledge but is rather narratively organized. I agree with the first part of this argument (that folk psychology does not rest on theoretical understanding), yet I suspect that the latter part runs the risk of overextending the conceptual range of narrative. I will return to the issue a bit later.

Because folk psychology is based on culture, it also evolves historically, altering “with the culture’s changing responses to the world and to the people in it” (AM: 14). Bruner suggests that it “is worth asking how the views of such intellectual heroes as Darwin, Marx, and Freud

gradually became transformed and absorbed into the folk psychology.” In this sense, he uses cultural psychology and cultural history as virtually interchangeable terms (14). The linguist Charlotte Linde (1993: 163–191) has termed such recognizable loans from the cultural history in life stories as “coherence systems,” arguing that they are located between common sense and what she calls “expert systems.” To some extent, the nature of Bruner’s FP remains ambiguous because his choice of terms in claiming that FP “... is a culture’s account of what makes human beings tick. It includes a *theory of mind*, one’s and others’, a *theory of motivation*, and the rest” (AM: 13, italics added), as if the understanding of minds might after all be a theoretical and conceptual endeavour. However, Bruner does not renounce his distinction between “paradigmatic” and “narrative” spheres of knowledge. Folk psychological understanding, including this figurative theory of mind, still belongs to the side of narrative knowledge, and in that sense does not contain ‘theories’ in the strict meaning of the term.

Bruner employs the concepts of “belief” and “desire,” only to connect them immediately to the larger cultural fabric. He suggests that these “beliefs and desires become sufficiently coherent and well organized as to merit being called ‘commitment’ or ‘ways of life,’ and such coherences are seen as ‘dispositions’ that characterize persons: loyal wife, devoted father, faithful friend” (39). Generic characters thus seem to provide important meeting points for cultural expectations and individual life stories.

Folk psychology, therefore, is not merely or primarily a descriptive but a thoroughly *normative* and *canonical* system of knowledge. Before his *Acts of Meaning*, Bruner had explored, together with Joan Lucariello, how the 22–33-month-old Emily Otter started as a storyteller at first by strictly confining herself to telling what is regular, appropriate, and expected in her immediate world (Bruner & Lucariello 2006). What Emily accomplishes, the authors maintain, “can almost be called a triumph of ordinariness, a kind of routinization in story” (96). One of Emily’s most memorable monologues recounts the course of a whole day, yet according to her mother, “no particular Friday, but rather some appropriate day, one in which events dovetail predictability, appropriately, with proper affect and action...” (91).

The joint article conveys the significance of canonicity in Emily’s advance as a language user in a commanding way. It documents how Emily invests heavily in learning and composing the canonical course of events, the normal sequences of events, how things should happen in her world. Katherine Nelson further particularizes that children usually learn how to tell about the *exceptions* of canonicity only from the age of 5 or 6 onwards (Nelson 2003: 28). However, there

is no reason to believe that the folk psychological task of getting to know the ordinary would then be over, quite the contrary. This study arguably has a crucial role in the development of Bruner's argument on canonicity and breach, by demonstrating that canonicity is not merely a hypothetical abstraction or suggested image in the background of narrative, but indeed something very tangible and observable that small children are eager to learn and to have a practical command of, in order to be competent agents and tellers.

Bruner seems to build strategic *tension* between narrative and folk psychology in his formula about canonicity and breach, because, according to his famous formulation, "it is only when constituent beliefs in a folk psychology are violated that narratives are constructed" (AM: 39). Moreover, if a person radically departs from the prevailing folk psychological expectations, his or her behaviour would even be judged "folk-psychologically insane," unless he or she can articulate an adequate corrective narrative. From this perspective narratives accomplish a crucial task within the system of folk psychology, for they are "purpose-built for rendering the exceptional and the unusual into comprehensive form" (47). Folk psychology cannot only claim the canonical, it also needs to contain the mechanisms for dealing with the exceptions. For Bruner, the primary moderating mechanism is the narrative, and he maintains that the "function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern" (49–50). Narrative as a mode or capacity is thus included in canonicity, in the sense that every proper narrative has to deviate from it.

