Homo Narrans Narrative in Natural Discourse: On Conversation and Rhetoric

by Thomas B. Farrell

An exploration of the implications and applications of the dimension of time for the continuity, cumulation, and accounting of events in communicative interaction.

Patterns of thinking, like the thinkers themselves, may become victims of their own celebrity. Consider the celebrity lexicon of constructs once associated with epistemology. Not so long ago, everything short of sadomasochism was considered to be a distinctive “way of knowing.” Or consider the thrust of fanaticism that recently attached itself to “metaphor.” Those who contemplated dissertation research in each of these areas would have been well advised to work fast, lest the spotlight fade and enthusiasm move to a different, undiscovered star. What often happens when a bundle of exciting notions captures the attention of humanities thinkers is that a very useful construct moves over to become a foundation for entire disciplines of thought. Subtle problems of definition and inference are accordingly trampled to shreds by those unfortunate enough to be caught between the rear and the advance guard. It is, thankfully, too early to say whether some such fate looms on the horizon for “narrativity.”

However, there is no doubt that narratio has come a long way from its classic status as the second division of a speech, or—in the Poetics—the ordering principle of plot.¹ Classical thinkers wrote before the notion of historical demarcation had ever entered our vocabulary; so the notions of early, late, modern, current, traditional, and even classical thought

¹ Much of the literature responsible for narrative’s celebrity status is reviewed in a thoughtful essay by Fisher (12).

Thomas B. Farrell is Chair of the Department of Communication Studies at Northwestern University.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
bespeak an era in which historicity has already begun to dictate cognitive value. Yet the legacy of such historicism is richly ironic. If history became, with Hegel and Marx, the arbiter of utopian convictions, the “court” of last resort, the prerogative of interpretation was now up for grabs. No less ambiguous than the voice of God, history’s “meanings” have yielded as many messages as there are messengers, to as many different authorities as there have been “last words.” And so it should not surprise us that what was at one time a simple artistic ordering device may become, with a turning of the lens, a constitutive diachronic form. At the same time, if we have lost enthusiasm for the themes of the stories we have been telling, if they have become self-defeating, better to blame the format than the content or author. A heightened attention to narrative may help to remind us that, with enough imagination, foresight, fortune, it may yet all turn out differently.

The interest of students of communication have in the study of narrativity is thus complicated by the fact that each recent advance in the methods of the human sciences has been no more lasting than the half-life of its metaphors. Underlying this essay is the suspicion that any genuine improvement in our self-understanding must become evident on a level more precise than that of metaphor or metatheory. Ultimately, such improvement should become evident in the way our own communication practices are better understood. A holistic vision of human beings as story-telling animals, therefore, doesn’t point us in a direction so much as it suggests the need to do so. And thus questions emerge such as: How do we gain the authority to tell a story about others in the first place? How do we construct and elaborate narratives about our collective burdens, struggles, and destinies? Given several competing narrative frames, how do we reliably choose a preferable story to live through? In short, how do we distinguish between practical reason and wishful thinking? No single perspective on narrative (or anything else) is likely to answer these questions to everyone’s satisfaction. My purpose in this essay is to reconstruct some initial assumptions behind the use of narrative, so that we might better appreciate the constraints it exerts over meaning in differing genres of discourse—specifically, the two relatively distinctive types of communication I will call conversation and rhetoric.

I set forth a four-part, informal demonstration throughout the body of this essay. First I offer a preliminary distinction between the “worlds” of literature and natural discourse. Next I concentrate upon the implications of this distinction for the role of “story” and “action” in each range of discourse. Then I introduce the complexity of “time” to ground-guiding principles of narrative for conversation and rhetoric. Finally, I

---

2 The movement of narrative into history is but a variation of a larger process: the movement of argument in general into history (see 10). For an interesting meditation on the recurrence of historical categories, see (15).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
explore the differences in narrative assumptions as these pertain to our two central types of natural discourse. The point of this relatively painstaking inquiry is to move beyond the initial excitement of “perspective by incongruity” and begin to clarify the differences of narrative use within recognizable forms of discursive practice.

Central to my own argument is the assumption that what we call literature implies different forms of communicative action than conversation and rhetoric.

In particular, I wish to claim that literature presents us with forms of communicative action where the principles of formal enactment are essentially internal to the work. There are a great many ways in which this minimal claim can be (and has been) amplified. One would be the suggestion that literature begins with the assumption of resemblance (i.e., mimesis; see, e.g., 2, 17) and from that beginning presents the reader with a “reality” that is self-contained in the work. One can engage the reality of literature in virtually any external situation that permits reading. Other than higher-order interpretations or flagrant revision, changes in the world situation do not change what is internal to the work. This point seems to be consistent with commonsense distinctions that have been drawn by everyone from Searle (21) to Bakhtin (3).

