Introduction

Understanding Narrative

JAMES PHELAN
PETER J. RABINOWITZ

From Understanding to Self-Consciousness, from Fiction to Narrative

By design, our title refers to Brooks and Warren's influential textbooks, especially Understanding Fiction. In establishing this intertextuality, we are neither claiming kinship with Brooks and Warren's 1943 volume nor launching yet another assault on New Criticism. Instead, we are invoking their familiar title in order to fix a point of orientation in an increasingly complicated critical landscape, a point that will help us define the ways that the terms understanding, fiction, and narrative—as well as the institutional practices to which they are tied—have altered in the past fifty years.

In the most general sense, understanding fiction and its signifieds have weathered this period the way that any social construct (a string quartet, a baseball franchise, a family, an English department) survives a half-century: the signifiers have remained intact while the signifieds have been continuously transformed. But the trajectory of the relations between signifier and signified in the phrase understanding fiction is especially complex, partly because the signifier-signified relation of each separate term has evolved differently, partly because these divergent changes have led to a
change in their relation to each other. Adapting Umberto Eco's metaphor of semiotic space, we can say that, while the two terms have remained in each other's gravitational field, each has, in its own way, been realigning its relationships to numerous other signifiers and signifieds in nearby orbits.

On the one hand, understanding has been adding signifieds as theorists have developed new ways of reading, new ideas about the interconnectedness of reading and writing, new theories about the difficulty, even impossibility, of reading, and, indeed, new understandings of understanding itself. That is, not only are there now multiple, noncompatible theories claiming to offer the best account of the way the particulars of a text form—or resist forming—a larger gestalt; but theorizing about understanding by everyone from Hirsch to Irigaray has also profoundly altered our relation to the activity. In short, our understanding of understanding has been pluralized, and one increasingly important use of the term holds that understanding is a self-reflexive and self-questioning act, one in which the process and the subject matter are inextricably tangled. In this use of the term, understanding entails not only the interpreter's translation of the object into other terms but also the critic's self-conscious awareness of her relation to the "terministic screen" or "critical framework" or "metaphysical assumptions" or "situated subjectivity" or "horizon of expectations" that mediate between her and the object. Wayne Booth's essay exemplifies both dimensions of the shift in our understanding of understanding. Booth distinguishes several different kinds of reading, each entailing a different kind of understanding: "reading-with" (accepting the apparent demands made upon us by the text), "reading-against" (seeking what is unintended or even "banned" by the text), and "critical rereading," which searches a text anew, either for "deeper meaning" or for "an understanding of structure." Despite certain echoes in its terminology, Booth's third category is clearly distinct from Brooks and Warren's notion of understanding as an account of the "organic relation" existing among a text's elements, for it inevitably reflects back on the act of reading itself: it can lead us, for instance, to "deplore" what we have done before or, alternatively, to
Introduction

acquire a “heightened admiration” through a heightened questioning of the ethical quality of our reading experience. In particular, the assumptions about the values of structural understanding that serve as the basis for Brooks and Warren’s analyses become the subject of Booth’s inquiry into Henry James’s Wings of the Dove. Susan McClary’s analysis of Mozart’s Prague Symphony similarly builds from one kind of understanding to another: her investigation of Mozart’s structures leads into an interrogation of the reigning assumptions about their ideological neutrality.

While understanding has been adding signifieds, fiction has been expanding its borders, invading the space formerly controlled by other signifiers. Indeed, the borders have been changing in at least two ways at once. First, border-crossings have become bolder and more frequent, as theorists such as Hayden White and narrative artists such as Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, Ishmael Reed, and Don DeLillo have called attention to the fictionalizing that they regard as inevitably a part of such nonfiction genres as history, biography, and autobiography. Second, the location of the borders has also changed: fiction has moved out from its home base in the province of prose to annex pieces of such surrounding territories as poetry, film, painting, music, and performance art. Indeed, as the signifier has stretched to cover all these different signifieds, its work of signification has increasingly been shouldered by another member of its family. Just as television sets, given their broadened functions, have been increasingly referred to as monitors, so the term fiction has increasingly been replaced by narrative.