Bruner does not explicitly elaborate folk psychology as any kind of generalized or abstracted capacity of mind reading, at least in the sense that many cognitive narratologists and cognitive theorists later argued (Palmer 2004; Zunshine 2006). For Bruner, people mostly understand each other because of the shared common sense and canonical expectations. Elsewhere, I have argued that the difference between the perspectives of folk psychological understanding and mind reading may be radical (Hyvärinen 2015). Equally, the primary consequence of a violation of expectations is not a sudden surge of mind reading but the need to tell and hear folk psychological, corrective narratives. If so, Bruner contends, we need to "consider the nature of narrative" (AM: 35). At this juncture, I suspend discussion of Bruner for now in order to consider the nature of narrative, albeit at the moment in the company of Monika Fludernik's theory of narrativity. Bruner and Fludernik share a particular interest in the phenomena of mind. Moreover, Fludernik's theory embraces experientiality and the role of oral narration, thus making her theory a particularly interesting counterpart to Bruner.

## Narrative and experientiality

Fludernik's major work *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996) has an interesting place within the history of narratology. Fludernik draws heavily from cognitive theory, primarily from cognitive linguistics and frame theory, yet she affords no discussion about folk psychology or about the later popular mind reading. She builds equally on the traditions of sociolinguistics and narratology, foregrounding the relevance of everyday storytelling for the narrative theory, yet, without any explicit references to Bruner's work. For a number of reasons, including her move further away from the Saussurean theory of language, Fludernik's work is one of the milestones in the road from structuralism to what was later termed as "postclassical narratology" (Herman 1999; Alber & Fludernik 2010).

Right at the beginning of her work, Fludernik writes:

Unlike the traditional models of narratology, narrativity [...] is here constituted by what I call experientiality, namely by the quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real-life experience'. Experientiality can be aligned with actantial frames, but it also correlates with the evocation of consciousness or with the representation of a speaker role. (Fludernik 1996, 12–13)

At this point, there seems to be no major disagreement with Bruner, who in turn has emphasized the relevance of two different "landscapes of narrative," namely the "landscape of action" and the "landscape of consciousness" (Bruner 1986: 20–21). The latter one can now, for the time being, be re-described as "experientiality." A few sentences later, however, the clash of positions becomes evident:

Where the current proposal supersedes this setup is in *the redefinition of narrativity qua experientiality* without the necessity of any actantial groundwork. In my model there can therefore be *narratives without plot*, but there cannot be any narratives without a human (anthropomorphic) experiencer of some sort at some narrative level. (Fludernik 1996: 13, italics added).

More than once, Fludernik emphatically criticizes the presumed relevance of sequentiality, as well as the Proppian actantial models. She asserts that her "radical elimination of plot" is "based

on the results of research into oral narrative” (13), yet this is the first obvious point of disagreement with Bruner, who in turn characterizes narrative in the spirit of structuralism as follows:

Perhaps [narrative’s] principal property is its inherent sequentiality, a narrative is composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors. These are its constituents. [...] [These constituents’] meaning is given by their place in the overall configuration of the sequence as a whole – its plot or *fabula*. (AM, 43)

Drawing from the studies into oral narration, the literary theorist Fludernik is ready to renounce the constitutive role of sequentiality and plot,<sup>2</sup> while the psychologists Bruner, drawing from the models of Vladimir Propp (1968) and William Labov (1972), among others, elevates sequentiality as the most fundamental structural property of narrative. Interestingly, Bruner’s choice of terms is not the more abstract, complex, and flexible concept of “temporality,” suggested earlier by Paul Ricoeur (1981), but instead the formalist and straightforward sequentiality<sup>3</sup> (see Hyvärinen et al. 2010). It is clear that Bruner’s orientation here is towards rather big, finished, coherent, and individually completed stories, in contrast to the many conversational, shared and unfinished stories that Fludernik’s proposal makes easier to understand (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2008).

As much as Bruner (1990) revised our pragmatic and *functional* understanding of narrative, his *structural* description of narrative nevertheless remains within the confines of sequentiality.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes he even seems to betray his major argument with his commitment to narrative formalism. After claiming, convincingly, that narrative is one of the most ubiquitous “discourse forms in human communication,” he proceeds to a more daring claim: “Narrative structure is even inherent in the praxis of social interaction before it achieves linguistic expression” (77).<sup>5</sup> At the minimum, this claim is perplexingly obscure, and in the worst case might be understood to represent the “narrative imperialism,” of extending narrative’s range of reference beyond acceptable limits (Phelan 2005).<sup>6</sup> What narrative structure, in which sense, and how in “in the praxis of social interaction”? In arguing for the huge cultural relevance of narrative, Bruner fosters an occasional wish to embed narrative deeper and deeper into human action and mind, thereby jeopardizing the analytic clarity and power of the concept. To specify my argument, I will next elaborate the complications these kind of structural claims pose for his functional argument.

