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On The Road
An Event, a Narrative, a Correlation, a Practice

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The popular reception of Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel, The Road, has been coloured by recollections of the aerial attack upon the cities of New York and Washington in September 2001. Even a cursory glance finds leading reviewers such as Alan Warner (2006) acclimating that its apocalyptic resonance befits the times. Unproblematically, it seems, all basically agree that it is set, temporally and spatially, approximately a decade after an imagined yet unspecified calamitous event in North America, focusing upon a dying father’s efforts to ensure the relative safety of his son as...
they traverse a moribund wasteland of débris and marauding survivors. None expressed any difficulty identifying the occurrence of a cataclysmic event and its aftermath as imaginatively conveyed in the context of McCarthy’s fictional narrative.

Beneath the apparently straightforward equation of narrated events with experienced events lies an unquestioned assumption. Bluntly stated, there is a basic presumption that fictional narrative renditions of perception and experience of events are inherently and textually encoded, thereby signalling our diurnal perceptions and experiences of events. Consequently, we, as readers, recognise that our fundamental task is one of decoding or discovering the rules or conventions intrinsic to narrative. The over-arching argument of this essay is that those upholding this view of how narrative embeds experience—a view we shall call the correlative hypothesis—have seriously misconstrued the relationship.

To demonstrate the failings of the correlative hypothesis, we shall begin with the question: What perspective applies to events in written fictional narratives such as The Road? That, in turn, allows us to compare Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s influential attempt to portray our experiential encounter with events by way of his phenomenological account which assigns primacy to perception. Because Merleau-Ponty’s notion of event intersects with that of time, the next section of our essay will briefly subject this conceptual intersection to a series of questions in order to pinpoint the ways in which conceptions of the event can scarcely be portrayed as straightforward. Owing to the complexities involving event and narrative, the fourth section of this essay will turn to Gilles Deleuze’s highly provocative and seminal lecture on event. However, Deleuze forces us into a blind alley. This cul-de-sac is exposed by applying its extended linguistic analogy to The Road. If our grounds for questioning the coherence of Deleuze hold, then an influential attempt to circumvent the correlative hypothesis beckons. During the ‘seventies Paul Ricoeur proposed that all discourse, written fictional narrative included, comes into effect as an event, but is understood as meaning. It is a proposal that introduces an appeal to linguistic and associative rules governing the constructive activity of reading. However, in our final section, we shall explore an alternative to Ricoeur by way of rule-governed practices in order to avoid the serious misconstrual within the correlative hypothesis of the relationship between a fictional narrative’s renditions of events and how its readers ordinarily experience them.

How do we usually approach events in written fictional narratives? A typical, albeit often implicit, way of construing experience or perception of events in narrative is by tracking the textual roles and utterances assigned to narrator and/or character in the presentation or representation, as well as in the evaluation or significance of events, even when these roles become blurred, as frequently occurs in The Road:

Rich dreams now which he was loathe to wake from. Things no longer known in the world. The cold drove him forth to mend the fire. Memory of her crossing the lawn toward the house in the early morning in a thin rose gown that clung to her breasts. He thought each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins. As in a party game. Say the word and pass it on. So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not (2006: 139).
Even beneath more refined analyses of narrative voice, terms-of-address, focalisation, distance, and the like, there appears to be a working presumption of conventions in operation equivalent to the extra-textual world as summarised by Manfred Jahn (2005) and in Peter Hühn and colleagues (2009). Taking the terms-of-address in the passage cited — ‘he’ and ‘you’ — for instance, do we understand the third- and second-person pronominal references in this fictional narrative discourse because of how it linguistically encodes our use of them in everyday life? After all, as Paul Ricoeur (1976) claims,

Discourse refers back to its speaker at the same time that it refers to the world. This correlation is not fortuitous, since it is ultimately the speaker who refers to the world in speaking (22).