Some theorists, of course, have called for resistance to what they see as a kind of imperialism in these expansionist tendencies, an imperialism that has led to a loss of attention to the special qualities of the individual domains that are being merged in the larger entity of narrative. The decreased differentiation between history and fiction has been particularly troubling. But for the moment we do not want to engage the question of whether these changes are for the better, for the worse, or—as is more likely—have mixed results. Our point is that these alterations in the landscape cannot be ignored. To take just one consequence, the realignment of relations
among fiction, nonfiction, history, and narrative means that apparent similarities of terminology between old and new critical texts on these subjects frequently mask significant differences in their conceptual territories. Future theoretical discussions will no doubt further change the terrain in which we work, but it seems unlikely that the old map of the territory will ever be restored.

The superseding of fiction (with its silent partner prose) by narrative is reflected most clearly in this collection by the essays of Judith Mayne, Susan McClary, and Mary Louise Pratt. In her essay on the film version of The Picture of Dorian Gray, Mayne proposes a reconceptualization of the notion of spectatorship and then shows how attention to acts of spectatorship within the film raises previously submerged elements of its exploration of male/female and straight/gay relations. The essay is a self-sufficient contribution to film theory and practical criticism; but in the context of this collection it also invites questions about the similarities and differences between representations of spectatorship in film and representations of reading in the novel.

In her essay, McClary peels away “the polished surfaces and assuring reconciliations that characterize the public veneer” of Mozart’s music. In particular, she demonstrates how what she calls “narrative inflections” intervene in the structure of Mozart’s Prague Symphony, and how an examination of these inflections on two fronts (public and private) can reveal the ways in which he was “wrestling” with the historical tensions (including tensions over class, gender, and identity) of late eighteenth-century bourgeois culture. In so doing, McClary suggests how the music reveals “the contradictions bound up with subject formation” and provides “models for how bourgeois sensitivity might be constructed in the face of both oppressive authority and the temptation to regress into nostalgia.”

Mary Louise Pratt's essay is, on the surface, more traditionally literary. But she too moves beyond the borders of a volume on “understanding fiction” as it was conceived by Brooks, Warren, and most of their contemporaries. Indeed, because the relatively straightforward travel narratives of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century
Introduction

European explorers in the Americas and Africa appear not to "answer fully enough our basic interest about human action" in the way that such contemporaneous canonical fictions as Clarissa and Wuthering Heights do, they would seem perfect exemplars of the class of anecdotal texts that Brooks and Warren cast out in the opening pages of their book (1-4). Without denying this difference, Pratt establishes that these texts, too, have a great deal to offer to serious students of narrative, revealing through her careful analysis of the travel narratives' techniques of description and narration the ways they imply, reinforce, and promulgate their imperialist ideology. Just as Pratt's analyses of these narratives are partially informed by the work done on more canonical works and genres in the last fifteen years, so too does her analysis offer a fresh way to think about the subtle and not-so-subtle communication of ideologies in canonical fictional texts. More challenging still, her analysis invites us to question the very bases on which we sort out our literary categories.

Theory practice: Rewriting the "New Reading"