Let me repeat the argument. At first, Bruner pronounces, “Folk psychology is invested in canonicity. It focuses upon the expectable and/or the usual in the human condition” (AM: 47). Next he powerfully argues that “it is only when constituent beliefs in folk psychology are violated that narratives are constructed” (39). Narratives, therefore, specialize “in the forging of links between the exceptional and the ordinary” (47). It seems to me that these vital *functional* claims never properly connect with Bruner’s conception of the structures of narrative. Narratives, on the one hand, are *commentary* on deviations from the canonicity; this canonicity, on the other hand, is always already organized or structured like narrative (35). For sure, sequentiality can credibly characterize the sphere of folk psychological canonicity, and may well be fitted together with the course of expected, generic social interaction. But narratives – in order to be able to expiate and moderate the consequences of the deviations from the expected – need to draw equally from the canonical, the exceptional, and the moment of disturbance. As in terms of Labov’s (1972) theory of oral narrative, a proper narrative includes the structural element of “complicating action,” which can exist on the level of canonicity only in a potential form, as a category of something that may sometimes happen. In consequence, these forms of knowledge cannot exactly be similarly organized, unless we totally downplay the relevance of the breach and the surprise. Bruner’s functional opening with canonicity and breach thus does not fit non-problematically with his trust in formalism.

As a way out, I have three preliminary proposals. According to my first and possibly most radical proposal, the concept of “narrative structure,” as a collective singular, should be seen as an entirely redundant idea. Historically, the idea of a singular narrative structure belongs to structuralist narratology, and in the search for narrative grammar. We can investigate different narratives, narrative modes, and genres from the perspective of structure, yet my claim is that there is no real equivalent for the abstracted and universalized term narrative structure.<sup>7</sup> There is no such structure informing, framing, and structuring all kinds of narratives. To speculate about it primarily constitutes a category mistake. As I wrote above, Bruner uses the term without giving much more content to it than the idea of sequentiality.

Secondly, I suggest revising the claim that folk psychology’s “organizing principle” is narrative. Rather than relying here on the global opposition between narrative and conceptual forms of knowledge, I prefer David Herman’s (2002) strategy to characterize the canonical layer of knowledge in terms of cultural scripts. Scripts indeed have the sequential event structure but without the singularity of events, the surprise, or the breach of canonicity. Rephrasing Bruner’s idea, Herman indeed claims that narratives need to use scripts as well as to depart from them.

Herman's terminology would clearly save Bruner's theory from some of its internal contradictions.

As a more specific attempt at addressing the issue of narrative structure, thirdly, I suggest a consideration of Labov's formal model (Labov & Waletzky 1967; Labov 1972). According to the model, *oral* narratives (note the restriction) would have the following parts: 1. Abstract, 2. Orientation, 3. Complicating action, 4. Evaluation, 5. Result or resolution, 6. Coda (Labov 1972: 363). This structural model, however, immediately encounters serious difficulties. For one thing, scholars have argued for a long time, and convincingly, that there are oral narratives, which do not fit in with this generalized model (e.g., Hymes 1996: 192–199). Martin and Rose (2008), for example, suggest such narrative modes as recount, anecdote, exemplum, and observation, which are structured in a different way. Ochs and Capps (2001) find more open structures from the conversational narratives. It is very hard to distil a shared and informative "structure" from this variety of stories, a structure that could equally cover the experimental fiction as well. Secondly, it is clear that any of these structural versions cannot be equalled with the course of social interaction, or found relevant in characterizing the folk psychological form of knowledge. Moreover, Emanuel Schegloff specifically criticizes Labov's model for forgetting the interactional setting, and assuming that the teller recounts the story in an isolated, non-interactive setting. Schegloff accentuates that ordinary storytelling is "a coconstruction, an interactional achievement, a joint production, a collaboration, and so on" (Schegloff 1997: 97). The real task, for him, consists in positing the storytelling within the frame of interaction and considering the narrative structures only within this context, not in transposing a presumed narrative structure into the interaction. This third alternative, equally, leads to the recommendation to renounce the idea of narrative structure.