Yet the deictic or indexical expression ‘you’ remains ambiguous in this passage from McCarthy: is it the narrator addressing the character? Is it the character of the father addressing himself? Is it the author addressing the reader, any reader, of the passage? If so, does that license us to pursue ‘correspondence’ between explicitly and formally narrated experiences and perceptions of events and our extra-textual experiences and perceptions of events? What impedes a ready acceptance of the correlative hypothesis here is, as Ricoeur himself acknowledges, that we are now dealing with ‘written discourse’ where ‘the author’s intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide’ in so far as ‘the author is not available for questioning’ since the text ‘no longer [has] a speaker’ (1976: 29 & 30). Whereas ‘references in the dialogical situation...are situational,’ Ricoeur concedes the very point Roman Jakobson argues in the case of ‘all fictional...narrative’ (1976: 35 & 37). We encounter a systemic ambiguity within fiction, as summarised by Jakobson (1960: 85), ‘in a split addressee, as well as in a split reference.’

II

It might be objected at this juncture that the ambiguity detected in fictional narrative merely applies to pronominal references—the ‘I,’ the ‘you,’ the ‘he, she, or it.’ Instead, what we need is a keener appreciation of how we experience or perceive events before we can pursue the properties of narrative upheld by the correlative hypothesis. An effective means of doing so is through a succinctly expressed set of phenomenological claims about our perception of events by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) in the ‘Temporality’ chapter of his magnum opus. Events, he states, are simply ‘shapes cut out by a finite observer from the spatio-temporal totality of the objective world’ (1945: 411) and hence our associated conception of change

presupposes a certain position which I take up and from which I see things in procession before me: there are no events without someone to whom they happen and whose finite perspective is the basis of their individuality (1945: 411).

By making our individual perspective central to our perception of the world, it is not surprising to find that time, according to Merleau-Ponty, is not so much ‘an actual succession’ as it is that which emerges from our ‘relation to things’ (1945: 412). Little wonder that, on this basis, The Road unproblematically appears to convey the same temporal perspective in the figure of the father, immersed in the objects and abandoned artefacts of his blighted world.
However, the narrative also depicts a figure haunted by both the suicide of his wife and the safety of his son. What we therefore designate as past (and, for that matter, as future) for Merleau-Ponty ‘exist in the present’ (1945: 412). As Merleau-Ponty reminds us, if an object, a person included, ‘bears traces of...past life,’ ‘these traces in themselves do not refer to the past: they are present’ (1945: 413). Moreover, he continues, if perceptions are ‘preserved’ within us, then ‘a preserved perception is a perception, it continues to exist, it persists in the present’ and can be ‘no more than an occasion for thinking of the past, but it is not the past which is compelling recognition’ (1945: 413). That past or recollected perception anchors itself in the narrative present is demonstrated throughout McCarthy, for example:

In dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white. She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell. Her smile, her downturned eyes. In the morning it was snowing again. Beads of small gray ice strung along the lightwires overhead....

From daydreams on the road there was no waking. He plodded on. He could remember everything of her save her scent. Seated in a theatre with her beside him leaning forward listening to the music.... Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned (2006: 17-18).

Ultimately for Merleau-Ponty our consciousness of time — ‘the series of possible relations’ whether construed as past, present and future or as before, simultaneously and after — ‘is not time itself, but the...recording of time, the result of its passage’ (1945: 415). When our perspective upon events is based upon the primacy of perception and actions, time is better apprehended spatially ‘since its moments co-exist spread out before thought; it is a present, because consciousness is contemporary with all times’ (1945: 415). Alternatively expressed, time is perceived not so much in linear or serial terms, but as ‘a network of intentionalities’ (1945: 417) involving volitions, memories and imaginings, as part of the way we ‘reckon with an environment’ (1945: 416). For those upholding the correlative hypothesis, this helps to rationalise why the forty-four marked yet unnumbered sections of The Road realise time so sporadically in terms of mornings, afternoons, and evenings so that the duration of the journey remains ‘uncounted and uncalendared’ (2006: 292). Indeed, it makes plausible why repeated actions, voices, thoughts, and objects bear the weight of the journey by father and son to and from the coast.

