Re-constructing Narrative Theory: A Functional Perspective

by John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit

Focusing on the interaction of form and function in narrative allows for the exploration of its role in the formation of political and social consciousness.

Narrative has received a great deal of attention in recent years, not simply in the corridors of literature departments but throughout the various disciplines of the human sciences, ranging from anthropology to linguistics and from jurisprudence to sociology (see 7, 37, and 48, including 30, 34, 56, 62, 66). The impetus for this surge of interest has been, in large measure, the growing belief that narrative represents a universal medium of human consciousness—in Hayden White’s terms, a “metacode” that allows for the transcultural transmission of “messages about a shared reality” (66; see also 4; 24; 33; 41, pp. 197–209; 50; 54). Curiously, however, despite the apparent consensus that a narrative voice pervades virtually every genre and medium of human discourse, ranging from novels and television dramas to sermons, political campaign orations, advertisements, journalistic reports, historical treatises, and everyday conversations, the dominant contemporary theoretical explanations of narrative are drawn almost exclusively from “poetic” models of discourse featuring formalistic criteria of evaluation.¹

¹ This is not to ignore the efforts of those concerned to contrast “historical” narratives with “literary” or “fictional” narratives. We would note, however, that the conception of narrative from which such historical appropriations derive and deviate is largely poetic in origin (see 64, pp. 1–42; 47; 65).

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The importance of poetic models of narrative to a critical understanding of culture and society is incontestable; nevertheless, a primary reliance upon them—to the subordination or exclusion of alternative models that one might find in dialectical and rhetorical discourse—encourages a limited and distorted view of the scope and function of the narrative metacode. So, for example, rather than focus attention on how narratives operate in the context of specific situations to link speaker (narrator) and audience (narratee), most current studies of narrative privilege a concern for the decontextualized structure of a discourse (see 2, 11, 13, 27, 39, 52, 53, 61; cf. 29, 44, 58). Even those studies directly concerned with discourse as human action seem to rely on the literary heritage provided by Kenneth Burke’s notion of dramatism as the framework for exploring the narrative dimensions of socially and politically consequential discourse (see 7, 9, 10, 19; cf. 28). Such formal, literary analyses provide insight into the formation of narratives but reveal very little about how narratives function in and act upon the meaning and structures of culture and society, especially in a mass-mediated era.²

A more complete and useful theory of the narrative metacode, we submit, requires a reconstruction based upon a thoroughgoing account of the recursive interaction of the multiple forms and functions of narrative as they are materialized in the discourse of everyday life. This essay is a prelude to such a theory. In what follows we probe the ancient and currently neglected rhetorical conception of narration, narratio, as a means of highlighting the various functions of narrative discourse (2; 14, pp. 55–63; 51; see also 15, pp. 181–187). We hope that by reestablishing narratio as a pragmatic and critical alternative to poetic conceptions of

² Smith (60) offers an insightful “deconstruction” of the mechanistic dualism implicit in much of contemporary narrative theory (see also 45). McGee (42) provides a critique of the inadequacy of Burkan dramatistic disengagement to deal with the full force of social phenomena.
narrative, we can gain the grounds of comparison for examining the interplay of form and function across the full range of discourse genres that employ narration and thus resume the search for an empirically sound, general theory of the narrative metacode.

The first step toward a re-construction of the theory of the narrative metacode requires that we establish the range of functions that narratives serve in discourse.

We begin with the ancient assumption that all discourse is designed to achieve at least one of three goals—to delight, to instruct, and to move—which end products we interpret respectively as the display of "beauty," the transmission of "truth," and the wielding of "power." In examining the three primary, ancient modes of discourse—poetic, dialectic, and rhetoric—it has often been noted that, while a particular discourse may address one, two, or all three of these goals, it will typically feature one of them as its primary end (see 35, esp. pp. 48–72). Accordingly, poetic discourse privileges the display of beauty, the strength of which is dependent upon power and truth; dialectical discourse privileges the transmission of truth, a truth frequently portrayed as beautiful and often employed in the service of power; and rhetorical discourse privileges the wielding of power, a power unabashedly expressed in the interests of truth and beauty.

