The Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series
Narrative as Rhetoric
Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology

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For Betty, Katie, and Mike, with love
and gratitude for our vital rhetorical community
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Preface

This book did me the great favor of sneaking up on me. I wrote it while procrastinating on a different, seemingly more daunting project. I'd get to that large body of work, I told myself many times over the last few years, right after scratching this itch, massaging that cramp, scrubbing away this dirt. After a while, I realized that I'd done so much scratching and scrubbing that I'd managed to create something with a discernible identity of its own. Whether the coherence and magnitude of this creature is sufficient—or sufficiently attractive—for anyone to want to spend much time in its company remains to be seen. But it is worth noticing here that the coherence derives from my consistent attempt to think through what it means to say that narrative is rhetoric, even as I've worked on the range of issues that give the book its first claim to magnitude: voice, progression, mimesis, the ethics of reading, kinds of textual recalcitrance, the paradoxes of first-person (or homodiegetic) narration, the role of ideology in telling and interpreting nonfictional narratives. At the same time, the thinking through occurs very much in connection with the practical work of interpreting particular narratives, and the range of these texts constitutes the other claim to magnitude: short stories by Joseph Conrad, Katherine Anne Porter, Ernest Hemingway, and Lorrie Moore; novels by William Makepeace Thackeray, Virginia Woolf, Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Toni Morrison; nonfictional accounts of contemporary campus life by Dinesh D’Souza.

The progression of chapters here does show some shifts in my thinking about narrative as rhetoric: in particular, I start with but gradually move away from a model in which rhetoric consists of an author, through the narrative text, extending a multidimensional (esthetic, emotive, ideational, ethical, political) invitation to a reader who, in turn, seeks to do justice to the complexity of the invitation and then responds. In the model I move to, the multidimensional
quality of reading is retained, but the lines between author, reader, and
text become blurred. In the revised model, rhetoric is the synergy oc-
curring between authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader re-
response. Despite this shift, I don’t regard the book as implicitly con-
structing a metanarrative, a Bildungsroman in which the initially
flawed but sympathetic critic moves, with each succeeding chapter,
nearer and nearer to the Great Enlightenment. If, as I maintain, au-
thor, text, and reader are in an endlessly recursive relationship, then
any one essay will necessarily emphasize some features of that relation-
ship more than others—and it will have been written at some particu-
lar moment in my ongoing relationship to the narrative. Conse-
quently, the particular work of any essay here should remain both
potentially useful and presumptively less than definitive regardless of
when in the last few years I composed it. To help indicate some of the
connections between the essays, I have written headnotes to each. To
help the reader with the terminology of narrative theory I employ in
the book, I have included a glossary of terms after the appendix.

While the book was sneaking up on me, I was getting help from many
people. I owe thanks to Debra Moddelmog for introducing me to
“Magic”; to Paul Smith, Scott Donaldson, and Mike Reynolds for en-
couraging me to think some more about Hemingway, and to Jackson
Breyer and Jerry Kennedy for an inducement to do something with
Fitzgerald; to Elizabeth Langland and Laura Claridge for the invitation
to write about Thackeray and to Susan Griffin and Sandy Morey
Norton for complicating my first conclusions; to Dan Schwarz for
asking me to write about Conrad; to Monika Fludernik for prodding
me to think about second-person narration; to Dinesh D’Souza for
agreeing to participate in a dialogue about Illiberal Education. I am also
indebted to a large group of students and colleagues who have over
the years patiently listened to me go on about these texts and these is-
ues (in one seminar, my worrying over “My Old Man,” I later dis-
covered, almost transformed the twelve vigorous participants into
“My Prematurely Aged Grad Students”). I have named some of these
people in notes to specific chapters, but here I want to acknowledge
my deep and enduring appreciation for the help of four research asis-
tants, Elizabeth Patnoe, Jane Greer, Susan Swinford, and Elizabeth
Preston. These people have each provided crucial material support and invaluable criticism and advice; without them, this book would be a lesser thing. To Peter J. Rabinowitz, I owe a special thanks: he read it all—much of it more than once—with a wonderful combination of generosity and rigor, and then took the time to walk me through his responses. In short, he exemplified what it means to enter into an authorial audience without losing oneself in the process. Finally, I am thankful for the rhetorical community in which I find most favor, that provided by my wife, Betty Menaghan, and our two children, Katie and Mike; this one is for all of you.

Different versions of the following chapters have appeared, in whole or in part, in the following publications. I thank all of them for permission to reprint.


Chapter 8 as “Narrating the PC Controversies: Thoughts on