III

Because Merleau-Ponty’s notion of event intersects with that of time, is our understanding of event impeded by a kind of conceptual entanglement? Yet identifying events in The Road, for example the occurrence of the earlier calamity or the eventual death of the father, seems unproblematic. In the first case, indirect mention is made of the catastrophe: ‘The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions’ (2006: 54). In the second case, the narrator depicts the death as: ‘He slept close to his father that night and held him but when he woke in the morning his father was cold and stiff’ (2006: 300).

However, if a more sceptical approach is taken to claims that events are easily identified — an approach indirectly derived from Peter Hacker (1981) & (1982) — consider how rapidly complications accrue once events are said to imply no more than happenings or occurrences. The sceptic might immediately challenge this understanding on the grounds that our attempt to identify events was
actually dependent upon our reference to objects such as the ‘shear of light’ and the ‘series of concussions’ in the first case. We might reply that, because both our examples are replete with temporal succession (the accumulative ‘and then’ and the contrastive ‘but when’ respectively), there is little room to doubt that either example is one of the events constituting the narrative. Here, our sceptic might raise the question of whether we are now upholding the view that events are properties of time. So, in practice, our sceptic continues, by construing events as times, we are effectively claiming that events are no more than moments or intervals of time during which certain statements apply. For example, ‘By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp’ (2006: 32) is identified by the pairing of the relevant time (‘day’) with the statement ‘the banished sun circles...’. If we in turn countered by saying it is the event that we perceive, not the time, then our sceptic may switch his accusation, claiming that we are now construing times as events or, more precisely, as relationships amongst events. Consider, for instance, the recollection of the period immediately after the cataclysm: ‘Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road’ (2006: 33). Here, it is as if the underlying temporal dimension is defined as a linear order of one event – the cataclysm – preceding another – the fires, the chanting, the screaming of the living and the dead.

At this juncture, our sceptic might seize upon our earlier contention that, however construed, narratives are constituted by events. Would the following block his objection about our appeal to the nature of narrative? To distinguish a narrative from, say, an argument or an exposition, surely we could counter-argue that a minimal set of criteria ought to apply. Drawing upon Gerald Prince for instance, we could muster a number of criteria characteristic of narrative: in brief, narrative contains ‘any representation of non-contradictory events,’ be they ‘real or fictive,’ within ‘a time sequence,’ where there must be at least two events and where neither of the events logically ‘presupposes or entails the other’ (1982: 145, 1 & 4). Furthermore, the temporal dimension involved can be connected with situations, objects, or events in their order of occurrence or with the way in which they are represented in the order of telling. Is this not demonstrated by the closing passage of The Road where we shift, as Prince expresses it, from a ‘recounting of events’ to a ‘discussion of their representation’ (1982: 146)?

‘Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow... On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back... In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery’ (2006: 306-307)

Yet even here our sceptic may insist on questioning Prince’s definition of narrative in terms of at least two events within a time sequence further. What are we to make of the earlier example, ‘Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting’ (2006: 33)? Whilst neither the fires nor the chanting presuppose or entail each other, are they causally connected? Or, because they supposedly occur in the same place at the same time, are they one and the same event? To the first question, we could reply that not only is a causal connexion distinct from a logical one, but also if the fires were the cause of the deranged chanting, then the cause is one event and the effect or result is another. To the second question, we could accuse our sceptic of being confused. Granted, when objects – be they animal, vegetable, or mineral – occupy the same spatio-temporal location, we intuitively sense that they would be identical. However, objects are not events because events
are occurrences unlike objects. In other words, whereas events befall or unfold, objects occupy. This distinction holds even when we stipulate how some events involve activities (‘the survivors were [are] [will be] chanting’) and others involve states (‘the survivors knew [know] [will know] there were fires on the ridges’), a distinction linguistically echoed by verbs with a continuing aspect (‘-ing’) and verbs without respectively. So, by Gottfried Leibniz’s (1696) principle of the identity of indiscernibles, events and objects are distinct since strict indiscernibility implies that all properties of events and objects are shared, both relational and non-relational properties.