The actual doing of creation (i.e., writing imaginatively) has been finished long prior to the engagement of reader with text. The lived experience of the author, like the world situation surrounding the text, is not now (i.e., as the work is “read”) an active determinant of the text itself. Even exceptions such as literary performance and “speech act” interpretation seem to confirm this preliminary rule. Performance of literature “externalizes” text with voice and gesture. As in theater, or other media, the speaker(s) and audience “recreate” a formally completed work in the simultaneity of collective experience.

The performance of literature quite properly raises the question of performative utterances generally. Recently, there has been a tendency to reexamine literary text from the increasingly prominent perspective of “speech act” theory. But even the most “radical” of such treatments I can find, by Eaton (8), concedes:

But the illocutionary acts that a writer performs vary a great deal from those of the average speaker. The most commonly discussed illocutions are assertions, questions, and commands; so let us consider them. Writers may perform these actions; but often they do not. Rather they are responsible for attributing assertions, questions, commands, and so forth, to others, namely to dramatic speakers. Writing literature may in fact be viewed as putting words into the mouths of dramatic speakers and thus causing them to perform certain illocutionary acts.
Perhaps. But writing literature includes much more than this, too. Most important, it includes the creation of an internalized contextual realm in which these so-called “illocutionary” acts make sense. Most starkly put, these are not illocutionary acts in the same sense as—for instance—my promise to a close friend. The treachery of Dostoevski’s Stavrogin is not inflicted, full blown, upon any world but his own.

If my description of this inner-worldliness of literature seems intuitively sound, then there follows an equally fundamental fact about the so-called natural discourse of communication—that discourse is embedded, for better or worse, in the horizon of external life. This is not to say, for instance, that the discursive forms of conversation and rhetoric are somehow more real and significant than those of “literature.” For most of the history of literary aesthetics, exactly the opposite has been the case. It is to say that the unfolding history of time and space in which natural discourse occurs is a whole lot less harmonious and formally complete than the self-contained realm of literature. With the practices of communicative action (as I would prefer to speak of conversation and rhetoric), speakers literally are authors of communicative form. And even as audiences engage and thus anchor the form, they are simultaneously embedded in those momentary choices that turn one way and not another, that ultimately make the form what it turns out to be.

There are, as with literature, other (but none too flattering) ways to make the distinction we are after. The ongoing practices of communication are unlikely, for the most part, to be kept, or “preserved” (as phenomenologists might have it). They are usually judged, if judged at all, as not worth preserving. Thus, it is perishable discourse that marks the lives of its creators with so much disposable “color commentary.” Occasionally a Gettysburg Address or Appeal for Dreyfus breaks through the presumption. But then, discourse such as this is usually judged to be great literature.

There are, I believe, some significant implications deriving from the differences among conversation, rhetoric, and conventional literature.

Perhaps the most important of these implications is that the coherence of both conversation and rhetoric is an acquired, as opposed to a prefigured, trait. By this I mean that both conversation and rhetoric find that the intention and imagination of authorship must be mediated and

3 Here I am employing the concept of communicative action in a way that is loosely consistent with the pragmatics of Jürgen Habermas (16). One apparent difference is that Habermas has considered rhetoric to be a distorted form of communicative action (based upon his ideal speech situation criteria), and I do not.
thus shared by outside contingencies as a direct condition of meaningful form. In conversation, of course, there are other speakers who help shape the path any episode may take. In rhetoric, there is the “other” as co-author, the audience to whom discourse is addressed. And in both, there is the unfolding of an encounter history—the moods of chance and circumstance that frustrate and redeem human anticipation. Both conversation and rhetoric, in short, are forms of communicative action, in addition to being forms of discourse. And, as Hannah Arendt observes with characteristic eloquence, action is as unpredictable as it is boundless:

Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a “doer” but always at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. These consequences are boundless, because action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others. Thus action and reaction among men never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners (1, p. 190).
Of course, there is more to be said about communicative action than that it is boundless and unpredictable; otherwise, it would be unintelligible as well. In practice, we (that is, the interactants in an episode) set certain bounds, or horizons for interpretation, so that a succession of utterances can be made into a “sequence” of utterances: so that we can understand what “went on.” And also, in practice, we try not so much to predict as to anticipate general themes, topics, and issues in the talk of others, for a multitude of reasons. As Kenneth Burke would probably say, there is form or coherence throughout communicative action partly because we expect that there will be. Much has been written from the so-called “rules approach” about the various sanctions and strictures that can be made relevant to natural discourse. We know, for instance, that some rules are encounter-specific, whereas others are rooted in the form-of-life assumptions of a culture. We know that some rules can be invented, invoked, or bracketed with the consent of interactants. Still others can carry considerable regulatory force.  

