

## Editor's Note: On Narrative

The essays included in this special issue of *Critical Inquiry* are a product of the symposium on "Narrative: The Illusion of Sequence" held at the University of Chicago on 26–28 October 1979. The rather special character of this symposium may be traced to a key element in its design. Unlike many such gatherings, the symposium was not fragmented into concurrent or competing sessions, and all the speakers remained throughout the entire weekend to discuss the papers of their fellow participants. Several distinguished participants, in fact, did not read papers but confined their contributions to the conversations which developed over the several sessions of the three-day program. The impact of these sustained discussions is reflected in the revisions which the authors made in preparing their papers for this special issue, and thus this collection is a "product" of the symposium in a fairly precise sense.

The inevitable temptation in introducing this topic is, of course, to try to tell the story of the symposium. But which story would be the right one to tell? Would it be the "plot" of the organizers of the symposium to bring together a distinguished group of speakers from a variety of disciplines to discuss narrative under the rubric of "The Illusion of Sequence"? This was the first plan to go awry, as one speaker after another quarreled with the assumption that sequence is either illusory or is definitive of narrativity. Would the right story be on the order of intellectual history, explaining how it is that in this age and place one could gather together a group of philosophers, literary critics, psychologists, art historians, anthropologists, novelists, and (rarest of breeds) narratologists to discuss the ways we tell, understand, and use stories? Or would the right story be a journalistic version, "getting the story straight" with who, when, where, what, how? Or a piece of literary journalism such as Bill Monroe's account in *The Chicago Literary Review* which presents the symposium as a ritual drama in three acts, featuring the major speakers (I leave it to you to guess their identities) in such roles as Knave, Scapegoat, Hermeneutic Harlequin, Oracle/Sophist/Priest, Secret Sharer, Saint, Alienist, Skeptic, Professor, Critic, and Chorus?

If conflict, and not mere sequence, connexity, or a central subject, is one of the essentials of narrative, then the symposium on narrative was a storied event indeed. One thing that should make the present issue of *Critical Inquiry* of value to students of narrative in all disciplines is that it dramatizes (and, we hope, clarifies) the most fundamental debates about the value and nature of narrative as a means by which human beings

represent and structure the world. It is a commonplace of modern relativism, of course, that there are multiple versions of events and the stories about them and that there is something suspect about claims to having the “true” or “authorized” or “basic” version in one’s possession. The real problem, however, is not the telling of true stories from false (this seems to be a practical rather than a theoretical problem) but the very value of narrativity as a mode of making sense of reality (whether the factual reality of actual events, or the moral, symbolic reality of fictions). Hayden White came closest to taking an explicitly “anti-narrativist” stance in his symposium lecture, suggesting that narrativity *as such* tends to support orthodox and politically conservative social conditions and that the revolt against narrativity in modern historiography and literature is a revolt against the authority of the social system.

It is now possible, as Robert Scholes observes, to say of narrative what Marx said of religion, that it is an “opiate” which mystifies our understanding by providing a false sense of coherence, an “illusion of sequence.” Many of the essays which follow seem, in retrospect, to be designed to answer this charge. A remedy for our addiction to the orderly consolations of narrative sequence is offered by Frank Kermode, who suggests that narratives also conceal “secrets” which may be uncovered by “overreaders . . . members of a special academic class that has the time to pry into secrets.” Kermode’s reassuring discovery of a scandalous, incoherent, chaotic dimension to narrativity is a theme which recurs in several of these essays: in Victor Turner’s claim that narrative, like ritual, is not simply in opposition to the forces of disorder and chaos but is a way of bringing on disintegration and indeterminacy in the interests of unpredictable transformations in a culture or individual; in Paul Ricoeur’s sense of narrative as an “open” interpretive structure or “model for the redescription of the world”; and in Jacques Derrida’s contention that the “law of genre” (including the genre of narrative) “is threatened intimately and in advance by a counter-law that constitutes this very law” so that “the law is mad, is madness; . . . madness cannot be conceived before its relation to law.”

The speaker with the most intimate professional acquaintance with the encounter between madness and the law of narrative was, of course, the eminent psychoanalyst Roy Schafer, whose interest is in redescribing psychoanalysis as an interpretive discipline (as opposed to a positive science), based on typical or normative narratives of individual development, and in helping people come to understand and redescribe their own life stories in ways that allow for change and beneficial action in the world. Whether Schafer’s use of narrative reconciles the law of narrative with madness or imposes a benign but false resolution on its revolutionary energies is a story that is best completed by the reader of these essays.

The debate over the value of narrative, either as a mode of imposing order on reality or as a way of unleashing a healthy disorder, is accompanied by an argument about the nature of narrative, which focuses on three questions addressed most generally by Nelson Goodman: (1) What are the minimum conditions for narrativity? (2) How much distortion can a narrative endure before it becomes something else? and (3) What is the relationship between different versions of a story? These questions sometimes converge in the notion that there must be a basic story, an "ur-narrative" with certain minimal features underlying all the different versions of a tale, that allows us to identify these versions as versions of something. This assumption, articulated here by Seymour Chatman in the linguistic terminology of "deep structure," has served as a basic point of departure for the discipline of narratology and is subjected to a vigorous critique by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who contends that this binary notion of narrative "betrays a lingering strain of naive Platonism . . . which is both logically dubious and methodologically distracting." A related binary notion of narrative which comes into question in these pages is the assumption that stories refer to a chronological continuum which is neutral or unproblematic. Paul Ricoeur opposes this view with a multidimensional and existential picture of time that stresses "the reciprocity between narrativity and temporality." We have not only different versions of stories but different versions of time which are shaped by the stories we live by.

Conflict over the nature and value of narrative was, of course, not the only or most interesting story of the symposium on narrative. Probably the most important sense of the event as lived was the aura of intellectual excitement and discovery, the common feeling that the study of narrative, like the study of other significant human creations, has taken a quantum leap in the modern era. The study of narrative is no longer the province of literary specialists or folklorists borrowing their terms from psychology and linguistics but has now become a positive source of insight for all the branches of human and natural science. The idea of narrative seems, as several of the contributors to these pages note, to be repossessing its archaic sense as *gnārus* and *gnosis*, a mode of knowledge emerging from action, a knowledge which is embedded not just in the stories we tell our children or to while away our leisure but in the orders by which we live our lives. The magic of this mode of knowledge was conjured up for the symposium's closing session by Ursula K. Le Guin's witty and generically indescribable talk, "It Was a Dark and Stormy Night; or, Why Are We Huddling about the Campfire?" Whether we call it prose or poetry, narrative or meta-narrative, parody or panegyric on storytelling, if the story of the narrative symposium is to be found anywhere, it is in the secret sequences of Le Guin's jocular and haunting tale.

The symposium on narrative was sponsored by the University of Chicago Extension, C. Ranlet Lincoln, Dean (who also served as moderator). It was organized and managed by Joan Cowan, Assistant Dean of the Extension, and Joyce Feucht-Haviar, Assistant to the Dean. The symposium was funded by the Extension and by the Midwest Faculty Seminar with the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Speakers, panelists, and special guests were Seymour Chatman, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Howard Gardner, Merton Gill, Nelson Goodman, Paul Hernadi, Frank Kermode, Ursula K. Le Guin, Françoise Meltzer, W. J. T. Mitchell, Barbara Myerhoff, Paul Ricoeur, Roy Schafer, Robert Scholes, Richard Shiff, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Richard Stern, David Tracy, Victor Turner, Tamás Ungvári, and Hayden White.

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