IV

Having just alluded to linguistics and to Leibniz, let us now turn to Gilles Deleuze who, in the sixth of his 1986/1987 lectures on Leibniz, attempted to define event from a metaphysical perspective and, in the course of so doing, stipulated several characteristics of event by way of linguistic metaphors. Our aim here is to test the applicability of Deleuze’s influential account to written fictional narrative such as The Road.

The first ‘component or condition’ that defines event is extension which, Deleuze claims, ‘exists when one element is stretched over the following ones, such that it is a whole and the following elements are its parts’ (1988: 87). Secondly, these mereological or part-whole relationships form an ‘unlimited’ or ‘infinite series’ notwithstanding ‘the limits of our senses’ (1988: 87). Here, space and time constitute the ‘abstract coordinates’ for whatever ‘[m]atter...fills space and time’ and thereby lends the event its character so that it becomes ‘something rather than nothing’ (1988: 87-88). Deleuze’s third component is ‘the individual,’ a “concrescence” of elements, moving from the public ‘world’ to the private ‘subject,’ which is something ‘other than a connection or a conjunction’ (1988: 88). It is the individual, or the element expressing ‘immediacy, individuality, and novelty,’ which apprehends, and is apprehended by, ‘its antecedents and its concomitants and, by degrees, ... a world’ (1988: 88). Here, an event becomes a “nexus of prehensions”’ (that is, of concrete rather than abstract feelings and ideas of the individual) such that an event participates ‘in the becoming of another event and the subject of its own becoming’ (1988: 88).

Without detouring into an extensive exegesis of what Deleuze has explicitly drawn from, for example, Leibniz (1714) on the monad in Deleuze’s evocative rather than argued portrayal of the event, let us focus instead on how he depicts much of his definition of event in linguistic terms. The second component is hailed as ‘no longer the indefinite article, but the demonstrative pronoun’ and the third as ‘[n]o longer...the indefinite or the demonstrative mood, but a personal mood’ (1988: 88). With this in mind, let us experiment with how, as James Williams (2011) argues, Deleuze upholds the primacy of events over objects to which they happen and the perspective from which any event is to be apprehended. Consider the way in which McCarthy typically develops a coalescence of elements when, for example, the father and his son look down upon a lifeless lake and its defunct hydroelectric dam:

In that long ago somewhere very near this place he’d watched a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain and break with the keel of its breastbone the midmost from a flight of cranes and take it to the river below all gangly and wrecked and trailing its loose and blowzy plumage in the still autumn air (2006: 19).
Can we trace the father’s recollected event in terms of the linguistic characteristics Deleuze assigns to the event? Demonstratives are attached to time (‘that long ago’) and place (‘this place’), the indefinite only connected with the falcon and the cranes in flight (‘a falcon’...’a flight of cranes’). Certainly, we can acknowledge how time and place here assume a co-ordinating role and how person, falcon, and crane metaphorically ‘fill’ time and place and thereby characterise the event. However, what is the so-called ‘personal mood’ of the segment quoted here? When introducing the linguistic notion of ‘mood,’ is Deleuze focusing upon the manner in which activities conveyed by predicates – say, the falcon falling, breaking, and taking – is articulated by the narrator? Traditionally, clausal (or sentential) mood is exemplified by the interrogative, the indicative, and the imperative (that is, questions, statements, and commands). Yet mood can also be applied to finite or tensed verbs in such forms as the conditional (‘if he had watched...’) and the subjunctive (‘would he had watched...’). By not discriminating between the two senses or applications of mood, Deleuze’s appeal to mood remains ambiguous. Are we therefore to assume that all moods, in one sense or the other, are ‘personal’ for Deleuze in so far as they express some person’s attitude or assessment of activities (or states) being articulated? If so, once again we face difficulties with his linguistic definition because we can distinguish between personal and impersonal at both the lexical and the clausal level. Lexically, for example, we mark impersonal pronouns such as ‘one,’ ‘you,’ and ‘they’ when avoiding reference to any specific person. At the clausal or sentential level, we operate impersonally when suppressing any mention of the person or agent initiating or otherwise responsible for the activity. This can be variously manifested by the use of the passive voice (‘the falcon was watched’) or the ‘empty’ pronoun (‘it was long ago somewhere very near this place’) or the non-tensed verb (‘to recall that time and place is to remember that falcon attacking a crane’). In sum, Deleuze’s talk of ‘personal mood’ appears to be quite idiosyncratic.