### Experience and expectations

At this point, however, it is a good time to consider Fludernik's idea of experientiality from the perspective of Bruner's functional model. Are we able to find something that Bruner could teach Fludernik? Fludernik attaches her concept of experientiality closely to the idea of human embodiedness, arguing that "narratives of spontaneous conversational storytelling," maybe the oral stories in general, "cognitively correlate perceptual parameters of human experience" (1996: 12). Human experience provides the starting point of the whole argument, and this experiencing in turn is moderated by the "perceptual parameters" of embodied human experience. At first



glance, this kind of experientiality appears to be rather individual and embedded within the confines of a singular body. Experiencing, however, is not just about the immediate perception but is deeply embedded within the fabric of social action. As Fludernik later argues, “[h]uman experience typically embraces goal-oriented behaviour and activity, with its reaction to obstacles encountered on the way” (29). This can reasonably be reconciled with Bruner’s ideas of canonicity and breach, and his discussion on the Burkean Pentad (AM: 50). She further argues that all “experience is therefore stored as emotionally charged remembrance, and it is reproduced in narrative form because it was memorable, funny, scary, or exciting” (1996: 29). But why is something memorable, funny or scary (and, therefore, worth telling as complicating action as in Labov’s model)?

Fludernik’s experiencing is directly connected to embodiedness, and the body seems to be the source of the “cognitive parameters” that “can be regarded as ‘natural’” (1996: 12). Through this naturalization of the parameters, experiencing itself becomes increasingly ‘natural,’ and for this reason, possibly, does not invite further theoretical consideration. In what follows, my purpose is to challenge the cognitive naturalness of experientiality, firstly with the ideas of the feminist philosopher Joan Scott (1998), secondly with the ideas of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck (2004). Scott problematizes the rise of experience as a “foundational category” in recent feminist thought and historiography. She emphasizes the constructed nature of experience, encapsulating her argument in an elegant sentence: “Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* in need of interpretation” (69). Her methodological advice after the rejection of the foundational role of experience is far-reaching, since for her, experience is “not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain” (69). Indeed, should or could we have intellectual tools for considering why we have such and such experiences?

Reinhart Koselleck’s theoretical discussion on the “existential pair” of experience and expectation becomes utterly relevant at this point (Koselleck 2004: 255–275). I readily admit that Koselleck writes as a historian, not as a narratologist of any kind. He also writes about history, portraying experience and expectation as “historical categories,” not about narration as such. Yet I find his main argument, proposing that expectation and experience are basic *existential categories* in orienting human action and categories that necessarily require each other, quite compelling and informative for narrative thought and the further elaboration of experientiality.

Koselleck is known for his studies into asymmetric conceptual pairs, such as Christians and heathens, or *Mensch* and *Unmensch* (2004: 155–191). Expectation and experience, however, do not belong to such exclusive pairs of historical counter-concepts, rather, they “indicate dissimilar modes of existence” (261). Koselleck specifies that the categories of expectation and experience are “merely formal,” in comparison with such pairs of historical studies as war and peace or work and leisure. However, he claims that “[e]vidently, the categories of ‘experience’ and ‘expectation’ claim a higher, and perhaps the highest, degree of generality, but they also claim an indispensable application. Here they resemble, as historical categories, those of time and space” (257). Arguably, time and space are equally indispensable aspects of narrative, categories that characteristically are differently charged in different narratives, yet necessitating the existence of the counter-part of the pair. A historian can easily focus, or practically delimit, his or her particular study on “war” or “leisure,” and ignore the other side of the pair for the time being, whereas experience and expectation remain necessary aspects of any theoretically charged historical account: “No expectation without experience, no experience without expectation” (257).

These are commanding claims if found relevant in narrative theory. Paul Ricoeur, in *Oneself as Another* (1992: 161–163),<sup>8</sup> is one of the first to make this connection. Ricoeur ponders literary narratives’ capacity to represent one’s self and identity. One of his counter-arguments is based on Koselleck. If literary narrative can only recount the past, how can it express adequately the human existential situation, which equally includes the Koselleckian expectations. For Ricoeur, the past of literary narrative is only relative, and in narratives “we find projects, expectations, and anticipations by means of which the protagonists in the narrative are oriented toward their moral future” (163). In other words, in Ricoeur’s thought, expectations always color the literary narrative. “In other words,” Ricoeur continues, “the narrative also recounts care. In a sense, it only recounts care.” In what follows, I intend to study more closely, how the horizon of expectation works in shaping literary and everyday narratives, and which kind of content one might attribute to Ricoeur’s bold claim that narrative “only recounts care.”

