Introduction

Narrative as Rhetoric: Reading the Spells of Porter’s “Magic”

Reading a Narrative of Rhetoric

What does it mean to treat narrative as rhetoric? Although this question, a natural way to begin a book entitled Narrative as Rhetoric, tempts me to deliver a long, theoretical disquisition on authors, readers, narrative techniques, structures, conventions, and the concept of rhetoric, I will spare you that and opt for illustration by offering a rhetorical reading of a particular narrative. The narrative I choose is a narrative of rhetoric, that is, a narrative whose central event is the telling of a story, Katherine Anne Porter’s “Magic.”

Magic

And, Madame Blanchard, believe that I am happy to be here with you and your family because it is so serene, everything, and before this I worked for a long time in a fancy house—maybe you don’t know what is a fancy house? Naturally . . . everyone must have heard sometime or other. Well, Madame, I work always where there is work to be had, and so in this place I worked very hard all hours, and saw too many things, things you wouldn’t believe, and I wouldn’t think of telling you, only maybe it will rest you while I
brush your hair. You'll excuse me too but I could not help hearing you say to the laundress maybe someone had bewitched your linens, they fall away so fast in the wash. Well, there was a girl there in that house, poor thing, thin, but well-liked by all the men who called, and you understand she could not get along with the woman who ran the house. They quarreled, the madam cheated her on her checks: you know, the girl got a check, a brass one, every time, and at the week's end she gave those back to the madam, yes, that was the way, and got her percentage, a very small little of her earnings: it is a business, you see, like any other—and the madam used to pretend the girl had given back only so many checks, you see, and really she had given many more, but after they were out of her hands, what could she do? So she would say, I will get out of this place, and curse and cry. Then the madam would hit her over the head. She always hit people over the head with bottles, it was the way she fought. My good heavens, Madame Blanchard, what confusion there would be sometimes with a girl running raving downstairs, and the madam pulling her back by the hair and smashing a bottle on her forehead.

It was nearly always about the money, the girls got in debt so, and if they wished to go they could not without paying every sou marqué. The madam had full understanding with the police; the girls must come back with them or go to the jails. Well, they always came back with the policemen or with another kind of man friend of the madam: she could make men work for her too, but she paid them very well for all, let me tell you: and so the girls stayed on unless they were sick; if so, if they got too sick she sent them away again.

Madame Blanchard said, “You are pulling a little here,” and eased a strand of hair: “and then what?”

Pardon—but this girl, there was a true hatred between her and the madam. She would say many times, I make more money than anybody else in the house, and every week were scenes. So at last she said one morning, Now I will leave this place, and she took out forty dollars from under her pillow and said, Here’s your money! The madam began to shout, Where did you get all that, you——? and accused her of robbing the men who came to visit her. The girl said, Keep your hands off or I’ll brain you: and at that the madam took hold of her shoulders, and began to lift her knee and kick this girl
most terribly in the stomach, and even in her most secret place, Madame Blanchard, and then she beat her in the face with a bottle, and the girl fell back again into her room where I was making clean. I helped her to the bed, and she sat there holding her sides with her head hanging down, and when she got up again there was blood everywhere she had sat. So then the madam came in once more and screamed, Now you can get out, you are no good for me any more: I don't repeat all, you understand it is too much. But she took all the money she could find, and at the door she gave the girl a great push in the back with her knee, so that she fell again in the street, and then got up and went away with the dress barely on her.

After this the men who knew this girl kept saying, Where is Ninette? And they kept asking this in the next days, so that the madam could not say any longer, I put her out because she is a thief. No, she began to see she was wrong to send this Ninette away, and then she said, She will be back in a few days, don't trouble yourself.

And now, Madame Blanchard, if you wish to hear, I come to the strange part, the thing recalled to me when you said your linens were bewitched. For the cook in that place was a woman, colored like myself, like myself with much French blood just the same, like myself living always among people who worked spells. But she had a very hard heart, she helped the madam in everything, she liked to watch all that happened, and she gave away tales on the girls. The madam trusted her above everything, and she said, Well, where can I find that slut? because she had gone altogether out of Basin Street before the madam began to ask the police to bring her again. Well, the cook said, I know a charm that works here in New Orleans, colored women do it to bring back their men: in seven days they come again very happy to stay and they cannot say why: even your enemy will come back to you believing you are his friend. It is a New Orleans charm for sure, for certain, they say it does not work even across the river. . . . And then they did it just as the cook said. They took the chamber pot of this girl from under her bed, and in it they mixed with water and milk all the relics of her they found there: the hair from her brush, and the face powder from the puff, and even little bits of her nails they found about the edges of the carpet where she sat by habit to cut her finger- and toenails; and they dipped the sheets with her blood into the water, and all the time the cook said something over it in a low voice; I could not hear all, but
at last she said to the madam, Now spit in it: and the madam spat, and the cook said, When she comes back she will be dirt under your feet.

Madame Blanchard closed her perfume bottle with a thin click: “Yes, and then?”

Then in seven nights the girl came back and she looked very sick, the same clothes and all, but happy to be there. One of the men said, Welcome home, Ninette! and when she started to speak to the madam, the madam said, Shut up and get upstairs and dress yourself. So Ninette, this girl, she said, I’ll be down in just a minute. And after that she lived there quietly.