Deleuze’s linguistic portrayal of the event falls well short of explicating the sheer fluxity of events and of apprehensions of them in this instance. Nor does it coherently depict the event that has apparently initiated the ‘cauterized’ world (2006: 13) in which the father and his then pregnant wife found themselves:

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didn’t answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lights switch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the window-glass. He dropped to one knee and raised the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go. She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? she said. What is happening? I don’t know. Why are you taking a bath? I’m not (2006: 54).

Perhaps the commonplace construal of event as related to temporal change in some state of affairs – ‘A long shear of light...then a series of low concussions... A dull rose glow in the window-glass’ – might retrieve the impasse. It better realises Deleuze’s preferred description of the apprehension of change as ‘the movement from one perception to another as being constitutive of a becoming’ (1988: 89). Without change, where there only is, for instance, a ‘[d]rip of water’ or a ‘fading light’ (McCarthy, 2006: 299), all we have is a state of affairs. In other words, given his pre-occupation with
processes, Deleuze does recognise that, whatever else we attribute to the notion of the event, there is the perennial issue of the perspective from which an event is to be conceptualised. It is a recognition we have already encountered in Merleau-Ponty above.

V

From what perspective should we conceptualise the event in cases of written fictional narrative? No one has devoted more energy to this question than Paul Ricoeur, especially in the ‘seventies, whilst at the same time attempting to circumvent the correlative hypothesis. Yet the hypothesis threatens to re-emerge in his efforts to account not only for a commonality in the linguistic structure of historical and fictional narrative discourse, but also for how ‘they refer nonetheless, each in its own way, to the same fundamental feature of our individual and social existence’ (1979: 274). This feature, continues Ricoeur, is the fact ‘that we make history, that we are immersed in history, that we are historical beings’ (1979: 274). It is a fact fully realised by McCarthy in a multiplicity of ways, be it jointly (‘Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory’) or individually (‘He’d had this feeling before... The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion’ including ‘the names of things one believed to be true’) (2006: 55 & 93). Hence, the task Ricoeur sets himself is to demonstrate how ‘history and fiction contribute, in virtue of their common narrative structure, to the description and redescription of our historical condition’ (1979: 274). In sum, Ricoeur declares that he is enquiring into ‘the correlation...between narrativity and historicity’ (1979: 274) whilst granting that they partake of ‘different ways of relating to the world of action, of being about this world’ (1979: 274 & 280).

When previously focusing upon the nature of fictional narrative discourse in written texts, Ricoeur emphasizes two problems. Firstly, we face the issue of interpreting such discourse because ‘writing-reading is not a particular case of the relation speaking-hearing in the dialogical situation’ (1972: 303). Spoken dialogue, according to Ricoeur, ultimately and ostensibly refers to ‘the situation common to the interlocutors’ (1972: 313). Secondly, epistemically speaking, we encounter a conceptual opposition between interpretation and explanation where the former conveys ‘specific subjective implications, such as the involvement of the reader in the process of understanding’ (1972: 303). However, the reader’s involvement stops short of the separate empirical issue – recently questioned by Galen Strawson (2004: 428-434) – about whether or not ordinary human experience is itself narrative by nature.