Koselleck suggested to set the terms expectation and experience on a more abstract existential and theoretical level than the practice of historiography would normally accommodate. As he clarifies, “these two categories are indicative of the *general human condition*; one could say that they indicate an anthropological condition without which history is neither possible nor conceivable” (257, italics added). Coming even nearer to the language of narrative theory,

Koselleck continues:

Hope and memory, or expressed more generally, expectations and experience – for expectation comprehends more than hope, and experience goes deeper than memory – simultaneously constitute history and its cognition. They do so by demonstrating and producing the inner relations between past and future or yesterday, today, or tomorrow. (Koselleck 2004: 258)

The passage could perfectly and informatively characterize the inner dialectics of much of the autobiographical narration, and be acutely sensitive as regards such prose as W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (Sebald 2001). Koselleck further redefines experience as “present past,” and expectation as “future made present” (2004: 259). This refiguring of temporal relationships intimately resonates with Ricoeur's (1981, 1984) reflections on narrative time, in particular his discussion on Augustine's understanding of time as an “extension of mind” (1984: 16–30). Ricoeur (2004: 296) explicitly notices “the homologous constitution linking the categories of historical time in Koselleck and those of internal time in Augustine's *Confessions*.” Hope and memory take indeed place within the mind, and do not entail any objective existence of past and future. Koselleck proceeds to talk metaphorically about the “space of experience” and “horizon of expectation.” Almost as if directly commenting upon the discussions about narrative sequentiality, he writes how

Chronologically, all experience *leaps over time*; experience *does not create continuity* in the sense of an additive preparation of the past. To borrow an image from Christian Meier, it is like the glass front of a washing machine, behind which various bits of the wash appear now and then, but are all contained within the drum. (2004, 260, italics added)

Of course, Koselleck still writes above as a historian. As applied to human lives, the metaphor of a washing machine is almost shocking – as it is tempting. It suggests nothing less than that experience is not – normally, standardly, automatically, always, you can pick your term – as such sequentially organized. Julian Barnes (2011: 3) works with such an idea in the beginning of his novel *The Sense of an Ending*:

I remember, in no particular order:  
- a shiny inner wrist;

- steam rising from a wet sink as a hot frying pan is laughingly tossed into it...

followed by four similar images without any obvious chronology. The sequential organization of memory is possibly best understood as an achievement, more specifically, as a narrative achievement. To further illustrate the relevance of expectations to memory, I turn to some perplexing autobiographical memories from Barnes (2013).

### Missing memory and expectations

In the third part of his recent book *Levels of life*, Julian Barnes gives an autobiographical account about the time of the death of his spouse Pat Kavanagh and his own brittle recovery and working-through afterwards. Barnes had met Kavanagh forty years ago and had been married to her since 1979. According to the account, the marriage was both long and intensive, Barnes and Kavanagh being the best friends and active in versatile cultural as well as hiking activities. In 2008, only 37 days after the diagnosis of a brain tumor, Kavanagh died. In the aftermath of her death, Barnes suffered from a mysterious loss of memory, or rather of a strangely selective memory. On the one hand, he says,

... I remember, sharply, last things. The last book she read. The last play (and film, and concert, and opera, and art exhibition) that we went to together. The last wine she drank, the last clothes she bought. The last weekend away. The last bed we slept in that wasn't ours. The last this, the last that. (Barnes 2013: 98–99)

In contrast to this burning exactness of his memory and capacity to recollect the minute details of her last moments, there was a gap, most parts of their joint past preceding the January diagnosis missing:

I remember every detail of her decline, her time in hospital, return home, dying, burial. But I cannot get back beyond that January; my memory seems burnt away...  
And so it feels as if she is slipping away from me a second time: first I lose her in the present, then I lose her in the past. (97–98)

As always, there are several possible avenues for accounting of this kind of memory loss. One could refer to a shock or traumatic experiences. However, it is precisely the traumatic part that

Barnes is able to remember in every painful detail. Barnes was even profoundly irritated by those friends who avoided speaking about Kavanagh and their joint past, possibly as a gesture of subtlety, because he himself was not able to remember it and desperately sought out a social corroboration of the existence of this past.

This loss of memory may at first seem to contradict Bruner's theory on canonicity and breach. The death of one's spouse, if anything, should shatter the canonicity and give a perfect reason for a full narrative account. Of course, Barnes' book itself eventually fulfils these terms perfectly, yet it was published only six years after Kavanagh's death, and also after the publication of *The Sense of an Ending*. How could Bruner and Koselleck help us to understand this disconcerting memory loss?