In saying that “Magic” is a narrative of rhetoric, I want to call attention, first, to the rhetorical dimensions of the maid’s action: she is telling a particular story to a particular audience in a particular situation for, presumably, a particular purpose. I want to call attention, second, to the parallel between the maid’s action and Porter’s: the particular story that Porter is telling is the maid’s telling of Ninette’s story. In analyzing these parallel acts of telling, I want to focus on teller, technique, story, situation, audience, and purpose: all the elements that help determine the shape and effect of the story.

By approaching both the maid’s telling and Porter’s telling as parallel rhetorical acts, we can recognize a crucial element of its construction that may not initially jump out during a first reading: “Magic” is a narrative with three interrelated levels. These are (1) the inner level, narrated by the maid: the story of Ninette, the madam, and the cook; I shall refer to this level as Ninette’s story; (2) the middle level, narrated by the heterodiegetic narrator, who appears only twice: the report of the maid’s telling Ninette’s story to Madame Blanchard; I shall refer to this level as the maid’s story; and (3) the outer level, constructed and designed by Porter as implied author: the largely covert communication from Porter to her audiences, implied and real, of the narrator telling the maid’s story of Ninette’s story; I shall refer to this level as Porter’s story.

In looking first at the technique of “Magic,” notice that, rather than calling attention to the three different levels, Porter’s presentation blurs the borders between them, especially the border between Ninette’s story and the maid’s story. Porter starts in the midst of things
and does not even use quotation marks for the maid's story (And Madame Blanchard, I am happy to be here [emphasis mine]); furthermore, she has the heterodiegetic narrator speak only after Ninette's story is well under way and, as noted above, only twice in the whole story—and each time very briefly. As a result, Porter elides the difference between Ninette's story and the maid's story—or perhaps, better, she foregrounds Ninette's story and backgrounds the maid's. Given this technique, it is not surprising that, as Helen Leath has noted, many critics focus on Ninette to the exclusion of the maid. Surely, one effect of the technique is to engage us strongly in the horrors of Ninette's story.

Indeed, as we attend to those horrors, we also recognize the major disparity between the maid's version of Ninette's story and Porter's: in Porter's version Ninette is not defeated by the cook's magic spell but rather by the social forces lined up against her. Ninette returns to the fancy house looking sick and wearing the same clothes because she has had no money to live on and has not been able to find another way to support herself. Ninette's story in Porter's version is not about magic but rather about failed rebellion and victory for the oppressive madam and her support system of police and well-off men.

This first act of seeing beneath the surface of Ninette's story quickly moves us into the next, richer area of the rhetorical exchange, that involving the ways that Ninette's story, the maid's story, and Porter's story intersect. As soon as we infer that Porter does not expect us to believe in magic, we are inclined to ask whether the maid does—and whether the maid expects Madame Blanchard to. The answers are not immediately obvious, but merely posing these questions highlights the fact that the maid seizes upon the pretext of Madame Blanchard's remark about her laundry being bewitched to tell Ninette's story. This recognition in turn prompts the questions that form the interpretive crux of "Magic": what are the maid's motivations for telling Ninette's story, what does she hope to achieve by telling it, and does she achieve any of her goals? In short, what rhetorical purposes does the maid want her narration to serve, and does it achieve those purposes?

Porter's technique of eliding the first two levels of the narrative suggests that the answer can be found in parallels and contrasts between them. Porter provides many. First, there are the two madams.
Though they move in different social spheres, both are powerful women—they have money, authority, employees. At the same time, their power itself depends on a larger patriarchal structure: the madam provides a service to the men of New Orleans, and when they complain about Ninette’s absence, the madam responds; Madame Blanchard’s wealth and comfort depend, to some extent at least, on her marriage to M. Blanchard. Second, there are the maid and Ninette: they are both subservient employees of a madam. Third, and most strongly, there are the maid and the cook: both have “mixed racial blood”; both have lived always among people who work spells; both like to watch all that happens; both apparently like to tell tales.

All these parallels help us answer the questions about the maid’s rhetorical purposes, though we have a multitude of possibilities rather than any single answer. The maid may be giving Madame Blanchard a warning: If you do not treat me well, I will, like Ninette, oppose you—and because I am like the cook, I will be more successful in my opposition than she. The maid may be trying to ingratiate herself, saying in effect, “Like the cook, I am willing to help my Madame in all things.” Or the maid may be signifying on Madame Blanchard’s remark that the sheets are bewitched in order to scare Madame Blanchard: Like the cook, I can do powerful magic; if you think those sheets are bewitched, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.

Because the end of the maid’s story coincides with the end of Ninette’s, we cannot know which is her primary purpose and we do not know whether she has achieved it. But the two appearances of the heterodiegetic narrator and the two interjections by Madame Blanchard do direct our attention in specific ways. The power struggle between employer and employee that defines Ninette’s story seems to be very much the subtext of the maid’s story. It is when the maid is telling about the madam’s general ill-treatment of her employees that the maid pulls Madame Blanchard’s hair: a quiet assertion of the maid’s power even as she is serving her mistress. Madame Blanchard reasserts control by gently stopping the hair pulling, but she also reveals that she has been caught by the power of the maid’s storytelling: she asks the rapt audience’s perpetual question, “And then what?” In the second appearance, just after the maid recounts the cook’s spell, the heterodiegetic narrator calls attention to Madame Blanchard’s
closing her perfume bottle "with a thin click." Since Ninette’s madam asserted her power over her employees by beating them with bottles, Madame Blanchard’s clicking her own perfume bottle shut at this moment suggests that she feels some need to remind herself—and the maid—of her power. But, like the first interruption of the maid’s telling, this one also ends with Madame Blanchard asking the engaged audience’s question: “Yes, and then?”