In so far as Ricoeur regards any written text to be at the very least ‘a set of sentences,’ it therefore qualifies as ‘a discourse’ (1972: 307). Yet all discourse, he asserts, ‘occurs as an event’ unlike the underlying language system it happens to manifest (1972: 305). Any act of discourse, we might add, therefore accommodates the question of number (‘how many?’) and frequency (‘how often?’). As an event, discourse not only possesses ‘an instantaneous existence’ in the way ‘it appears and disappears,’ but it can also be (re)identified as the same, as what Ricoeur calls its ‘meaning’ (1972: 305) or its ‘propositional content’ (1976: 9). In more precise terms, words acquire meaning in the context of sentences comprising a text and in the ‘contextual action’ by which meanings of words are created or constructed; indeed, he declares, verbal meaning exists ‘only in this context’ (1972: 307). Why is it that the meaning of a written text is constructed or created linguistically and associatively? In part, claims Ricoeur, there is an ‘asymmetric relation’ between text and reader (1972: 312): readers are the ones to make sense of a text and not vice versa. In part, a written text such as a novel is ‘a closed chain of meaning’ which is ‘more than a linear succession of sentences’ because its reading implies ‘a cumulative, holistic process’ (1972: 312).

Without pursuing Ricoeur’s variation on the correlative hypothesis and role of the reader further, we already find that he assents to the view that meanings of words, whether used literally or metaphorically, not only ‘depend on the semantical and syntactical rules which govern [their] use,’ but also on other rules ‘to which members of a speech community are committed’ (1972: 309). However, once we probe what these other rules might be, the attempt to seek correlations between the textual features of fictional narrative discourse supposedly conveying perceptions and experiences of events and its readers’ non-literary or extra-textual perceptions and experiences of events becomes problematic. Baldly stated, there are no textual rules or conventions instructing readers of any age or epoch that a given passage or expression constitutes an event. Nor are the rules governing a community of readers those characterising any or all of, say, the economic or educational, political or religious practices or activities in which the production and reception of written texts occur as a set of institutional events.

VI

Though cast in radically different terms, perhaps we can retrieve the rules sought by Ricoeur by adapting an approach ultimately traceable to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1945) & (1951) (and aesthetically elaborated by Peter Lamarque (2010)). The rules in question comprise constitutive rules defining the practice of reading a text. What therefore counts as a fictional narrative is not simply a set of written sentences which somehow intrinsically impart the perception and experience of events of narrator or character and consequently merely await disclosure by individual readers. But what do we mean by practice here?

Firstly, the notion of practice, not unlike the concept of expecting, demands an object, which is why we cannot effectively describe the process of practicing without referring to the object of our practice. Nor can we effectively describe the process of practicing something – be it reading a narrative or writing one – without knowing that we are doing so, let alone without knowing what, under some description or other, we are practicing. In some circumstances, our activities count as practicing something; in other circumstances, they may not. Running one’s forefinger over the indentations of printed lines of *The Road* may well act as a means of pacing one’s reading, yet an activity indistinguishable from it could, in other circumstances, be no more than a means of deriving tactile pleasure. Secondly, because practicing is a set of activities, that is, it applies to what we are doing, it takes time – even if intermittent or interrupted – and can be undertaken in a particular way – be it hesitantly or hurriedly. Where the objects of our practicing are perceptible – adjusting to the range of fonts in which a novel is printed – we can usually specify the sensory or perceptual activities by which we practice. Where, by contrast, the objects of practice are abstractions – grappling with possible themes emerging from an unnumbered section of *The Road* – we can usually specify the cognitive activities involved. Finally, because we can teach someone to practise something, whether they end by doing so willingly or unwillingly, we can also distinguish between the roles taken towards the activities constituting that practice. We can practise them, to employ a distinction developed by D.W. Harding (1937), as an onlooker or spectator or as an agent or participant where the spectator role more so than the participant role enables us to focus to the point of evaluation upon the rules governing examples of practice. As spectators, rules can loom large; as participants, anticipating or enacting actions prevail.