The changes in the meanings of and relations between understanding and fiction are only a small part of much broader changes in narrative studies since the breakdown of the widespread New Critical orthodoxy established by such books as Understanding Fiction. To take one example, consider the issue of organic unity. Where Brooks and Warren could once proclaim with utter authority and confidence that "A piece of fiction is a unity, in so far as the piece of fiction is successful" (xx), contemporary critics of narrative share no such agreement about the relation between unity and success. This change is not simply the substitution of one dogma for another; that is, it is not simply the consequence of the rise of some monolithic "poststructuralism," or even of a clan of related poststructuralisms, that proclaims the impossibility of organic unity. Rather, even many individual critics who embrace few of the principles of poststructuralism find the search for organic unity a
decreasingly rewarding critical pursuit. For example, Phelan's analysis of the relation between present tense narration and Coetzee's positioning of his implied audience in *Waiting for the Barbarians* has an unexpected side effect. In tracing the course of the audience's positionings, Phelan claims that Coetzee's narrative lacks one of the standard features of the coherent, unified text: the implied author's final judgment of the protagonist. In a traditional analysis, this lack would move to the center of the study: the critic would have to address the question of whether Coetzee had created a new kind of unity or frustrated the reader's desire for unity—or whether he had simply failed as an artist. For Phelan, however, this question is beside the point because he has shifted attention away from the form-in-itself and focused instead on the dynamics of the audience's response without worrying about the overall coherence of those dynamics. Thus Phelan's attention to the formal element of present tense narration implicitly throws into question what we mean by formal analysis. Similarly, Rabinowitz's essay is specifically focused on the way that the ending of *The Maltese Falcon* surreptitiously betrays the epistemological principles that had grounded the novel to that point. But here too the traditional questions about the narrative's unity drop out of the analysis as Rabinowitz seeks instead to interrogate the sources of this epistemological rupture in the intersection of narrative technique (specifically, the use of "second person narration") and ideology (specifically, that stemming from Hammett's anxieties about women). Rabinowitz first shows that Hammett's acceptance of his culture's dominant ideology of gender leads him to deny full subjectivity to Brigid O'Shaughnesssey and, as a consequence, to choose a particular kind of second person narration at the climax. Rabinowitz then shows how this technical choice short-circuits the epistemological innovations Hammett was introducing into the evolving formula of the hard-boiled detective novel. In other words, rather than holding up unity as a goal to be achieved and a measure of aesthetic success, Rabinowitz focuses on how a rupture in organic unity allows us to read the novel as a site of conflict between ideologies.
Introduction

Not surprisingly, this collection represents more than just the general critical shift away from a concern for unity. It also indicates how far we have traveled away from the larger program implied in Brooks and Warren's "Letter to the Teacher" and exemplified in the rest of *Understanding Fiction*. Although we all still live with the powerful legacy of the New Criticism, there is probably no single critical principle of *Understanding Fiction* that some prominent theorist has not repudiated in the last fifty years. Even more significant than the breakdown of the New Critical hegemony is the institution's refusal to replace it with any New Orthodoxy. We therefore doubt that we could propose any new set of principles for understanding narrative to which all our contributors, let alone all contemporary students of narrative, would subscribe. And yet this critical ferment does not, we believe, lead to theoretical anarchy. Indeed, although we can't be sure that any of the individual contributors would agree, we view this volume as a chance to stake out a program of critical activity—one quite different from that which followed in the wake of *Understanding Fiction*, not only in its particular critical principles, but also in its larger metatheoretical stance.

For the past fifty years, the journals have been full of essays offering new readings of Masterpieces Ancient and Modern, new keys to their meaning or, more recently, to their contradictory meanings or even their unreadability. We contend that the continued production of such essays is less and less profitable—in particular, that untheorized interpretation can make only a minor contribution to contemporary narrative studies. By untheorized, we mean interpretation that goes about proving its thesis without reflecting either on the principles informing its practice or on the relation of the essay's findings to more general issues in narrative theory. (By this definition, of course, many essays of the forties, fifties, and sixties were theorized; our aim is not to privilege a given theoretical content but rather to emphasize a kind of inquiry.)