More generally, the more we look at the interaction of Ninette’s story, the maid’s story, and Porter’s story, the more it seems that Porter wants us to view the maid’s telling of Ninette’s story as the prime example of the maid’s magic. Like the cook, the maid casts a spell. By calling her story “Magic,” Porter makes the same claim for herself: just as the maid seeks to catch Madame Blanchard in the spell of Ninette’s story, so too does Porter want to catch us up in her telling of the maid’s story.

In this way, the rhetorical exchanges in which we participate as we read and interpret Ninette’s story, the maid’s story, and Porter’s story eventually lead us to reflect on the power of narrative. We do not know exactly what the effect of the maid’s telling on Madame Blanchard will be, but the clues about the subtext of power relations and the evidence of Madame Blanchard’s being caught by the maid’s spell strongly suggest that it will have some effect. And the effect of this conclusion on us is to reinforce our sense of the magic of narrative and to take pleasure in our consenting to Porter’s spell. In this respect, the open-endedness of the story is all to the good. The more interpretations we find of the maid, her motive, her story, and its likely effect, the more we are both drawn into her world and made cognizant of the magical power of narrative.

**Concepts of Rhetoric: Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Communication**

There is more to say about the concrete particularities of "Magic," and I will return to them shortly, but I turn now to consider the theoretical principles I have been using to discuss the story so far. First, the phrase “narrative as rhetoric” means something more than that
narrative uses rhetoric or has a rhetorical dimension. It means instead that narrative is not just story but also action, the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose. Furthermore, as the analysis of “Magic” indicates, this basic configuration of teller-story-situation-audience-purpose is at least doubled in most narrative: there is the narrator’s telling the story to his or her audience and then the author’s telling of the narrator’s telling to the author’s audience. Consequently, the narrator’s telling is part of the author’s construction of the whole narrative, and in that sense, what is a matter of the telling at one level becomes a matter of the told at the next. Before exploring the details of this rhetorical configuration, I would like to highlight some of its key assumptions and emphases by comparing the general approach with the ones that follow from two other widely circulating conceptions of rhetoric: deconstruction and pragmatism.

I call deconstruction’s conception of rhetoric “widely circulating” with full knowledge that deconstruction’s heyday has passed and that most critics and theorists are currently more concerned with reinventing historical criticism and merging literary with cultural studies in ways that foreground the politics and ideology of both cultural and critical texts. I engage deconstruction here because its legacy is so influential: it is to deconstruction that we owe the wide acceptance of the principles that language is inherently unstable, that there is no transcendental anchor to textual meanings, and that textual meanings are more likely to be at odds with one another than not. Like most other contemporary theorists, I acknowledge the value of these deconstructionist principles for complicating our understandings of language, textuality, and interpretation. At the same time, however, I find these views less compelling than many other critics do, and although I am not interested in trying to repudiate deconstruction, I do want, first, to show how the principles of my approach to narrative as rhetoric differ from deconstruction’s and, second, to suggest that, despite appearances, deconstruction does not invalidate or otherwise supplant those principles.

I call pragmatism’s conception of rhetoric a widely circulating one because, through the efforts of Stanley Fish and Richard Rorty, this conception has come to be seen as part and parcel of poststructuralist antifoundationalism. Again, my efforts here are less to argue either for or against pragmatism as a philosophical position than to locate my
approach to narrative as rhetoric in relation to it—and, more specifically, to make a space for that approach in the contemporary critical landscape.

Paul de Man's famous essay "Rhetoric and Semiology" illustrates the fundamental emphasis of deconstruction's approach to rhetoric: a rigorous reading of language as a system of tropes and a rigorous analysis of the logic implied by the tropes of any text. De Man argues that the grammar and rhetoric of texts frequently diverge, but efforts to decide whether one should be privileged over the other are doomed to failure precisely because there is no decisive evidence in the text. He brilliantly illustrates this logic of deconstruction in his tour de force reading of an interchange from the 1970s television show *All in the Family*. When Edith Bunker asks her husband, Archie, whether he wants the laces on his bowling shoes tied over or under, he impatiently replies, "What's the difference?" Under de Man's gaze, Archie's question is fully explicable, first, as what its rhetoric suggests—a rhetorical question revealing Archie's belief that there is no difference—and, second, as what its grammar suggests, that is, a genuine question, asking for an explanation of difference. As a genuine question, it is a kind of challenge to Edith—if you're going to ask me such a question, I want you to explain the difference to me. It is worth noting that de Man's analysis includes the rhetorical situation but that he does not believe that an appeal to the situation can decide the case. Since the fault line between grammar and rhetoric is so wide, since the text finally does not contain sufficient evidence for its own interpretation, appealing to author, audience, occasion, or purpose for a resolution to the undecidability is not a valid move but instead an imposition of the interpreter's will on the text.