Of course, modern discourse situations offer a variety of complex combinations of these three purified aims, e.g., historical novels, agit-prop theater, editorial cartoons, television documentaries (see 59, esp. pp. 41–75). Because our immediate purpose is to work toward a re-construction of the narrative metacode, we will ignore these discourse alloys here in the interest of considering the pure elements from which they are fused. It is from within the matrix of poetic, dialectical, and rhetorical discourse, then, that we parse three narrative functions.

1. The poetic function. As we represent it here, the primary goal of poetic discourse is the expression of beauty. From this perspective, the function of a narrative is precisely to formalize (or "plot") the temporal and spatial relationships between the persons, objects, and concepts of a universe of discourse so as to create a pleasurable or entertaining experience (see 1, 1448b5–1449b5; 3; 4, p. 124; 12; 57, pp. 35–75).

Because a poetic narrative, typically referred to as "literature" or "pure fiction," operates in a universe of the author's own making, there is no requirement that it be adapted to the needs of a specific audience or conform to the limits of material reality. Possibility, not probability, and internal consistency, not external validity, are the criteria for judging poetic narratives (13, pp. 43–95; 18, pp. 131–170; 47, p. 130; 57, pp. 30–37). Both truth and power are thus sublimated in the interest of the artistic endeavor. So, for example, it is equally acceptable for Superman to defy gravity and for Mr. Ed to philosophize the problems of middle-class America while munching hay. Neither content, context, nor audi-
2. The dialectical function. The primary goal of dialectical discourse is the discovery, revelation, and presentation of a truth. Our use of the word "truth" is not intended to resurrect the epistemological dispute between relativists and objectivists (8, pp. 1–50) but rather to recall the useful everyday distinction between "fact" and "fiction." Fictions are symbolic constructions that bear no necessary relationship to the external world as experienced by humans, while facts are symbols that represent empirically "verifiable" phenomena. In the interest of transmitting truth, dialectical discourse relies upon the factual world (in whatever way it is known or posited by humans) and accordingly requires a narrative code vastly different from what one might expect to find in poetic discourse.

Dialectical narratives aspire to the status of fact. That is, the stories that they relate represent argumentative claims as to the nature of the universe, and they require empirical verifiability. Typical of such narratives are the storied events that one finds re-presented in historical treatises, news reports, and eyewitness testimonies. The function of such narratives is not to present a pleasurable tale for its own sake, as with poetic narratives, but rather to illuminate the factual nature of the universe as a means of providing information for human use. The essential characteristic of a dialectical narrative, therefore, is its content, which is constrained by criteria of accuracy and external validity. Because they are absolutely prohibited from purposefully fabricating the stories they tell, the authors of dialectical narratives are granted far less formal flexibility than the authors of poetic narratives, who face no such constraints. So it is that when news stories are revealed as blatantly contradicting the facts of a case, journalists are forced to print retractions; or when hitherto unknown historical facts are uncovered, revisionist historians are compelled to replace old narratives with new; or when eyewitnesses are caught in the act of perjury, they are faced with prison walls (46, pp. 24–45; 47, p. 135; 67, p. 2; see also 16, pp. 1–20; 26, pp. 185–217; 38, pp. 94–106).

3. The rhetorical function. Along with Aristotle (2, 1355b27–37), we conceive of rhetoric as "the faculty [power] of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion." Such a definition, however, masks the material significance of the rhetorical process, for those who rely upon rhetoric are seldom like the school-house orators who, engaged in contest, imagine simple persuasion as their ultimate end. The primary goal of rhetorical discourse is what that persuasion achieves, the enactment of interest, or the wielding of power (31; cf. 20, pp. 101–104). The wielding of that power relies on more than
the fanciful use of tropes and figures (see 63) or the mere display of the truth. Rhetorical discourse requires careful attention to form (arrangement, style, and delivery) as well as to content (invention), but, more important, it treats those two in the dynamic context of a specific, rhetorical, situation—the (“molecular”) relationship between speaker, speech, audience, occasion, and change (43).