A possible way to proceed from the dilemma of trauma is to ask what is it, exactly, that makes the preceding time so unbearable to remember. Following Koselleck, one might think about the tremendous breach of the whole horizon of expectation that Barnes had to face. Within the previous horizon, there were joint hiking expeditions to expect, concerts and plays to attend together, daily discussions on experiences and the intricacies of work, indeed, the whole social ethics of life to share. After the diagnosis, practically nothing of this was left while the horizon was dominated by the approaching death, mourning, and living in the future without Kavanagh and the palette of sharing. Living through the harsh time ahead with its necessary practicalities was not bearable if being able and forced to compare between the old and new horizons; thus the selective oblivion. Something similar is suggested by Michael Pickering (2004: 279) in a comment on Koselleck, saying that "you may be without the time needed to modify, with any reasonable adequacy, the framework that links experience and expectation." Quite convincingly, this indeed was Barnes's dilemma. Barnes's amnesia not only accentuates the relevance of the "horizon of expectation" in the study of human lives, it also hints at a potential narrowness in Bruner's theory of canonicity, a point I will elaborate in the next section.

#### Canonicity and the horizon of expectation

For Bruner, canonicity with all the embedded expectations is exclusively based on the accumulated cultural experience. This is not the case with Koselleck in his historical theory, who in fact argues that one distinctive feature of modernity is the growing distance between the "space of experience" and "the horizon of expectations." The media researcher Michael

Pickering (2004: 272) notices that the metaphor of the horizon “is the supreme locus of promise and possibility. It stands for the potential to transcend our present limits...” Pickering’s primary interest is focused on the societal and cultural level, nevertheless he appositely foregrounds the “exhilaration” embedded in the seaside vision of the vast, open horizon. Expectations, thus, can embrace many more dynamic aspects than the partly overlapping concept of canonicity. Expectations and canonicity thus create partly different backgrounds and motivations for narration. Bruner, when he refers to the role of Marx, Darwin, and Freud, seems in fact to be alluding to this other aspect of expectations.

In contrast to this general vision of modernity, there are still antithetical contexts that allow only for the most compelling canonicity, narrowing down the horizon of expectation to the utter minimum. Primo Levi’s (1996) account of Auschwitz Monowitz provides a number of sharp observations about the danger of expectations. “I already know the Lager well enough to realize that one should never anticipate, especially optimistically” (107), “Do you know how one says ‘never’ in camp slang? ‘*Morgen früh,*’ tomorrow morning” (133) and, finally, in a more explicit and refined form:

In the Lager it is useless to think, because events happen for the most part in an unforeseeable manner; and it is harmful, because it keeps alive a sensitivity which is a source of pain, and which some providential natural law dulls when suffering passes a certain limit. (Levi 1996: 171)

Levi obviously depicts the hazard of thinking anything outside the immediate camp routine. The distance between “now” and “possibly someday somewhere” was too enormous to cross, meaning that the mere thinking about the future could crush the prisoner mentally. It was dangerous to have expectations attached to normal life, because these images of normal life could render the current experiences utterly unbearable.

I conclude this section by proposing that expectations, be they canonical or drawn from the wider horizon of expectation, obviously play a central role in the way experiences are gained, reflected, and remembered. The study of narratives, therefore, cannot confine itself to the “landscape of action,” nor is the aspect of experientiality, eventually, enough to cover the whole range of Bruner’s “landscape of consciousness.” In a profound sense, narrative analysis must always visit the aspect of expectations, and answer questions concerning the relationships

between narrative, experience, and expectations.

### Non-prototypical narrative modes

The preceding argument has mostly concerned the dialectics of canonicity, expectations, and experientiality in the case of prototypical (Herman 2009), folk psychological (Hutto 2008), or good narratives (Bruner 1990: 52–55); that is, without addressing more broadly other categories of conversational narrative. Next I will turn my attention to some narrative modes that reside further away from this prototypical center of everyday narratives. In principle, I am not entirely sure how radically fictional narratives escape this set of pragmatics, at least if we accept that the “expectations” can equally be betrayed on the level of discourse. Thus, for example, a deliberately boring story builds its breach of canonicity on the level of narrative discourse. Canonical telling, of course, is itself one version of canonical action. The much discussed unnatural narratives, per definition, seem to specialize in breaking all kinds of expectations about events, minds, and ways of telling (see Alber, Nielsen & Richardson 2013). Yet, as Bruner has it, the prototypical narratives specialize “in the forging of links between the exceptional and the ordinary” (AM: 47). Fiction, including the unnatural narratives, quite obviously draws from this everyday pragmatics, use it as a resource but equally suspends the everyday wish for forging links between the exceptional and the ordinary. Fiction is able and often determined to leave the strange to stay, without connecting it safely to the ordinary, in ways that are not preferred in most everyday genres. However, these differences in pragmatic functions are not clear-cut and categorical. There is fiction, and not bad fiction, which more or less clearly follows the Brunerian pragmatics. At least one thing is certain, namely that the balance between the strange and the ordinary varies dramatically between different genres.