That said, what do the activities comprising the practice of reading imply? Several implications immediately come to mind. Firstly, to focus upon activities is to emphasize the role of readers, texts, and writers at the expense of individual instances of them. Despite our curiosity, Cormac McCarthy’s
age or appearance, ethnicity or education, personality or preferences gives us little if any insight into his authorial role. Secondly, without an established practice of reading with its constitutive rules there would be no objects of reading, written fictional narratives included. An object with all the attributes of a physical text entitled *The Road*, including its sets of sentences arranged into forty-four sections, cannot count as a novel independently of the practices defining the role of readers, writers, and texts. Obviously, readers might find themselves wondering how to categorise *The Road*. For example, Janet Maslin (2006) talks of it in terms of ‘parable,’ a ‘cautionary tale’; Ron Charles (2006) views it as simultaneously a ‘novel’ moving into ‘the allegorical realm’ and ‘a succession of prose poems’; and Mark Mordue (2006) notes that it is ‘as if the book were not composed of sections but stanzas in a poem.’ Yet, any dispute over whether it should be categorised as a novel or as a prose poem immediately finds the criteria applied by disputants anchored to their practice and its rules pertaining to ways of categorising types or genres of objects of reading (novels, allegories, prose poetry, and the like). Should the dispute remain unresolved and shift to whether or not there is actually such a thing as a novel or a prose poem, then the dispute is now raising questions about the existence and nature of the very practice itself.

Disputes of either kind demonstrate a further implication. To talk of the practice of reading is to acknowledge that we, as practitioners of reading, have been initiated into it and that our learning may be described as more or less perfunctory, proficient, and so forth. Here, of course, is where the concept of reading tends to bifurcate. On the one hand, we may be emphasizing the processes involved in mastering the grapho-phonological and lexico-syntactic mechanics of reading. On the other hand, we may be emphasizing the comprehension and appraisal involved in interpreting the semantics or meaning of what is being read. Accusations of a wayward reading of McCarthy, for instance, cut across both senses of reading whilst simultaneously indicating that the aberrations or mistakes made are grounded in what the reader should know procedurally (‘knowing how to do something’) or in what the reader should know propositionally (‘knowing that something is the case’) or in both.

Returning to the matter of learning or developing a practice, such learning need not be solely equated with formally acquiring rules. Readers young and old learn by example: from a parent who reads dialogue and narration with a dramatic flair; from a teacher deliberating misconceiving the function of a character in order to demonstrate the inappropriateness of an interpretation; from a friend playfully reading story after story backwards. Now, should a reader think that reading narratives backwards was an activity befitting the nature of reading, then we would have no hesitation in saying he or she was ignorant about what rules make for reading. The issue here is not whether the rules constituting the practice of reading can actually be articulated in this (or any other) case; the issue is what our reader is doing. As this essay has argued, readers do act as if reading fictional narratives, *The Road* included, were little more than an exercise in decoding patterns of textual features.

Where, in conclusion, does our discussion upholding reading as a rule-governed practice leave us in relation to the correlative hypothesis about events in written fictional narratives? The correlative hypothesis, as we have seen, presupposes that the linguistic and textual features of written fictional narrative inherently possess properties which signal that events are being represented. However, when we regard the role of readers and texts to be anchored in the practice of reading, it is the reader, rightly or wrongly, who imposes events upon the text where the activities comprising reading centre upon acts of interpretation and appraisal.
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Also

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