CLARIFYING THE NARRATIVE PARADIGM

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If I were to respond to Professor Rowland's essay in the usual way, I would argue that he does not test the narrative paradigm, that he tests his understanding of it, and it is his understanding that fails. I would, of course, substantiate my claims with detailed citations from his text. In particular, I would point him (and others) to the Preface of my book where the questions I am pursuing are presented, indicating the precise nature of my project, and to the introduction of chapter seven where I propose how one can go about using the narrative paradigm. However, I do not think that counter-attack is the best tack to take—at least for now.

Rather than counter-attack, I want to try again to clarify my position. This statement will be an addition to a brief piece I recently published in *Argumentation and Advocacy* (1988, pp. 49–53), in which I responded to articles by my colleagues, Bruce Gronbeck (1987, pp. 569–577) and Allan Megill (1987, pp. 557–563). My purpose was not so much to dispute what they had to say about historical writing as to question the heavy distinction they each made between argument and narrative. One of the moves I made in that essay is relevant here, a delineation of three senses in which I understand narration: narration\(^1\)—individuated forms such as depiction, anecdote, and characterization; narration\(^2\)—generic forms such as argumentation and narration; and narration\(^3\)—a conceptual framework, like dramatism, for understanding human decision, discourse, and action. Given narration\(^1\), narration\(^1\) and narration\(^2\) can be interpreted and assessed as modes of expressing good reasons, as rhetorical forms inducing conclusions about people, community, and the world. I have no quarrel with those who insist on the utility of narration\(^1\) and narration\(^2\). Efforts to use these distinctions to criticize the narrative paradigm, however, miss the thrust of my project. Such efforts seem to hold that the distinctions are not only useful but inviolate.

The decision not to counter-attack probably requires some justification. My reasons are as follows: One, I have never read an author's reply to critics that did not come across as defensive, hurt, and/or petulant. I must confess that these feelings are not unknown to me, but I also feel that they are unproductive—for me or anyone else who wishes to advance ideas. Two, the replies of authors are usually followed by retorts from critics, the result often being more heat than light and a further fractioning of the spirit that inspires a scholarly community. Disagreements are, of course, constitutive of conversation, but not if they center on fundamental misconstruals. Three, I believe, along with William James (1974, pp. 131–132), that there is a natural evolution in the affirmation of new ideas. In regard to pragmatism, he wrote: "First, you know, a theory is attacked as absurd; then it is admitted as true, but obvious and insignificant; finally it is seen to be so important that its adversaries claim they themselves discovered it." I do not mean to suggest by using James' observation that the narrative paradigm and pragmatism are somehow equal ideas, only that they, in their own times, are alike in being "new." And four, I wholeheartedly agree with Max Planck (1936, p. 96), who wrote: "An important

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scientific innovation rarely makes its way by gradually winning over its opponents... What does happen is that its opponents die and that the growing generation is familiarized with the idea from the beginning: another instance of the fact that the future lies with youth.” Again, I do not mean to suggest that the narrative paradigm is a “scientific innovation,” but it is a “new” idea (not mine alone, perhaps needless to say), and “new” ideas are often the province of youth and the uninitiated. (The narrative paradigm has attracted the favorable attention of more young scholars than old, and more established scholars outside the field than in).

To further clarify the narrative paradigm, I offer the “Afterword” which is scheduled to be published in the paperback edition of Human Communication as Narration. (It is published here with permission of the University of South Carolina Press).

Conversation about the narrative paradigm grows apace. The most constructive contribution I can make to the dialogue at this moment, I think, is to supplement what I said in the hardback edition of Human Communication as Narration, which concerned what the narrative paradigm is. Here I would like to indicate what it is not.

First, it is not a rhetoric. As I say in the conclusion, “the narrative paradigm is the foundation on which a complete rhetoric needs to be built.” This structure would provide “a comprehensive explanation of the creation, composition, adaptation, presentation, and reception of symbolic messages.”

Second, the book is not about criticism, or at least the way I would deal with the topic. It is true, however, that the narrative paradigm concerns the interpretation and assessment of rhetorical messages and I believe it can serve the rhetorical critic, but the book does not explore the ways in which the rhetorical critic thinks or writes. A book on rhetorical criticism would do this by examining the concepts and practices (actual examples) that mark the explication or evaluation of texts read from different perspectives: What can we reveal about a text by knowing its genre? What can we say of interest about a text by knowing its author? What can we disclose in a text by knowing the audience(s) for whom it is intended or meaningful? And what can we expose in a text by reconstructing or deconstructing it in terms of itself? Whatever theory a critic may adopt is but a means to answering one or more of these questions. It is the case, of course, that good answers can produce or modify theory. The interest of the critic, however, is to communicate what is remarkable about the text.

Third, the narrative paradigm is not a celebration of narration as an individuated form—as anecdote, depiction, characterization, and so on—or as a genre in and of itself. If the narrative paradigm celebrates anything, it celebrates human beings, and it does this by reaffirming their nature as storytellers. It affirms that narration as individuated form and as genre—like other individuated forms (such as argument) and genre (such as argumentation)—are expressive of good reasons, if viewed rhetorically. And when they are so experienced, they are constitutive of people, community, and the world.

Fourth, as just suggested, the narrative paradigm does not deny the utility of traditional genres—in poetic, rhetoric, philosophy, sciences, and so on. It does insist, however, that regardless of genre, discourse will always tell a story and insofar as it invites an audience to believe it or to act on it, the narrative paradigm and its attendant logic, narrative rationality, are available for interpretation and assessment. (A brief account of my approach to genre appears in chapter seven).
Fifth, the narrative paradigm does not assert that some communication cannot be seen as serving other than rhetorical functions. For example, some communications can be described aptly as phatic or consummatory, and all human communication is recognized as reflecting unconscious motives and achieving unintended results. It is only when communication is considered seriously in regard to its advice or fostering of belief, attitude, or action that the narrative paradigm becomes relevant: to ascertain the meaning and merit of the communication as a ground for decision and performance.

Sixth, the narrative paradigm is not a rejection of the tradition of argumentation, as I hoped chapter two would clearly show. What is rejected is the specific notion that reason only appears in discourse when it takes the individuated forms of inference or implication, or the genre of argumentation. Also rejected is any conception of human communication that denies or ignores values. The "logic of good reasons," I want to stress, combines tests of reasoning and tests of values. It adds to them, considerations of coherence—structural (argumentative), material, and characteriological—to comprise the construct of narrative rationality.

Seventh, the narrative paradigm does not deny that power, ideology, distortion, or totalitarian forces are or can be significant features of communicative practices. Regardless of their presence, however, decision and action are inevitable, and their appearance is always in the context of ongoing stories. If they were the only features of communicative practices, decision and action would only and always be: whose domination shall we submit to and live by? I continue to believe that some stories are more truthful and humane than others.

In short, the narrative paradigm is a philosophical statement that is meant to offer an approach to interpretation and assessment of human communication—assuming that all forms of human communication can be seen fundamentally as stories, as interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character.


The foregoing is offered with the hope that it may forestall unnecessary misunderstanding. There is no anticipation that it will do this completely. Human communication is too imbued with the shortcomings that people are heir to for that. Nor is there any expectation that it will eliminate disagreements. It is not meant to do
this either. It is meant to keep the conversation focused on genuine disagreements rather than those caused by the fragility of the writer and readers.

REFERENCES