In general, the rules perspective has complemented the aesthetic understanding of communication texts with an appreciation of the ethical domain of communication practice (see, e.g., 6, 9, 22). The question that lurks behind this discussion is how an aesthetic construct—narrative—might contribute to the ethically significant practice of human communication.

To understand the different ways in which narrative operates in two more or less distinctive forms of communicative practice—conversation and rhetoric—we must confront the single scarce aesthetic resource that most distinguishes the actor from the storyteller: time.

Whether a fictive character or real, the actor is lodged—for better or worse—in the midst of “natural time”: the ongoing chronology of an unfolding encounter history. His or her interest in the outcome of events, like the power to control them, must necessarily be partial. Not so with the storyteller. In the world of fiction, the outcome of a character’s action is known by the author “in advance,” and control over the aesthetic resource of time is total.  

In the world of nonfiction, where Arendt’s commentary is rooted, the implications and results of action are known by the storyteller “afterward,” through memory (or its poor

---

4 Burke hasn’t exactly said what I am attributing as Burkean. His seminal redefinition of form in Counter-statement regards form’s appearance in literature as “the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (5, p. 31). I am assuming that a similar notion of mutual anticipation could be sufficient for the engendering of form in natural discourse.

5 In speaking of the literary author’s control over time as being total, I mean a control over the principle of action’s unfolding internal to the work. Literary characters, such as Quixote or Falstaff, may require a “life” of their own, independent of the original author; but then such “life” has also become external to the author’s literary world as well.
relation, historiography). A larger picture—composed of time’s previous machinations—is glimpsed, as a whole, even though the storyteller has little control over its overall composition. A host of propositions follow from this modest point. But I would like to confine our attention to the implications of time (as a narrative resource) for communicative action in conversation and rhetoric.

Consider that conversation and rhetoric are generally regarded as perishable discourse precisely because we spend most of our lives creating, attending to, and enacting these forms in real, ongoing “natural time.” The utterances composing these forms of communicative action appear and are then gone, no less ephemeral than the successive moments marking their appearance and absence. For any actor in such a setting, breadth of vision and range of choice must be inversely related. If the historian sees a broad picture, he or she also is constrained by a very narrow range of reportorial options. Exactly the opposite is the case for the spontaneous interaction. Here virtually anything can, in principle, be said. But this is only because very little is really known. If the most complete form of time is history, then communicative action is history in its most immediate and incomplete sense simultaneously.

Time is an aesthetic resource at the mercy of the storyteller only in the world of fiction—and tragedy, recall, has been the archetype of such a “world.” In all nonfictional discourse, time is either a formal or efficient cause. So if narrative is the principle for ordering the succession of time, conversation and rhetoric present special cases and special problems for the creation of coherent discursive form. Form in each case is a by-product of multiple choices and accidents alike. Therefore, narrative in real-life “talk” must be less an overt creation of any omniscient author and more a background postulate governing the expectations of communicants themselves.

_The question of central interest is how differing orientations to “time” are reflected in our presuppositions about narrative._

“Narrative implicature,” my name for this background presupposition about narrative time, functions differently for conversation than for rhetoric. In previous research (11), I have tried to sort out some of the similarities and differences between rhetoric and conversation as recurrent types of “speech.” For instance, both are forms of practice admitting the naive and the sophisticated practitioner alike and thus a range of competency and aesthetic appreciation. Both involve interlocutors, who witness and extend upon the utterances of others; this is another way of saying that rhetoric and conversation are not wholly private pastimes. Perhaps most important (to the present account), both conversation and rhetoric are composed of performative utterances: speech acts. Such utterances—promises, commands, warnings, and so forth—do more than
simply “say” things. They do things in and through the participation of others. And one of the most important things they do is oblige those who perform these acts to live through their meaningful implications. Finally, the preceding similarities frequently bring conversation and rhetoric together in communicative occasions. But to understand how this occurs, we need to attend to the differences as well.