What deconstruction's attention to textual rhetoric means for narrative analysis is very nicely encapsulated in J. Hillis Miller's entry "Narrative" in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. The "basic elements" of narrative, Miller declares, are three: plot, personification, and trope. Not surprisingly, he gives special emphasis to trope, arguing, in effect, that narrative inevitably tropes over itself. That is, narrative develops some pattern or repetition of trope, and this patterning invariably generates "fundamentally incongruous meanings" or "narrative disjunctions that can never be brought back to unity" (77).

Turning back to "Magic," then, we can see that a deconstructionist
would be willing to accept much of the analysis I have presented so far but would go on to say that it stops too soon, that it does not do a sufficiently rigorous reading of the logic of Porter’s narrative. The conclusion that the story demonstrates the magical power of narrative does not attend sufficiently to the first move of my analysis: the inference that Porter’s story tells us that Ninette comes back not because of the cook’s spell but because of the madam’s power. Once we reexamine that inference, we can see that the powers of all the spells found through the analogies made in my analysis—between the cook’s spell, the maid’s story, and Porter’s story—are built on an illusion. Consequently, Porter’s story simultaneously demonstrates the power of narrative and exposes narrative as powerless. Everyone may be caught in the spell of narrative, but the spell is, finally, based on an illusion.

Furthermore, we can push the logic of Porter’s technique of elision to its logical conclusion. The spell in Ninette’s story that brings her back is cast by the cook, whereas the spell in the maid’s story is cast by the maid’s own telling. But it is just as much the spell cast by the maid’s story that brings Ninette back, because there is no evidence other than the maid’s word that Ninette came back in seven days. Indeed, there is no evidence that any of the events of the tale actually occurred or that Ninette is anything other than the maid’s invention. Again, the effect is to demonstrate narrative’s power and simultaneously to expose its powerlessness. The maid’s narrative makes things happen—and makes them happen so vividly as to catch Madame Blanchard in its spell—but the things it makes happen may have happened only through the act of the maid’s telling. If saying makes things so, then our sayings are powerful indeed; but if saying makes things so, then, to anyone’s saying, we can say, “So what?” And of course, this same logic applies a fortiori to Porter’s story.

Before discussing the relation of this deconstructive reading to the one I have offered, I would like to consider the pragmatist conception of rhetoric and its resultant claims for both readings. This conception, represented in the work of Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, and others, is well summarized in Fish’s chapter entitled “Rhetoric” in Doing What Comes Naturally. This view sees the world—especially that part of the world concerned with knowledge—as constituted by rhetoric. Our discourse about the
world makes the world what we find it to be. In his essay, Fish points to two attitudes toward rhetoric that have been present in different forms throughout the history of Western thought: (1) the attitude that rhetoric is a means by which a truth independent of our discourse is folded, spindled, mutilated, or otherwise manipulated; and (2) the attitude that rhetoric is inescapable because truth is not independent of but rather constituted by our discourse about it. Fish emphasizes the point that the ancient quarrel can never be resolved, but upon reflection we can see that this emphasis itself indicates his preference for the second view. Someone committed to the position that truth is independent of our discourse would think that this truth could be demonstrated sufficiently for the quarrel to be resolved, whereas someone committed to the position that truth is constituted by our discourse about it can see both positions as consistent with the general principle—and therefore as engaged in a quarrel in which neither can win.

A pragmatist view of narrative as rhetoric would view narrative as inescapably bound up with its interpretation and its interpretation as endlessly malleable—according to the needs, interests, and values of the interpreter on any given occasion. Consequently, the pragmatist would regard both my analysis of "Magic" and that of the deconstructor as different instances of the same phenomenon: each is construing Porter's narrative in a particular way for its particular purposes. What neither view realizes, however, is how partial and particular it is, how much the questions it asks and the assumptions it makes—about language, the nature of narrative, readers, and many other things—participate in the construction not just of the interpretation but also of the text. And what each view needs to recognize is that no final resolution of disagreements is possible. There is no fixed ground, no foundation—either in the narrative text, in authorial agency, in reader response, or, indeed, in any general theory of interpretation—that would allow for any satisfactory adjudication. However, the pragmatist would also say that the difference between my analysis and the deconstructive one is the difference between a foundationalist and an antifoundationalist view of truth. From the pragmatist perspective, my analysis seems to assume Porter's narrative has some essential character that the interpretation seeks to describe, whereas the deconstructive analysis sees the textual rhetoric as
frustrating any access to such an essential character. Although the pragmatist would want to qualify the deconstructor’s claim for the necessity of the deconstructive reading, the pragmatist would also favor it over the one I have proposed.