As mentioned above, there are conversational narrative modes that depart from the prototypical model in important ways, as do their functions. More specifically, narrative scholars have identified different exceptions to the Labovian (1972) oral story.<sup>9</sup> Catherine Kohler Riessman (1990) introduces two such modes, “habitual narrative” and “hypothetical narrative.” Riessman gives the following example of habitual narrative by a divorced woman:

And we stopped talking early on in our marriage really. And he spent more and more time at work, he didn't want to come home. He'd come home and then [!] I would say, “I'd like you to spend a little time with the kids.” He'd just want go up and read a book, kind of

thing. We just didn't communicate really. (76)

This narrative section does not exhibit any particular course of events. Habitual narratives rather endeavor to render a description of something that has continued over a period of time. Gérard Genette (1980: 116) calls this narrative mode *iterative*; “narrating one time (or rather: at one time) what happened n times” (italics removed). For a good reason, the passage could even be called *pseudo-iterative*, because in the middle of the recurring processes there is a specific verbal utterance that has unlikely been repeated over and over in the very same form. The first sentence provides a verbal process that is finished, though possibly slowly, as they “stopped talking.” After that, the passage mostly contains repetition and a continuous state of affairs.<sup>10</sup>

Such sections of habitual narration do not typically offer one clear point of breaking canonicity (in this example, the first sentence may be understood to sanction such a breach). The purpose is rather to posit a continuous state of affairs for evaluation; here, to say that his mental absence is a deviation from the canonicity of marital life. Looking from another perspective, such passages may likewise be conceived as descriptions of an emerging sub-canonicity. If we forget the title of Riessman's book (*Divorce talk*) for a while, we might be able to imagine an enduring state of mutual silence as a new local canonicity. Having first established such a sub-canonicity, a husband walking home and suddenly wanting to talk and participate intensively in the family life would constitute a breach of the new canonicity of silence. At any rate, the passage exhibits not a neutral record of a marriage, everything that is said is related to expectations and draws its meaning in relation to these expectations.

What then about Reissman's “hypothetical” narrative? This term too has a parallel term in literary theory, namely Gary Saul Morson's (1994) “side-shadowing.” When asked to tell about their life and experiences, ordinary narrators frequently resort to hypothetical telling, that is, telling abundantly about what might have happened, even though it did not. In these cases, the relationship between canonicity and breach differs again from the standard Labovian story. I have taken my example from Sonja Miettinen's (2006) research into daughters' narratives about the death of their mothers. In the following passage one of the daughters, “Silja,” accounts for the death of her father:

1. For me, for example, one of the most important things
2. in my sorrow was



3. that I went to the hospital and
4. I was left in total peace there;
5. nothing like, now comes the priest,
6. and now comes a person from the funeral parlour,
7. or now comes somebody, or comes the doctor or comes the autopsy.
8. I was left in total peace; I was there with
9. my husband, saying goodbye to my father [starts crying]. (138, my translation)

This highly emotional passage of Silja's story would have been a rather sparse account of visiting her dead father had she not incorporated the lines 5–7, as a hypothetical but not at all realized course of events. These sentences, all in negative form, tellingly focus on the expected, as if elevating a presumed canonicity as a threat to the intimacy of bidding farewell to her father. Regardless of the actual rate of canonicity, these sentences densely convey Silja's troubled expectations before meeting her dead father. What she performs, in fact, is to construe and intensify the whole narrativity of the episode, not by telling what happened, but by framing the event with the distressing expectations. By first building the hypothetical canonicity, she is also able to breach it.

The thorniest alternative, and truly far away from the prototypical center, may be the “future narratives,” suggested by Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2007). Obviously, very few of those who are jointly telling their shared futures would be tempted to inscribe dramatic, unnatural or subjunctive deviations from the appropriate or canonical way of life. In other words, dramatic crises, ruptures, or disturbances are hardly incorporated. As Georgakopoulou says, such stories of “(near) future events (sic projections) are by far the most common type of storytelling in the group's conversations and frequent in the email data too. The taleworld of such projected events, in the same vein as in stories of past events, is *temporally ordered and emplotted* yet they are clearly...neglected and marginalized narrative types...” (47, italics added).