As noted earlier, much of what we have been able to discover about rhetoric can be identified as acquired traits of language use, specifically the performative dimension of messages that guide the conduct of interested others. Since rhetorical messages anticipate an audience response as part of their very “meaning,” they also lend themselves to a kind of refinement and “conscientiousness” that ordinary talk seems to preclude. Conversation, to paraphrase Gadamer, is something we “fall into” rather than choreograph from the outset. And once involved in its web of associations and demands, we are less the leaders of it than the led (13, pp. 345–346). Of course one may be, à la Samuel Johnson, a most witty and gifted raconteur, a conversationalist par excellence. But the fact remains that eloquence in conversation is realized in mastery of the moment, what the Greeks called kairos. In rhetoric, which often begins with the urgency of the moment, eloquence moves beyond wit to the virtue of propriety, what the Greeks called phronesis (see 19, pp. 144–145). We may, then, summarize and simplify the differences between rhetoric and conversation by allowing that one appears to be monologic, partisan, and directed outward—toward the attention of others, who then judge its quality; this is the performative dimension of rhetoric. The other appears to be dialogic, bipartisan, and disclosed no further than to those in the immediate encounter, who may appreciate, but never fully grasp, the holistic form itself; this is the emergent dimension of conversation.

As we have seen, however, what complicates the aesthetic dimension of both conversation and rhetoric is their appearance and completion within real, experienced time. Although this fact is critical to the varying principles of coherent understanding in conversation and rhetoric, thus far it has been neglected by most studies of natural discourse. The classic formulations of Paul Grice, for instance, offer background postulates of quantity, quality, relation, and manner that are alleged to be constitutive of meaning for all conversational discourse. Yet, helpful as those formulations are, there is no postulate that seems to grasp the sequential emergence of conversation (and other natural discourse) “over time.” The closest we come to an acknowledgment of the temporal dimension is the statement by Grice “that there is some sort of understanding (which may be explicit, but which is often tacit) that, other things being equal, the transaction should continue in appropriate style unless both parties are agreeable that it should terminate” (14, p. 11). This norm seems sensible enough on the face of it, until we search for counter-examples to test its power. Then we are left with the analytic
equivalent to a Yogi Berra maxim for knowing when the game is over (answer: when it's over). Perhaps a more serious omission is the developmental character of utterances in conversation: they may disclose a truth, develop a theme, lead us beyond our initial understanding, add to the collective enrichment of conversation itself. This is the aspect of communicative action best captured, I believe, by the notion of narrative.

The notion of narrative implicature presupposes that utterances within communicative episodes acquire some aspect of their meaning from the fact that they follow one another in time. This means that "form" in communicative action is understood to be more complex than the incremental sequencing of utterance-pairs, each of which is appropriate in some fashion to what comes immediately before. In common practice, we frequently leave the immediacy of act and response (i.e., "How are you?" "Fine") for reminders, promises, and delayed reactions. More important, perhaps, we assume that prolonged encounters with one another will deepen our mutual understanding over time. The postulate of narrative implicature encompasses this presupposition.

Three more specific clauses may now be detected in the practical application of this postulate to communicative action: what I will call continuity, cumulation, and accounting. These three clauses govern a subject dimension (i.e., what discourse is about), a process dimension (i.e., how communication develops), and an action dimension (i.e., how communicative utterances situate and constrain the future conduct of communicators themselves). But, although conversation and rhetoric both feature some variation of the continuity, cumulation, and accounting clauses, their specific uses of these clauses are quite different.

Beginning with the norm of continuity, we might propose that those who communicate will maintain the same range of temporal reference established by preceding utterances.

They will shift their levels of signification only with due notice and tacit consent ("Oh, by the way, that reminds me... Are you going to Alta come August?"). This is not to say that such consent is always granted ("C'mon, Professor, I haven't got all day—I thought you were here to complain about your raise!"). My point is only that the coherence of natural discourse requires some sort of signpost appeal whenever there is a notable shift in temporal signification.

Less obvious, but equally important, is our informal expectation that communication is somehow additive in significance, that later utterances contribute to and expand upon the meaning of earlier utterances.

---

6 With the exception of the T and V episodes (which follow), the examples used here are fictional but (one hopes) plausible. The T and V episodes are "true to life."
Again, this is not an empirical condition of all communication. We have all participated in exchanges that “went nowhere,” the relentless banality that is parodied by Pinter and Albee. Nor am I suggesting that idle chatter must somehow aspire to the status of ideal speech. The point is only that we generally presume to know more about each other, a subject, or a task at hand as each communicative encounter goes along. This is why, for instance, metacommunication usually emerges toward the conclusion of conversation and toward the beginning of rhetoric (more on this later). At stake in most metacommunication is the direction and cumulative success of emergent narrative.