An untheorized contribution is necessarily limited, in part, for a reason that others before us have articulated: as the number of new readings increases, the distinctiveness of any single reading fades away. What more is there to say about Joyce's attitudes toward
Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*? But we believe that such critical practice is limited for a more serious reason as well: it leaves out a vital dimension of critical inquiry at a time when the concept of understanding has been pluralized and when, as a consequence, many critics are engaged in an active and far-reaching conversation about the concepts underlying any proffered new understanding: author, audience, text, history, sign, structure, story, discourse, tense, character, style, ideology, politics, gender, ethics, and so forth. If we ignore this conversation, not only do we leave ourselves open to the possibility that the new reading has been undermined or recontextualized even before it is published. We also remain shut off from a significant dimension of our own practice—as if we were to announce from the outset that we are not interested in inquiring too closely into the underpinnings of our work. To put the point less negatively: if we ignore this conversation, we pass up, at the very least, opportunities to contribute to our own self-understanding and to an understanding of how our positions and practices relate to those of others in our critical community. In so doing, we miss the opportunity to transform the grounds of self-understanding, both for ourselves and others.

Again, the essays in this collection exemplify our point. While all of them could be discussed according to their double attention, to interpretation and to the grounds of interpretation, we will single out just two. Elizabeth Langland's analysis of the intertextual relations between Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* also proposes a revisionary view of the concept of intertextuality, one that moves it away from traditional notions of influence and toward a postmodern conception of textuality informed by the theories of Barthes, Bakhtin, Foucault, and Irigaray. As Langland illustrates how Brontë's relation to Thackeray gets variously played out as "dialogue, discourse, theft, and mimicry," she also varies the tone and style of her own text, thus suggesting an intertextual relation between her essay and those of the theorists she is drawing upon. Barbara Foley's essay on the relation between the form of the bildungsroman and leftist politics in proletarian novels of the 1930s draws much of its strength from its
Introduction

rigorous interrogation of the theoretical assumption that a given form implies a particular politics—an interrogation that includes, among other things, a historical examination of the way the key terms realism and bildungsroman have shifted their meanings. Foley's self-conscious and self-reflexive readings of Moscow Yankee and Yonnondio demonstrate just how complicated the relation between form and politics can be; and this demonstration, as Foley points out, has considerable importance to our understanding of other writers "who are variously termed 'oppositional,' 'marginalized,' and 'subaltern.'"

At the same time that we are questioning the value of non-theoretical interpretation, we are also (and this may be a less popular position) skeptical about the value of noninterpretive narrative theory. Despite the initial enthusiasm surrounding narratologists' claims in the 1970s that they would describe the grammar of narrative and define (even quantify) the essence of narrativity, their efforts have not borne much fruit—especially when these efforts have been divorced from concrete problems of interpretation.¹ This result is no accident. In part, the program has failed because the attempt to fix the rules for proper functioning of narrative cannot stand up in the face of the multiple and incompatible principles of understanding that theorists have advanced. But more important, many critics have discovered that the task of interpretation may itself lead to revisions of the theoretical principles brought to the task. If the untheorized interpretation is not worth reading, the untested theoretical proclamation is not worth believing.

By "testing," we mean something more than application: our journals will not be significantly better if all those explications of Joyce's attitudes toward Stephen are replaced by Lacanian readings of Joyce's attitudes toward Stephen. Nor do we mean testing in the sense of simple confirmation. Indeed, as we have seen in thousands of literary essays, the easiest part of hypothesis testing is confirmation. To choose one particularly famous example: in Is There a Text in This Class? Stanley Fish tells the story of how his class in seventeenth-century English religious poetry was able to interpret a reading assignment left on the board from his previous class ("Jacobs-Rosenbaum / Levin / Thorne / Hayes / Ohman(?)") as a
Introduction

religious poem. Although Fish intends this example to persuade us that interpretive strategies wholly constitute texts, it functions much better as an example of the ease of hypothesis confirmation. Once one shifts the question from "Can the text be read as a poem?" to "Which hypothesis—that this 'text' is a poem or that it is a reading assignment—is more powerful?" Fish's argument begins to founder. To take just the most obvious piece of evidence, the word "Hayes" resists being incorporated into the poem interpretation, while "Hayes" is readily incorporated into the assignment interpretation. Because hypothesis confirmation is typically easy, the critical essay whose theoretical principles are only being confirmed will be as unproductive as the untheorized new reading.