Unlike dialectical and poetic narratives, then, rhetorical narrative—conceived in the classical Roman tradition as narratio, the second part of a forensic oration—exists for a purpose beyond its own textuality. It is governed, ultimately, neither by form nor content but by its function, its ability to prepare an audience (originally the “judge” in a court of law) for the proof of an argument by characterizing the probability of the case upon which judgment is requested (51, Vol. 2, p. 49; see 15, pp. 181–187). Put otherwise, a rhetorical narrative is a story that serves as an interpretive lens through which the audience is asked to view and understand the verisimilitude of the propositions and proof before it. Both content and form of the rhetorical narrative are thus subservient to the demands of the relationship between the specific audience to which it is addressed, the specific context in which it appears, and the specific gain toward which it strives.

By focusing on narrative from a functional perspective, we gain a critical vantage point for exploring its role in the evolution of social and political consciousness, a role which is typically ignored by those who are interested only in the reified forms of its narrative structure. Our aim, however, is not to replace one limited unidimensional piety for another. Rather than simply substituting a study of narrative function for the current reliance upon narrative form, we are interested in examining the recursive interaction of narrative forms and functions in the context of particular discourse processes. If the various goals of poetic, dialectical, and rhetorical discourse incorporate radically different narrative functions, it should come as little surprise to discover that the resulting formal requirements of narratives in these discourse genres designate striking differences as well. To confirm this suspicion and to begin the task of elaborating the similarities and differences among these three narrative codes, we direct our attention to the interaction of form and function in rhetorical narrative, using the classical theory of narratio as our guide and the poetic and dialectical forms for comparison and contrast.

*The classical rhetorical treatment of narratio received its fullest expression in Quintilian’s first-century discussion of the requirements of forensic oratory—the discourse of the law courts.*

According to *Institutio Oratoria* (51), the forensic oration consisted of four parts: _exordium, narratio, proof_, and _peroration_. The _narratio_ played a key role in such an oration, as it was designed to influence the
judge's interpretation and understanding of the proof of the case. It achieved this end by characterizing the "nature of the subject" through the telling of the facts in story form (51, Vol. 2, p. 49). Quintilian's discussion of narratio was implicitly governed by a concern for the interaction of form and function. For that reason, we will follow his treatment of it here, provisionally, as a theoretical touchstone for probing the unique formal manifestations of rhetorical narrative attributable to its three inherent functional characteristics: the need to be adapted to specific audiences, contexts, and gains.

An audience is absolutely essential to the rhetorical enterprise. One can easily imagine poets and dialecticians successfully pursuing the expression of beauty or truth for its own sake, apart from any entertainment or knowledge that an audience might experience from it. Not so the rhetorician, who, by definition, engages his or her art or craft for the precise purpose of achieving the active assent of an audience. As Quintilian remarks with respect to the narratio in particular (51, Vol. 2, p. 71), its purpose is "not merely to instruct, but rather to persuade the judge." It achieves that persuasion not simply by revealing truth nor by creating beautiful and appealing tales, but by re-presenting the facts of a case in a conventionalized story form so as to make them appear both probable and compelling to a specific audience.

Theoretical narratives associated with the function of audience adaptation have two formal characteristics: consistency and brevity.

Consistency. Inasmuch as the purpose of a rhetorical narrative is to persuade a particular audience of the probability of the case being presented, both its internal and external consistency become primary formal requirements. As Quintilian observes:

...we must take care, first that our fiction is within the bounds of possibility, secondly that it is consistent with the persons, dates and places involved and thirdly that it presents a character and sequence that are not beyond belief; if possible, it should be connected with something that is admittedly true and should be supported by some argument that forms part of the case. For if we draw our fictions entirely from circumstances lying outside the case, the liberty which we have taken in resorting to falsehood will stand revealed. Above all we must see that we do not contradict ourselves, a slip which is far from rare on the part of spinners of fiction: for some things may put a most favourable complexion on portions of our case, and yet fail to agree as a whole. Further, what we say must not be at variance with the admitted truth (51, Vol. 2, pp. 99–100, emphasis added).

Internally, a rhetorical narrative must be consistent with itself as well as with the larger discourse of which it is only a part. Any internal contradiction, whether within the framework of the narrative itself or
between the narrative and the proof, is almost certain to undermine the probability and force of the case. Externally, a rhetorical narrative must be consistent with the audience’s general outlook on the world, with both its logical and sociological expectations (see 21, 22). So, for example, in a description of human behavior there must be a believable and likely compatibility between an agent’s action and motive. As a case in point, consider the fact that we do not typically believe a mother capable of torturing her own child. To make such a case seem probable, then, a rhetorical narrative would have to portray extraordinary motives for the mother’s action appropriate to the social knowledge of the audience, be it demonic possession, psychosis, or, as in contemporary times, a history of having been abused as a child herself.