Finally, and crucial to natural discourse, is the actional component of narrative implicature. Unless the “house rules” dictate otherwise, we take seriously what is said in real-life communicative episodes. Whether we are dealing with anonymous or intimate others, we assume that persons say what they mean, and we abide by the temporally constituted conditions for what they say. The much-discussed sincerity conditions provide one aspect of this accountability principle (“Hey, I thought you said our seats on this flight were together!” “Oh did I? Tee-hee, I must have been kidding!”). There are also the much-revised implications of what we have said (“But, Professor, I thought you asked me here to discuss my term project...!”). This is not the place for a detailed discussion of communicative ethics. But more is at stake here than the truthfulness of communicators. When we make promises, issue warnings, offer polite commands, even ask and answer questions, we create fragile bonds of trust that form and reflect our interpersonal character. To the casual observer, the textual record of face-to-face talk must appear to be an undifferentiated mix of false starts, interruptions, and non sequiturs. Without some sense of narrative continuity, cumulation, and accounting, casual observation would probably have the last word on this subject. A host of research issues is raised, I believe, by the principle delineated here. Before turning to these issues, however, I would like to explain the way in which the narrative postulate varies for our understanding of conversation and rhetoric.

Although both conversation and rhetoric occur within the natural unfolding of encounter-time (the ongoing life-history of communicators), one of these communicative forms is presumed to be shaped, at least in part, by the prior preparation of an author. That form, obviously, is rhetorical. This prior “preparedness” is often misread as manipulation. But as I have tried to show elsewhere, we often consent to just such prepared direction of our collective “time” in many a social forum (11, pp. 277–279). I should add that there are many other relevant “phenomenal” differences among rhetoric and its generic counterparts. Rhetoric is typically disputational, positional, instrumental in its aims, presumptuous in its methods, and so forth. My point is only that these other characteristics actually reinforce the necessity for some “thinking ahead” throughout the process of rhetorical engagement.
In contrast, conversation may, and often does, range widely over the timeless as well as the timely, through anticipation, regret, and retrospection. This is because, in a sense, every conversation ever held takes place on all of the levels of time we have discussed (i.e., it is enacted in actual encounter-time; we experience its duration subjectively; we follow atemporal conventions and norms that may be bracketed and discussed; and so forth). In general, then, the narrative expectancy of conversation moves horizontally through encounter-time, rather than hierarchically through levels of significance. Conversation may deepen its range of significance, as interlocutors reflect consciously on what their talk “means,” but too much of this mainly stalls talk. Most of the time, in most encounters, the principle of continuity requires only that we attend continuously to the subject of an episode, until the subject is “exhausted” and thus shifted (with implied consent). For any conversation, there will be peaks and valleys of depth and a general growth of knowledge, disclosure, and even relationship through a discontinuous range of topics.

For rhetoric, the aforementioned distance between the time of thought and the time of expression has critical implications for its own use of narrative. This distance, or durational “lapse,” requires first that continuity be an explicit aesthetic responsibility of the advocate or speaker. Often, this will take the overt form of previews, summary statements, transitions, repetition of claims, and so forth. While these generic qualities of “rhetorical” style sometimes appear to be the residue of an earlier elocutionary era, they also perform an invaluable artistic function. Unlike conversation, rhetorical discourse is expected to “deepen” hierarchically as it moves through introduction, preview, body, and conclusion. In the paradigm case of public speech, there is usually direct reference to the shared encounter context of audience and speaker, the social knowledge of form-of-life norms and values, even the commitments inherited from previous “speech acts” publicly performed. The rhetorical qualities of style are thus narrative markers for the continuity of social experience. As described long ago by Dewey, they allow the advocate/author to consciously order experience of others, so as to bring it to some fruition (7, pp. 48–49).

This initial attribute of continuity allows us to mark off a second important difference between the conversational and the rhetorical use of narrative: the clause of cumulation.

As we have seen, all communicative action carries, for the participants at least, some presumption of developmental movement. Once casual acquaintances have talked, they do not “start over” completely with every new encounter. And yet the process of development is very different for conversational, as opposed to rhetorical, encounters.
Informal conversations typically bracket worldly constraints in the interest of dialogue. It is exploratory, indefinite, and usually—apologies to Mr. Berra—over when it’s over; i.e., no more lasting than the time it is helping to pass. This means that the developmental quality of conversation is internal to the duration of the episodes themselves. The rule is simple enough. Narrative development for informal conversation extends beyond the episode only for the relationship—not for the cognitive significance of utterances themselves. If something devastating happens, of course, there could be implications for future encounters (a topic to be avoided, perhaps even a relationship to be ended). But these occasions of anxiety appear to be striking rhetorical exceptions—perhaps even of the sort that help us prove the rule. Other conspicuous exceptions are formal encounters, where progress from one episode to the next is critical to the encounter itself. Examples might include the psychiatrist-patient relationship or that of investigative reporter and source. Note that in each case disclosure carries weight and thus moment that seems to justify the encounter’s (and thus the relationship’s) very existence. To the extent that the conversation itself is a means toward other, extrinsic ends (whether those of task, disclosure, seduction, or cure), it is not the informal type of discourse described earlier.