On the other hand, when the critic allows the text to resist the theoretical principles she is bringing to bear upon it—that is, when the text is treated as something other than inert matter on which a theoretical position can be stamped—she is able not only to come to a stronger understanding of the text, but to reconceptualize her theoretical ground as well. Again we single out just two essays that exemplify this point. In his essay "Naturalizing Molloy," Thomas Pavel certainly offers a new reading of Beckett's novel. But by highlighting the contrast between hermeneutics and poetics and the relation between tradition and innovation, he contextualizes that reading by asking us to rethink, on theoretical grounds, the consensus that has grown up around Beckett. As a consequence, when he proposes a shift in our orientation away from the traditional apocalyptic readings of Molloy, he revises our received notions not only of the novel but also, more generally and more provocatively, of the activity of naturalizing the strange. Ross Chambers similarly shows how theory and practice can be reciprocally illuminating by proposing that we think of the "loiterature of travel" as a new genre that is recognizable more for its counter-disciplinary functions than for any specific set of characters, events, or conventions. Chambers's conception of the new genre arises out of his adaptation of Foucault's concern with the relations among power, knowledge, and desire, along with his own ideas about how some narratives allow "room for maneuver" within the
dominant ideology. At the same time, it is his analysis of the narratives of "strolling, touring, and cruising" that operationally defines the genre. In other words, the diverse texts that Chambers analyzes are able to shed light on each other once Chambers theorizes their generic similarity, even as his particular readings of those narratives flesh out his definition of the genre.

In calling for essays that combine theory and practice, then, we are calling for work that genuinely inquires into elements of both theory and text. The particular forms and purposes of such essays may be as plural as is understanding itself. As the essays in this collection show, some critics may give greater emphasis to theory, some to the text, some to historical context, some to formal structure, some to gender relations, some to technique. Foley and Chambers, for instance, have ends that are ultimately political. Others, such as Mayne, McClary, and Pavel, want to increase our cognitive knowledge of a text, both in its internal workings and in its relation to its sociohistorical situation. Phelan and Booth, for their part, focus on technique but emphasize the affective quality of the text, and thus attend to the way technique influences the emotional/psychological/ethical experience of reading. Langland and Rabinowitz also attend to technique, but their purpose is to explore some of the differences gender makes in the construction of narrative. Because of the diversity of the field of narrative studies, we do not claim to have representatives of all the voices in the current conversation; indeed, our metatheoretical claim about the nature of literary criticism today would be undermined were we able to do so. But each of these essays does represent one rich kind of exploration of theory and interpretation.

_Schools, Out!

To this point, we have emphasized the pluralizing of understanding and the diversity of current work on narrative, but we have not addressed the ways in which the essays in this collection might complicate or conflict with one another. Has our celebration of
diversity either deflected our attention from potentially fruitful disagreement or led us to gloss over unresolvable conflict? Rather than answer this question directly, we would like to leave it for our readers and to discuss instead how the kind of theorypractise we have been calling for also entails a new understanding of the relation between one critic's work and another's.