Let me now reconsider my analysis in light of these critiques. As always, I find that the deconstructive analysis seems simultaneously counterintuitive and virtually irresistible: once the premises of deconstruction are granted, its logic is very persuasive. However, thinking about this logic from the pragmatist’s antifoundational perspective clarifies the strength and weakness of deconstruction’s appeal. From the pragmatist perspective, the logic is intriguing because it is an instance of what it describes, an enactment of the power and powerlessness of narrative. That is, the logic leads to a strong account of Porter’s narrative, one capable of disrupting the analysis I proposed, but the logic also leaves us powerless to move beyond its contradictory assertions about power and powerlessness. To describe the logic this way is to make clear how deconstruction’s claim to be reading the text more closely than anyone else can be legitimately questioned: the logic depends on two interpretive leaps. The first leap is to key terms—in this case, magic and narrative, as opposed, say, to race and class; the second is to a narrative about those terms in the text—in this case, the narrative about the power/powerlessness of narrative. In other words, the antifoundational perspective helps point out that although no narrative and no interpretation is deconstruction-proof, deconstruction’s logic about textual logic is not as inevitable and necessary as its attention to textual rhetoric makes it appear. Laying bare the leaps that form the basis of the deconstructor’s operation shows that deconstruction cannot really claim to be closer to the literal text than other approaches.

With this understanding in mind, we can return to the most important question that the deconstructive reading presents to the one I offered: what is the relation between the cook’s magic spell and the maid’s magic of narration? Does our awareness that the cook’s magic is illusory make us suspect that the magic of narrative is similarly illusory? A closer look reveals that Porter’s story, in effect, recognizes the deconstructive hypothesis but then sets out its affirmation of the power of narrative. That is, Porter’s story indicates that the maid’s nar-
rative is more powerful than the cook’s spell because the maid’s narrative catches the powerful Madame Blanchard, whereas the cook’s spell is not really responsible for Ninette’s return and both that spell and the return may be a product of the maid’s magic. Furthermore, the parallel between the maid and Ninette also works to point to the story’s ultimate affirmation of narrative. Ninette, though sufficiently wily and resourceful to save enough money to leave the brothel, is not sufficiently wily and resourceful to construct a narrative for her madam that will allow her to keep the money and successfully escape. Regardless of whether the maid wants to ingratiate herself with Madame Blanchard, to scare her, or to warn her, the maid uses narrative in an effort to establish a different relationship with her employer than the one Ninette has with the madam. To be sure, Porter leaves open the question of whether the magic of the narrative will have any real effect. But in these situations “where it was almost always about the money”—situations faced by Ninette, the cook, and the maid—where the powerful have money and the powerless minorities and women have none, Porter’s story suggests that the best weapon or best defense of the powerless is narrative. Porter’s story, of course, does not offer any guarantee of the maid’s success, but it certainly suggests that her odds are better than Ninette’s.

Before turning from the deconstructionist to the pragmatist challenge, I would like to call attention to some other dimensions of the spell Porter casts in “Magic.” To read the story is not only to inquire into the maid’s motives but also to situate ourselves emotively and ethically in relationship to Ninette, the French cook, the two madams, the maid, and Porter herself. In Ninette’s story, the emotive and ethical lines are clearly drawn: our sympathies are with Ninette in her nervy effort to escape the domineering, abusive madam (and her willing helper, the cook); we experience the madam’s victory as a dispiriting defeat. In the maid’s story, however, the emotive and ethical lines are blurry. Because we have no strong evidence of Madame Blanchard’s ethical character, the maid’s storytelling, in contrast to Ninette’s efforts at escape, has the quality of a preemptive strike. Our inferences about Ninette’s story and what it suggests about the plight of the powerless woman certainly make the maid’s action understandable, and these inferences may incline us to sympathize with and even
admire her ingenuity and resourcefulness. However, once we recall that the maid may have simply fabricated Ninette's story, the maid's character—and the ethical balance of her story—shift. If the maid has invented Ninette's story, then she is someone who aggressively manipulates her environment, someone who, above all, looks out for number one. Of course, with either construction of the maid's character, Madame Blanchard does not change. We never see her as a victim of the maid, and, indeed, she may remain ultimately unaffected by the maid's storytelling. Nevertheless, our reflections on the maid enable us to recognize more fully how charged this domestic scene of one woman brushing another's hair may be. It is certainly a subtle power struggle; it may also be one with an underlying threat of violence. If Ninette's story is dispiriting, the maid's is chilling: although its outcome is unknown, the story itself is full of ominous notes.

Moving to Porter's story, we can recognize that her technique of plunging us into this situation works not just to involve us cognitively but also to affect us emotionally and to challenge us ethically. Each inference we make about the maid's storytelling situation also leads us, first, to a tacit judgment of the maid's action, motives, and character, and second, to our sense of how powerfully the scene is charged. But virtually each new inference (the maid is telling a story from her past; the maid is making up this story) leads us to a reexamination of these same things, a reexamination that involves us in such ethical questions as how much we take the maid's side, regardless of her motives, how much we care about whether she is making up Ninette's story, how much we judge Madame Blanchard simply on the basis of her name and her class. In short, Porter's story so successfully casts its spell because it so efficiently arouses and so tightly interweaves the audience's cognitive, emotive, and ethical responses.

If, on the one hand, my effort to make space for my approach to narrative as rhetoric alongside the deconstructive one has been successful, it may, on the other, nevertheless serve to sharpen the pragmatist objection: the approach is based on a fundamental epistemological error, the notion that there are facts and truths outside of our discourse. Now note that the pragmatist, especially the pragmatist called Stanley Fish, works with a strict either/or logic: either language describes the world or language constructs the world; either there is tran-
scendent Truth or there is no truth; either there are facts outside of discourse or discourse creates facts and truths. My response to the pragmatist objection is that this either/or logic inadequately captures the complexity of the relationship between facts, hypotheses, and theories, or in the realm of literary criticism, texts, interpretations, and approaches. I can better substantiate this claim after you read the following narrative, which I have entitled “Institutional Magic.”