Informal conversations rarely pick up where previous exchanges left off. Such openings as “Hi, Jim—still having trouble with your wife?” are inappropriate in most conceivable occasions (the therapy exception again stands out). There is no point in attempting to reintroduce a serious disclosure theme in subsequent conversation. Either it will emerge again in its own “good time,” or it won’t. Perhaps it is the dependence of informal conversation upon the leisure of encounter-time that creates this boundary to narrative development; perhaps it is the exploratory and evanescent character of our episode choices. But it seems that virtually any level of signification in conversational utterance may be suspended with each new episode:

A: Hey, I thought you were a Cub fan!
B: I was. Since the strike, I’m not a baseball fan.

or

A: Didn’t you once say, never draw to an inside straight?
B: Really? Just goes to show how much I know about cards. . .

Examples such as these should not trivialize the fact that in conversation we often try thoughts out, in the instantaneous openings afforded by the discourse of others. The clause of cumulation is bounded, with rare exceptions, by the duration of conversational episodes themselves.

As our exceptions have already suggested, rhetoric is a discourse that develops processually in the direction of something beyond itself. This “something” may be the decision of an audience; it may be the resolution of a problem or threat; it may be the further clarification of a
pressing public issue. But whatever the stake we may have in the outcome of a rhetorical discourse, the outcome is always outside the discourse itself. This fact is critical for an understanding of the peculiar narrative development of rhetorical address. In earlier research I have identified “places” within conversational discourse, wherein rhetorical practice seems to be appropriate (11, p. 271). Obvious examples include disputation among interactants, problems of coherence requiring practical choices by interactants to repair or “save” conversation, prepared discourse, the “sales pitch,” or the bargaining encounter. Note, however, that in each of these cases the narrative development moves beyond the rhetorical moment to some further end in view. If we are disputing, for instance, something as mundane as an impending highway exit, we typically relax turn-taking rules, vary the time-frames at issue, and await our moment to respond:

T: Seriously, Vera? You’re not sure if it’s 6-mile or not? How many times have you been on 605, I mean you lived here for 20 years...
V: 25. You don’t have to get upset about it; the whole place has changed.
T: Yeah, I guess one dump looks pretty much like another.... But my God, your whole family has no sense of direction. I half expect to see them driving into our lot with a guide dog running next to the car.
V: That’s not fair, Tommy, especially since you just missed the exit.

Note the narrative shift from retrospection to anticipation to (bluntly) problem-at-hand. Disputation is a highly complex art form that regards each utterance exchange as both a transition and a potential last word. Yet even in its conversational guise, the narrative movement takes us outward, toward some further end.

This narrative trait is much more conspicuous in the case of public advocacy. Even the greatest touchstones of rhetoric, discourses that have been—as it were—removed from history, are developmental sequences in a larger narrative. Lincoln’s second inaugural address is more than a marker in his own biography of eloquence; it is a still-unfinished call to bind up the nation’s wounds. Roosevelt’s declaration of war introduced and captioned a five-year period of unprecedented hostilities. And, most memorably, here are the last public words of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr:

We’ve got some difficult days ahead, but it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I have been to the mountain top. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life: longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain, and I’ve looked over and I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I am happy tonight. I am not worried about anything. I’m not

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.⁷

While offering a peroration to King’s public life (he died the next day), these same words are a challenge and a prophecy of social redemption for the “real-life” narrative of our culture. In a similar but less exalted sense, every instance of public advocacy cumulates in an external direction, beyond the initial historical moment of its occurrence.

This tendency of eloquence to deepen its range of meaning with the passage of time properly introduces the most important application of narrative to ordinary discourse: the postulate of accounting.

The most obvious cases of accounting in ordinary informal conversation involve rule violations. Rule violations are usually acknowledged and repaired within the ongoing episode:

V: Tommy, do you suppose you could give somebody else a chance to talk?

T: I’m sorry, am I monopolizing the show here? God, if Vera can’t get a word in edgewise, I must be!
The same rule violation (i.e., talking too much) remarked upon after the conversation is over would have little, if any, significance. For example:

V: Well, you certainly were monopolizing the conversation last night.

T: Was I? Well, screw ‘em if they can’t keep in step...