As the theory revolution has developed, the "schools and movements" model (originally developed to distinguish among artistic productions) has become an increasingly dominant means of characterizing both individual critics and their relations to one another. This model charts out critical terrain by identifying a critic's allegiance to a school and then analyzing the convergences and divergences of these larger groups. For example, we might say that Brooks and Warren are New Critics, Booth a neo-Aristotelian, Foley a Marxist, Mayne a poststructuralist feminist. We might further fill in the details of this mosaic by saying that Booth shares the New Critical belief in the power of the autonomous text but departs from New Critical beliefs about literature being a special kind of language; that Foley insists not on the text's autonomy but on its relations to its sociohistorical context and its ideological import; that Mayne emphasizes the way the complexities of signifying in the film text reveal its gender ideologies. While this model helps sort out the diversity among critics—indeed, it may be a necessary step in any attempt to understand the larger critical landscape—it does so only by locking everyone into a predetermined grid of possibilities by emphasizing the static (critical positions) rather than the dynamic (critical questions). We therefore prefer to sidestep this model and to attend instead to the dynamic nature of the work of individual critics and of the larger field. By saying "School's out" (or "Schools, out!") we liberate our perceptions from the predetermined slots provided by the standard maps of the field, and we allow ourselves to recognize that critics increasingly draw upon the insights of different kinds of critical work as they formulate their questions, develop their methods, and reason to their answers. To take just one example, Foley's Marxist commitments are in dialogical relation to her neo-Aristotelian commitments.
to the power of genre; it is precisely this multiplicity that fuels her insightful analyses of *Moscow Yankee* and *Yonnondio* and her general reconfiguration of the relations between politics and form.

Shifting away from a “schools and movements” approach does not mean that we thereby either eliminate or ignore conflicts. But it does allow us to distinguish between divergence and disagreement: between the choice not to ask a question, for instance, and the belief that it shouldn’t be asked—or between deciding not to make use of a particular theoretical insight and rejecting it entirely. Thus, for instance, neither of the two of us is committed, at the moment, to the search for unity; but neither of us would argue in principle against someone who is. That is, while unity may be a secondary, even tertiary concern in our respective projects, we do not thereby deem it a fallacy or a heresy to search for the principles of a given narrative’s unity, as the more dogmatic New Critics were apt to cast out positions with which they did not agree.

This shift in perspective clarifies what is most striking about our critical climate. Although the “schools and movements” popularizers tend to obscure this fact, today’s best practitioners do not stake out their arguments by opposition, but by interacting with different proportions of alternate methodologies in their eclectic mixes. That is, there inevitably are not only multiple sources of any critic’s work, but also multiple dimensions to any critic’s relation to another. Langland, for example, borrows heavily from Barthes, Bakhtin, Foucault, and Irigaray without fully endorsing their particular critical projects or, indeed, worrying about the possible compatibility or incompatibility of these theorists with each other. For her specific project of reconceptualizing intertextuality, she does not need to make any full endorsements or any totalizing synthesis of all their work. Instead, she needs to show that her eclectic conception of intertextuality has its own compelling logic and explanatory power—and here the practical criticism of her essay becomes crucial.

In summary, then, our call for theorypractice is a call to attend and contribute to the powerful dynamics of contemporary narrative studies. Unlike Theseus’s famous boat, in which the planks,
Introduction

sails, masts, and other parts are replaced without changing the essential structure of the boat, narrative studies changes its shape as it changes its parts. Sometimes the new planks fashioned in response to a particular cargo of issues and questions don't quite fit the old construction, and so a new design is developed. But after a while, this design too becomes inadequate for accommodating another new cargo of issues and questions, and yet another renovation takes place. As the essays in this volume show, the signifieds of “understanding narrative” are plural—and always under construction.

Notes

We would like to thank Jane Greer for her editorial work, and especially for doing the index to this book.

1. It is worth distinguishing this work from the apparently similar program of moving beyond interpretation outlined by Jonathan Culler in Structuralist Poetics and The Pursuit of Signs (especially the essay “Beyond Interpretation”). Because Culler's work proceeds by examining specific interpretations by other critics, it offers worthwhile insights into conventions governing interpretive practice. Gerald Prince’s Narratology, on the other hand, often proceeds by analyzing brief narratives that he devises specifically for analysis. Because these narratives are otherwise divorced from the social and historical contexts of both production and reception, the reach of Prince’s conclusions remains limited to his own closed system.

2. For a fuller discussion of this example and Fish’s general position, see Phelan, “Data, Danda, and Disagreement.”

Bibliography

Introduction

Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