During a session at a conference I recently attended called “The Politics of Interpretation after Poststructuralism,” I witnessed a disturbing event. A white middle-aged man was reading a paper arguing that the political consequences of much mainstream poststructuralist thought are inimical to the politics of multiculturalism and that this antithesis highlights some serious theoretical limitations of poststructuralism. His delivery indicated both that he felt very strongly about the political dimension of his argument and that he was very nervous about making this case at a conference where the reigning assumption seemed to be that the theoretical (non)foundations of poststructuralism were beyond question. After he had been talking for about ten minutes, a man in the audience began to hiss. At first the sound was barely audible, but the hisser gradually grew bolder and louder. Then the woman sitting next to him joined in. And then another person and another, until everyone in the room, including the speaker, could hear it. The speaker became increasingly flustered until, unable to stand it anymore, he looked up from his text and berated the audience: “You see, this is exactly the kind of negative political consequence I am talking about.” But this chiding only incited the hisser to increase their volume. The speaker tried to return to his text but was now so distraught that he could not find his place. The hissing continued unabated, and the speaker’s distress turned to panic: shouting, “The hell with it!” he threw his paper into the air and ran from the podium and out of the room. As he left, the hissing turned to applause.

Horrified by this event, I wrote two letters: one to the speaker to express some sympathy and support, and one to the conference organizer to complain about the behavior of the audience and to inquire whether any formal action was going to be taken. Within a few weeks I had two replies: a very brief thank-you from the speaker, and a
longer letter from the conference organizer with a very surprising enclosure. Since an unsolicited apology had just arrived, he was not going to pursue any formal action; I would understand, he said, when I read the enclosed copy of the letter of apology. This letter, you see, was from the speaker. In addition to apologizing, the speaker detailed his conversion to a position much more sympathetic to poststructuralism, and he expressed gratitude for the audience’s “creative resistance” to his earlier, erroneous argument. Finally, the speaker hoped that the organizer would be willing to consider the paper he wrote about his conversion experience for publication in the conference volume, adding as an aside that the acceptance of one more essay would clinch his pending tenure case.

Let us now consider the pragmatist question about the existence and force of the “facts” of this story and my use of it. There are, I maintain, numerous kinds of facts involved here: (1) Facts that will not be disputed—for example, that I asked you to read “Institutional Magic.” (2) Facts that depend on the employment of our interpretive faculties—for example, that there are recognizable parallels between this story and Porter’s “Magic,” especially between Ninette’s defeat and the conference speaker’s change of heart. (3) Facts that depend on an even deeper excursion into the realm of interpretation so that the line between fact and interpretation is extremely blurry—for example, that the speaker’s capitulation in “Institutional Magic” is different from Ninette’s because he is more complicit in the oppressive system. Beyond this point, we get so deep into the territory of interpretation that rather than facts we have questions whose answers most will agree deserve the name “interpretations”: How much is the “I” of “Institutional Magic” like the maid in “Magic”? How much is the “I” constructing you as a reader in a role like the one Madame Blanchard has in “Magic”? What is the relation between the “I” of “Institutional Magic” and the “I” of Narrative as Rhetoric? What is the veiled communication I want to make? Is “Institutional Magic” less open-ended than Porter’s story? Given the context in which I have used it, how much is “Institutional Magic” thematizing narrative?

According to the pragmatist view, even this delineation of kinds of facts and this consideration of the interrelations between facts, inter-
pretations, and questions needs to be seen as the product of a kind of discourse: everything I’ve said about “Magic” and “Institutional Magic” can be seen as arising from a set of beliefs and assumptions that in turn influence my way of talking about narrative, literary critical arguments, academic audiences, and other issues. Without those beliefs and assumptions and without that discursive framework, both “Institutional Magic” and the things I have said about it—indeed, perhaps most of the things you have thought about it—are not recognizable and therefore cannot be considered as facts of any kind. If we stepped out of the discursive framework provided by my beliefs and assumptions and moved into one that attended, say, only to the reproduction of the black marks on the white page, then even the data and the givens of my case apparently disappear.

With the point that there are no facts outside of some framework for describing them I am in complete agreement. It is the next step of the pragmatist logic, the conclusion that truth is constituted by our discourse about it, that gives me pause. That our facts change as our discursive frameworks change does not prove that there are no facts; it proves rather that there are multiple facts and multiple ways of construing facts. Thus the same phenomenon, for example, the phrase “happy to be here,” may be, in one discursive frame, an ironic comment that reveals something about a character, while in another frame something tells us about the importance of the letter h. In making this claim, I am not asserting that my rhetorical approach to “Magic” or “Institutional Magic” is the standard or foundation against which all other ways must be compared. But I am asserting that the approach makes a legitimate claim to propose one kind of truth about both stories: the way each functions as a communication from author to reader.

