1986 conference to 1986 publication of its proceedings, perhaps. (*Communication as Performance*, also published in 1986, reports a 1983 conference.) Most distracting of the printing errors in *Renewal & Revision* is the failure of the last line of many pages to survive the printing process. Even to one interested in predictability of language, elimination of a whole line necessarily also eliminates sense.

The two collections bring together ideas from many of the best minds in our field and therefore should be in every college and university library in the country and on the shelf of every interpretation teacher. They make good reference sources. And even though Beverly Long's conversation is missing from *Renewal & Revision*, the after-dinner speech with which Wallace Bacon opened the Salado conference is present, Wallace Bacon, whose wisdom is always a comfort and a challenge. Performance, like language, he says, reaches beyond itself. "How can one overestimate the value of an act?"

ROBERT OVERSTREET
Auburn University


Walter Fisher's text exhibits the continuing cross disciplinary interest in narratology. Fisher combines several previously published essays with some new transitional material to tell the "story" of the evolution of his narrative paradigm.

The recognition that narrative constitutes innate human discourse forms the basis of Fisher's exploration. The observation that human beings are storytellers offers little new to students of performance of literature and inspires little debate. However, arguing that a paradigm shift, from a rational to a narrative paradigm is mandated, Fisher (borrowing from Thomas Kuhn) frames his assertion in revolution. Fisher's development of the narrative paradigm contains notable absences and challenges implications.

Fisher contends that a narrative paradigm of human communication better serves individuals than the rational world paradigm. Here the reader immediately confronts absent definitions.

Fisher states, "The narrative paradigm sees people as storytellers, as authors and co-authors who creatively read and evaluate the texts of life and literature" (p. 18). Fisher uses the term "story" and the immensely problematic term "text" without defining either. At another point Fisher claims that his concept of narration does not mean fictive
composition but has relevance for fiction (p. 58). Later, citing Hayden White, he allows that narratives are “moral constructs” (p. 68). Throughout, Fisher avoids a clear definition of narrative. Similarly, narration remains vaguely defined as meaningful, sequential, symbolic action.

Fisher’s goal in shifting from the rational paradigm to a narrative paradigm is to open the forum of public argument to participation by all people. Fisher posits that narrative allows egalitarian communication. The rational paradigm restricts participation to “experts” who arbitrate communication. The narrative paradigm assumes all human beings have the ability to participate in the creation of stories. The naivete implied in Fisher’s conception is inescapable. Individuals do not have equal access to communication. Research reveals that social/cultural restrictions even in narrative limit participation according to gender, class, and ethnicity.

In a slight (and denied) contradiction of his assertion of egalitarianism, Fisher states, “History records no community, uncivilized or civilized, without key storytakers/storytellers....” (p. 67). However, Fisher refuses to equate key storytellers in the narrative paradigm with experts in the rational paradigm.

Again, his position prompts questions. Do not key storytellers and experts similarly abridge the selection process by investing their discourses with the authority of their positions? Acknowledging the influence of socialized values of gender, class, and ethnicity in assigning cultural power, might emergent leaders—key storytellers and experts—win and hold their positions for reasons other than or in addition to the validity of their discourses?

Fisher contends that choices between or among competing stories are made without regard to the storyteller or issues of cultural power by individuals using innate “narrative rationality” (which accompanies innate narrativity). Narrative rationality operates with two components—narrative probability and narrative fidelity—which measure internal and external consistency respectively. By establishing probability and fidelity as the standards by which stories are judged, Fisher replicates an error currently acknowledged by narrative theorists. Specifically, the presumption of objectivity that guarantees the validity of probability and fidelity as valuative standards is false.

At a time when scholars like Nancy K. Miller (“Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women’s Fiction”) are exposing a history of restriction and limitation of narrative creation under the law of “probability,” Fisher posits a group of all people conceiving a shared understanding of internal narrative consistency. Even more problematic is Fisher’s belief that human beings approximate each other’s lived experiences closely enough, and share a view of the way the world is strongly enough, that they can agree about which narratives are consistent with that view.
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Adding to the difficulty, Fisher moves beyond even a socially derived meaning into the realm of absolute values. Discussing the superior nature of Socrates’ narrative compared with Callicles’ narrative in the Gorgias, Fisher states that Socrates’ narrative is preferable because the story rings true, not to life but life as we would like to live it" (p. 187).

Throughout his discussion, Fisher attaches moral value to judgments of probability and fidelity. The stories that are consistent with themselves and are “more ‘true’ to the way people and the world are—in perceived fact and value” are better (p. 68.) Questions about whose perception of “the way people and the world are” remain unasked.

The construction of ideals endorses the elite Fisher attempts to eliminate. The group of people (apparently including Fisher) who are able to recognize manifestations of the ideals of probability and fidelity must be seen as the “experts” of the narrative paradigm.

In spite of its inability to cure the discursive ills of the world, Fisher’s text extends to its readers a significant challenge. Because the definitions are absent, you must locate your own conception of narrative, narration, story, and text. You must discover the standards by which you choose among competing narratives and scrutinize your acceptance of one narrative over another. Students of narrative, busy digesting the current explosion of theory and thought, are well served by a trip through the maze back to delineation of premises.

Although the responses to Fisher’s narrative paradigm may eventually achieve a revolution in discourse study, Fisher’s account of it does not.


DARLENE M. HANTZIS
St. Lawrence University


In The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White contend that cultures “think themselves” through four interrelated symbolic domains: the human body, psychic forms, geographical space, and social formation. These symbolic domains, structured according to high-low polarities, function as sites of differentiation where