Allowing for variations in temperament, it is still worth asking why this is the case. One possible explanation is that the actional dimension of conversational choice is always rooted in the present tense. To retrospect upon choices that have already been made (that cannot be undone) is simply irrelevant. Another possibility is that conversation is an emergent by-product of multiple interactants and creative choices. Unless precisely the same membership and topical development were to occur at a later time, it is unlikely that prior conversational conduct would have much significance to subsequent exchange. And yet it is conduct nonetheless. If we were to press the point, virtually every conversational utterance does assume some background felicity conditions with moralistic overtones. And Kreckel (18) found that, whenever she asked conversants to explain their conversational conduct (from videotape and transcript), these persons offered a form of narrative justification situated within the discourse surrounding the episode (pp. 230–244). Our point becomes clearer when we reflect upon the exceptional cases of utterances whose episodic force actually transcends the

⁷April 3, 1968. This excerpt was taken from the documentary film, King: A Filmed Record; Montgomery to Memphis, produced by Ely Landau (not dated).
Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

T: Look, I’ll make a deal with you. . . . Teach the course this time, the way it’s set up, this one time, OK? And you’ll never have to do it again. I’ll put it in letter form, if you want.

M: No, that’s alright. A handshake is good enough for me.

Another clear case is the warning. By undertaking obligations in the presence of others, or forecasting an impending series of events, the conversational actor binds personal choice to social facts that transcend the “half-life” of an episode. I suggest once more that such exceptions as these actually help to prove the rule. Promises, warnings, commands, and so forth are each unexceptional cases of rhetorical conduct.

In striking contrast to most instances of ordinary conversation, then, public rhetorical advocacy is held to a principle of narrative accounting across episodes. It is as if audiences have relinquished an extraordinary prerogative to those in civil life who would “tell our story.” In return for this grant of authority (originally a right of “authorship”), the audiences of public rhetoric impose a counterfactual expectation that advocates at least appear to keep public promises and heed their own commands and public warnings. Now in practice, of course, there are few instances of public discourse that could stand up to this narrative expectation. That is, in part, because the expectation itself is largely mythic (that is, a tale we tell ourselves for comic relief). And it is also, in part, because public discourse is itself in such a sorry condition. In fact, it would be as easy to indict the narrative postulate just advanced as the discourse it so frequently undermines. Social circumstances shift. In politics, we quickly discover, appearances are reality. And rhetoric, above all, is about chance and circumstance, about learning in public. The problem is that, without some such sense of cultural memory and an expectation of narrative accountability, it would be impossible to take any public rhetoric seriously. If we are near to such a cultural situation, we have yet to arrive, as I hope to demonstrate with a few examples.

Each rhetorical advocate seeks to link claims to authority to the narrative of cultural themes preceding his or her utterances. And most rhetorical catastrophes over the past twenty years (in the United States, at least) have been due to the violation of this accountability postulate. For most observers of the war in Vietnam, the Tet offensive effectively dimmed the narrative metaphor of “light at the end of the tunnel.” In the pivotal election of 1972, George McGovern backed his running mate, Tom Eagleton, “1000%,” only to reverse that commitment. Richard Nixon had his previous statements about the history of Watergate declared “inoperative” by his press secretary and later conceded that some of his own statements had been “at variance with the facts.” Jimmy Carter’s presidency was, as has been well documented, a virtual paragon
of narrative confusion, culminating with his public discovery that he "could not trust the Russians." And until recently, President Reagan, who had made the appearance of a "steady course" the overarching aim of his administrative rhetoric, would also have appeared to be the exception that proved the rule. But at Bitburg, Reagan may have discovered that rhetoric, even his own, had limits. Above all, it is bound to a cultural legacy that makes some forms of "forgetting" impossible. In an era of revision, there is some sad comfort in the realization that history need not always bend so easily.

Reagan's rhetorical model, Franklin Roosevelt, may have put it best during the Second World War: "We Americans, all of us, we are characters in this living book of democracy. But we are also its author. It calls upon us now to say whether the chapters to come will tell a story of retreat or a story of continuous advance" (20). The very best rhetoric generalizes and deepens the story it helps to tell. As Solzhenitsyn asked of great literature, it transmits condensed and irrefutable human experience in still another priceless way: from generation to generation (23, pp. 4–5). And like great literature, it helps us to preserve and protect the soul of a culture.

Whether or not one agrees with the exploratory line of thinking suggested by the notion of narrative implicature, some conclusions may be drawn about the use of narrative in communication practice.

First, considerably greater precision is needed before we can specify, with much reliability, what forms of communicative conduct meet proper criteria of narrative use. Aesthetically, the very appearance of cumulative progress and consistency must be judged as something of an accomplishment for communicants—at least in the public sphere. But ethically, we might wish to require something more than appearances. Decades of codicils and norms should arouse our suspicion at each attempt to add to the list. Perhaps it is not too bold to suggest that memory, the lost canon of rhetoric, has now moved over to the status of a trait to be cultivated in audiences as well as speakers, if obligations are to acquire force over time. The aesthetic of narrative currently tempts us toward "happy talk": the predisposition that, no matter what the situation, all is bound to turn out all right. But an ethic of narrative would find the bounds of rationality in those commitments we have already made and what we must now do because of them.