To put the point another way, to accept the pragmatist position would be to accept that your experience in reading “Institutional Magic”—its arousal of horror, pleasure, disgust, indifference, or anything else—is not primarily a function of textual phenomena and their shaping by me (under Porter’s influence) but rather is rooted in something else—a set of beliefs about the academy, about stories, and about stories about the academy. My alternative view is quite simple: we should reject the institutional magic of pragmatism that makes the
story and its techniques disappear, because those techniques and that shaped story do influence the experience. Indeed, I have told this story about the academy rather than a whole range of others precisely because I believe in its power to evoke a strong response from my expected audience. You will be willing to accept my alternative to the extent that you find yourself convinced that the shaped story is important to (though not necessarily determinative of) whatever response it evokes in you.

In countering the either/or logic of the pragmatist by arguing that there are multiple facts and multiple ways of construing them, I am proposing a different kind of antifoundationalism. The position is antifoundationalist because it insists on the incompatibility of the multiple facts, the impossibility of finding the one true account of them and their connection to each other. At the same time, my antifoundationalist position departs from Fish’s version by insisting that although facts are always mediated, always seen from within the confines of a given perspective, the perspective does not create the facts. In doing interpretation, then, we will encounter narratives capable of providing recalcitrance to the rhetorical critic; furthermore, the perspectives of other approaches have the potential to complicate, revise, or even overturn the initial results of a rhetorical interpretation.

\section*{Rhetoric in Relation to Other Interests}

As many readers will have already recognized, my approach is indebted to rhetorical theorists such as Kenneth Burke and Wayne C. Booth who also emphasize narrative as a distinctive and powerful means for an author to communicate knowledge, feelings, values, and beliefs to an audience: indeed, viewing narrative as having the purpose of communicating knowledge, feelings, values, and beliefs is viewing narrative as rhetoric. There are various metaphors, all somewhat inadequate, that might be applied to this relationship between author, text, and audience: interaction, exchange, transaction, intercourse. Interaction is unexceptionable because unexceptional and bland. Both exchange and transaction carry connotations of buying and selling, and while these connotations are not entirely inappropriate, they are also reductive.
Gift exchange is better (see Sharp), but it does not quite capture the effort frequently involved in the reader's half of the exchange. Intercourse is, well, sexy. Its calling attention to the play of desire and the erotic component in the writing and reading of narrative (see Barthes) are genuine advantages, but again, it strikes me as too narrow. What I want is a shorthand term that might include all these things—interaction, transaction, (gift) exchange, intercourse. Rather than search for another metaphor, I propose to let rhetoric function as this shorthand. That is, in this book, when I talk about narrative as rhetoric or about a rhetorical relationship between author, text, and reader, I want to refer to the complex, multilayered processes of writing and reading, processes that call upon our cognition, emotions, desires, hopes, values, and beliefs.

Given this larger interest, I am more specifically interested in the elements of narrative (e.g., character, event, setting, narrative discourse) and in techniques, forms, structures, genres, and conventions of narrative for the ways in which they enable, enrich, interfere with, or otherwise complicate narrative as rhetoric. I am interested in the author in a way that parts company with Booth's highly influential rhetorical approach. Booth emphasizes the author as Constructor of the text, whose choices about the elements of narrative largely control the responses of the audience. As a result of this emphasis, Booth's work moves in the direction of defending the Author and the importance of authorial intention for determining the meaning of a text. I do not see authorial intention as fully recoverable and as controlling response, even as I want to insist that when we read rhetorically we encounter something other than ourselves. The approach I am advocating shifts emphasis from author as controller to the recursive relationships among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response, to the way in which our attention to each of these elements both influences and can be influenced by the other two. Shifting the emphasis this way also helps to open the rhetorical approach to the insights of many other approaches—from feminism to psychoanalysis, from Bakhtinian linguistics to cultural studies—about agency, response, and text. These insights, when integrated into the general approach, can complicate interpretations, even as the main concern with the rhetorical transaction of reading remains.
In the case of "Magic," the rhetorical analysis I have presented so far benefits especially from being complicated by the insights of a feminist analysis. Attending more closely to issues of gender and especially to issues of gender and power in "Magic," several important points emerge or at least take on greater importance. First, although all the main actors and tellers in the story are women and, indeed, the maid's story occurs in a distinctly female space, there is a larger system of patriarchy controlling the events. The madam of the "fancy house" is, in one sense, not entirely successful in her battle with Ninette because she has to give in to the demands of the male customers and take steps to bring her back. Furthermore, this development helps bring to the fore the way in which the brothel's existence depends upon the indulgence of the police and the larger patriarchal society. And why is Ninette unable to support herself except as a prostitute? This question is easily answered in light of the way the class-gender system worked in New Orleans of the 1920s (and still works in many places today) to prevent a poor woman from having any serious economic opportunity outside marriage. Ninette's parallel with the maid and the madam's with Madame Blanchard are also important in this connection. The maid's opportunities are severely limited by her gender, class, and race, and her effort to overcome these limitations through narrative becomes more important the more we attend to these limitations. If the madam of the brothel is dependent on a bargain she has made with patriarchal society, so, too, is Madame Blanchard. The difference, of course, is that her bargain seems to have left her better off. But Madame Blanchard's particular interest in Ninette's story may now appear as some kind of recognition, however unconscious, of some fundamental similarity among women that cuts across differences of class and race. Attending to these issues also suggests that we should not be too quick to move from the horror of Ninette's story to Porter's thematizing of the power of narrative: to do so is to blunt the narrative's genuine social critique. Indeed, it is the rhetorical power of the first-level story upon which all the effects of the narrative are built.