Georgakopoulou convincingly demonstrates the relevance and prevalence of this mode of talk-in-discourse. Yet it is partly a different question – and here I think the jury is still out – as to what are the benefits of investigating this kind of future talk *qua* narratives. In the quote above, the decisive criterion seems to be the sequential order of events. As I suggested earlier, the whole knowledge form of canonicity can be understood as scripts, that is, as routinized sequences of events. All kinds of planning is equally characterized by sequential structure. One way to conceptualize this category of talk might be to understand it as a mixture of storytelling and planning, as a mode at the (further) limits of narrativity. These prospective narratives hardly

suggest any breaches of canonicity or failures of expectations. In contrast, the whole interest seems to be focused on creating a horizon of expectation, and control over the risk of breaches. Perhaps it would not be too far-fetched to talk about the domestication of the future. The economy of expectations, at any rate, differs radically from the prototypical narratives. Prospective narratives seem to be active in creating, consolidating, and sharing new expectations rather than coping with the failures.

In conclusion, Bruner's theory on canonicity and breach offers conceptual tools to make functional distinctions between prototypical and less-than-prototypical modes of narrative. Moreover, it systematically emphasizes the profoundly social, interactional, and constructive function of storytelling. Literary theorists sometimes tend to think that the function of conversational narratives would primarily be informative, in contrast to the aesthetic purposes of fiction (e.g., Andersson 2015). On my reading, the Brunerian narratives are primarily interpersonal and social *comments* as opposed to any information *per se*. This is reflected by the fact that even though narratives draw from canonicity and expectations, the canonicity is very seldom described in any detailed way, and not nearly in the way experimental fiction often endeavors to do. The researcher who asks his or her interviewee to "tell" about the typical course of a working day, or "everything that happened yesterday," will most likely receive a rather dull chronicle lacking in evaluation, a breach of expectations, or surprises, not a narrative.

The purpose of this article has been to accentuate the relevance of Jerome Bruner's theory of canonicity and breach. This relevance, however, is highlighted by way of the useful revisions that the work of Monika Fludernik (1996) and Reinhart Koselleck (2004) suggest. Instead of an inclusive focus on experientiality, Bruner's and Koselleck's work equally direct attention towards the dialectics between experience and the horizon of expectation.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Plot’ is not a concept Bruner discusses thoroughly. Instead he assumes a rather straightforward conception of plot as a combination of sequence and whole. Paul Ricoeur (1984), for example, understands plot as a much more complex and nuanced concept.

<sup>3</sup> Considering the intensity whereby Bruner emphasizes the narrative sequentiality and the fullness of plot, his position, and the position of the whole narrative turn for that matter, as regards the structuralist and/or hermeneutic traditions may be more ambivalent and contradictory than Brockmeier and Meretoja (2014: 4,10) have recently suggested.

<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur (1981) already comprises a highly critical discussion on Propp and temporality. He quite compellingly demonstrates how poorly the strict models of sequentiality capture the temporality of the wonder tales, not to mention the more complex contemporary autobiographies. Bruner (1991) later celebrated the volume wherein Ricoeur’s article was published (Mitchell 1981), yet he never seemed to fully accept Ricoeur’s criticism of sequentiality.

<sup>5</sup> Note here the difference with Ricoeur (1984: 54–56) and his discussion on the “semantics of action” in *Mimesis I*. Ricoeur suggests a *semantic* connection between the pragmatic understanding of action and the capacity to narrate. According to Fludernik (1996: 22–23), Ricoeur’s *Mimesis I* “corresponds to the action-oriented parameters of frame theory.”

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<sup>6</sup> Carr (1986) is a telling and cautionary example of the problematic consequences of transferring narrative from communication to the sphere of action. Firstly, he boils the narrative structure down to the Aristotelian triad of beginning, middle, and end, and then finds this rather trivialized structure everywhere (see Hyvärinen 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Georgakopoulou (2007: 8) makes a similar point: “What this means for the study of narrative is that instead of treating it as a supra-genre with fixed structural characteristics (i.e., invariant and inflexible structural units), emphasis is placed on narrative structures as dynamic and evolving responses to recurring rhetorical situations...”

<sup>8</sup> In his *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), Ricoeur holds a more sustained and nuanced discussion on Koselleck and his role in reshaping the understanding of historiography.

<sup>9</sup> Labov (1972) is highly relevant here, because his discussion on narrative evaluation, in particular the necessity of the “point” of the story, is of course one of the key influences behind Bruner’s theory of canonicity and breach.

<sup>10</sup> Herman (2002: 27–51) offers a comprehensive and useful discussion on the varying time frames of different verbal processes and states.