8 For a detailed analysis of Carter's problems with the discourse of authority, see (10, pp. 140–147).
9 The rhetorical dilemmas surrounding President Reagan's visit to Bitburg and Bergen Belsen are being examined by Tamar Katriel and me in ongoing research.
If an aesthetic of narrative prompts us to attend to the various modes of interpretation that allow room for reappropriating and even revising the meanings of past experience, an ethic of narrative must attend to the moral of the "story." This would raise such issues as: What public character is implied by the course we have taken? What forms of social learning are yet available to us? What legacy of experience do we wish our story to yield to future generations? Which episodes in our unfinished and unbounded narrative of collective action are irretrievable or lost? Which need to be ended altogether, which prolonged, which begun anew? Which audiences, thus far neglected, need to have their own stories articulated? There are, of course, many more such questions. I have mentioned these because they would offer a way of sharpening existing forms of narrative rationality.

Second, there are some important differences among the uses of narrative in conversation and rhetoric. Although the picture is complicated greatly by the fact that conversation and rhetoric are by no means mutually exclusive (moments of each may occur in either type of speech), there remain some pertinent implications from this finding for the study of discourse practice in everyday life. For one thing, it seems apparent that, in philosophical circles (as well as American culture generally), there has been something of a shift in the intentionality of narrative. For some time, the ideal of sequencing in discourse was that of "problem solving," the purposeful, linear placement of a continually improving future over a discarded past. Something of this impulse still survives, of course, in technical rationality. But increasingly, the aim—for substantial areas of philosophy—has been to "keep the conversation going," to enrich or deepen our ongoing human experience, without being prematurely optimistic about where it will go. On the whole, this seems a healthy development (i.e., one less likely to run up against frequent disconfirmation). But it has left us with several methodological problems.

Initially, it is not quite clear what we mean by "keeping the conversation going." Earlier, I posited some questions that might guide a concept of narrative rationality. Yet, the very notion of rationality (and even the questions I have posed) might well be culture-bound, as might the values these questions are intended to serve. Put another way, it is possible that not all conversations deserve to be kept going. And on a more pluralistic note, it might be wise to examine what varying norms of conversational quality might contribute to an understanding of narrative continuity as communicative competence. Perhaps, too, the assumptions we now make about the culture of communicators may need to be more

---

10 The metaphor is variously expressed, from Gouldner's circling dialectic to Richard Rorty's cafe circle "talk"; from Foucault's babble, to Habermas's seminar "speech." This could be one of the metaphor's problems.
guarded than in the past. A justly acclaimed work, *Habits of the Heart* (4), for instance, employs what are frequently described as “conversations” with middle-class Americans to study the status of moral discourse (i.e., the coherence and justification for our public commitments) in contemporary culture. The authors conclude that most Americans with whom they had “conversations” employed a language of “individualism” to justify what public commitments they held. Once pressed beyond this language, they became confused or inarticulate. It may well be that most Americans lack a coherent discourse of moral justification. But one would be hard pressed to prove such a finding on the basis of “conversation” itself. Why? Despite the attempts of MacIntyre (19), who is an influence upon these researchers, and others to treat conversation honorifically, conversation as a real-life practice tends to allow for only the most gradual and reluctant disclosure of inclusive moral systems. In calling for explanations of moral commitment in such encounter settings, the authors of *Habits of the Heart* really are prompting rhetorical moments in the midst of ongoing conversation. And if the analysis in this essay is any guide, such moments as these must be found rather than forced. At the very least, attention to differences between and among the narrative groundings of communication practice should alert us to the need for greater methodological caution in issues of interpretation.

Finally, it might be appropriate to reach back for the problematic that started our line of thought. The notion of *homo narrans*, like many a happy invention, is rooted in a fortuitous encounter between two unlikely sources (as the sewing machine and umbrella of surrealist fashion). The sources, as we have seen, are literature and communicative action: more generally, aesthetics and ethics. To possess an art of real life has long been the rhetorician’s dream. Yet it is a dream that can be seriously entertained only as long as it does not become too entertaining. The question, bluntly put, is whether we can be actors in and authors of the same unfinished story without doing damage to the one indispensable outcome of successful narrative: character. Hannah Arendt thought not:

>What the story-teller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least so long as he is in the act or caught in its consequences, because to him, the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows. Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the story-teller who perceives and “makes” the story (1, p. 192).

Rhetoric and conversation remain the primary art forms of everyday life. They work best, I believe, when left to this limited but most important canvas. They work truthfully when they remember the truth there is to tell: its unmistakable past, its unfinished possibility.
REFERENCES