What is true of such a feminist approach is also true of other approaches: each of them is a potential source of complication for the rhetorical precisely because the rhetorical is interested in the multilayered relationships between authorial agency, textual phenomena, and
reader response and because it believes that reading is endlessly recursive. Consequently, I could continue the analysis of “Magic” by bringing the conclusions reached so far into dialogue with some things I’ve barely touched on, such as the story’s location in New Orleans in the 1920s. But rhetorical criticism must reach a (provisional) end, even if rhetorical reading, like relationships between people, stops nowhere.

Prelude

The rest of this book offers essays based on the underlying conception of narrative as rhetoric that I have sketched in this introduction, but each essay takes its particular shape from the particular problem or issue it seeks to address. Where this introduction has been concerned with illustrating, situating, and articulating the fundamental principles of my approach, the succeeding chapters are concerned with deploying it in the service of specific interpretive and theoretical problems. In this respect, my strategy of advancing the case for my approach will shift from direct comparison with other approaches to demonstration of the kinds of analysis this approach makes possible—or, more generally, to the way in which it can be an effective means of both identifying and resolving a wide range of theoretical and interpretive problems. No chapter is designed to produce a comprehensive analysis of any narrative, but each one is designed to explore some relation between particular features of a specific narrative and general issues in narrative theory. Because the essays were originally composed on different occasions for different purposes and different audiences, I have found it helpful to write headnotes for the occasion and audience of this book. Therefore, I will not describe the essays in detail here, but just offer the following brief remarks about their arrangement and their concerns.

I have organized the essays into three groups, but there is considerable overlap among the groups. In the first group are essays concerned primarily with progression and narrative discourse. In my previous book of narrative theory, Reading People, Reading Plots, I sketched an approach to character and narrative progression that seeks to describe
the way in which the internal dynamics of narrative directed our attention to different dimensions of characters—to what I called their mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components. The essays in this first group, in effect, expand upon the model I developed in Reading People by first considering Virginia Woolf’s The Waves, whose progression is more lyric than narrative, and second by attempting to theorize the role of “voice” in narrative with particular attention to Thackeray’s Vanity Fair and Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms. The essay on Hemingway also begins to move into the territory of the second group of essays, on mimetic conventions, ethics, and homodiegetic narration, because it moves beyond voice to consider some of the powers and limits associated with Frederic Henry’s narration.

The first two essays in part 2, on Hemingway’s “My Old Man” and Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, consider two problems in homodiegetic narration that both relate to the larger question of what constitutes mimesis in homodiegetic narration. In Hemingway’s story, the issue is unselfconscious narration and paralipsis, the narrator telling less than he or she knows. My effort there is not only to address some interpretive problems in “My Old Man” but also to show why the paralipsis is a paradox but not a problem. In The Great Gatsby, the issue is paralepsis, the narrator telling more than he knows, and its relationship to narrative reliability and unreliability. I attempt to show that understanding the rhetorical reasons for the paralepsis helps understand the ways in which the relationship between the narratorial and the character functions of homodiegetic narrators such as Nick Carraway can fluctuate considerably in the course of a novel. In both essays, questions of ethical judgment figure prominently, but in the third essay in this group, on Conrad’s story “The Secret Sharer,” I make ethics the primary focus as I examine the way in which the technique and the progression complicate the ethical positioning of the authorial audience.

This interest in the ethics and ideology of reading continues in the third group of essays. Here I combine issues of form and technique with questions of ideology and audience. The first essay in this section considers the question of audience in relation to second-person narration, particularly that in Lorrie Moore’s short story “How.” Bringing structuralist theory’s concept of “narratee” and rhetorical theory’s
concept of “narrative audience” together, I attempt to show that the complexity of effects generated by Moore’s story can best be explained by recognizing the complementarity of the two concepts. In the next essay, I consider the form of Dinesh D’Souza’s storytelling in *Illiberal Education* and how his ideology shapes that storytelling and my ideology shapes my critique. Although *Illiberal Education* is no longer receiving the attention it once did, I offer this essay as an illustration of how approaching narrative as rhetoric can perform effective work in the public arena. In the final essay of the book, I consider the problem of interpreting Toni Morrison’s character Beloved as an instance of a textual recalcitrance that is designed not to yield to our efforts at interpretation. This “stubbornness,” I suggest, has implications for my efforts as a white male reader to come to terms with Morrison’s narrative. This essay also experiments with a possible new direction in rhetorical reading by trying to mirror in some of the critical prose the complexity of the reading experience itself. Finally, I have included an appendix written in a different voice, which assesses the work of Wayne C. Booth, the theorist who has most advanced the profession’s thinking about rhetoric and narrative.

In sum, this book represents a series of inquiries into a range of texts and problems with a corresponding range of emphases on textual form, authorial agency, and reader response, especially those components of response involving judgment, ethics, and ideology. Taken together, these essays are an attempt to offer a rounded, albeit not exhaustive, view of what it means to claim that narrative is rhetoric; as rhetorical acts themselves, they are an attempt to show the power of the antifoundationalist, ethical, ideological, and audience-oriented rhetorical approach applied here to the spells of Porter’s “Magic.”