By contrast, dialectical and poetic narratives feature the requirements of formal consistency in starkly different ways. Dialectical narratives must be internally consistent, and they may not contradict the “truth” or the “facts” as the speaker understands them. However, they are never constrained by an audience’s prior beliefs and values (47, pp. 130, 135). Poetic narratives, on the other hand, permit, and in some ways feature, contradictions and inconsistencies (33, pp. 81–87). This is not to say that they are totally independent of the “real world”; without a body of shared knowledge on which to build, poetic narratives would be unintelligible (17, pp. 147–149; 36, p. 147; 57, pp. 32–34). Nevertheless, readers and viewers of fiction are constantly asked to suspend their disbelief for the sake of the story. Internal inconsistencies of character and plot, though not usually encouraged, are typically treated as no more than minor flaws. And external inconsistencies seem to be promoted, especially in postmodern poetic narratives, as a sign of the “free-play” of the discourse (see 17; cf. 33, pp. 83–88). Representative of this turn would be novels such as John Fowles’s Mantissa and Woody Allen’s film The Purple Rose of Cairo, wherein a movie character literally separates himself from the actor who portrays him and steps off the screen into “reality” as a sentient (and very attractive) human personality.

**Brevity.** A corresponding functional requirement of a rhetorical narrative is that it compel an audience to a favorable interpretation of the proof for a case without taxing its members to weariness or disinterest with digressions or unnecessary detail. It will be most successful, then, when it focuses and frames the audience’s attention precisely on the issue before it—no more, no less. The formal manifestation of this function is brevity. “The narratio will be brief,” notes Quintilian (51, Vol. 2, p. 73), “if in the first place we start at that point of the case at which it begins to concern the judge [audience], secondly avoid irrelevance, and finally cut out everything the removal of which neither hampers the activities of the judge [audience] nor harms our own case.” Like the formal manifestation of consistency, the brevity of a rhetorical narrative is ultimately measured in terms of the audience being addressed. An allusive reference to “Watergate” might be more than
sufficient for one audience to call to memory the events of the early 1970s as a narrative frame for a discussion of the abuse of executive power, while to frame the same issue for a different audience the details of the events leading to President Nixon’s resignation would require more elaborate description.

The interaction of form and function here is highlighted when we contrast the requirement for brevity in rhetorical narrative with the relative absence of any such requirement in dialectical and poetic narratives. In rhetorical discourse the narrator must select and integrate all and only those elements of a story that make it persuasive to a specific audience. The standards of brevity, as we observed above, are thus moderated by the relationship between the speaker, the content of the narrative, and the audience. In dialectical discourse the construction of a narrative is dictated by criteria of accuracy alone. The brevity or verbosity of such a discourse is relatively inconsequential to its function. Like the journalist, the historian is constrained, in Walter Cronkite’s terms, to tell it “like it was.” Either may elaborate a discourse however much they like, but as dialecticians they may do so only insofar as it corresponds exactly with the “facts” before them. By contrast, poetic narrators seem to eschew brevity as a formal characteristic altogether, preferring instead to indulge in elaborations that function to achieve aesthetic responses, whether or not they advance plot or character in any substantial way (see 4, pp. 91–97; cf. 13, pp. 131–134).

The point at which we are driving is that the formal manifestation of brevity in rhetorical narrative is a direct result of the functional requisite of rhetorical discourse. It is not the case, for example, that simple economics dictate the brevity of rhetorical narratives such as are found in televised political advertising, as compared to typical prime-time programming. Poetic narratives such as one finds on “Dallas” and “Dynasty” are designed to achieve an aesthetic, entertaining response, and therefore the economic goal of attracting attention merges easily with the aesthetic goal of these narratives. Predictably, then, poetic narratives dominate the televisual medium. The display of knowledge such as one finds in narratives on “Nightline” or the local “Eyewitness News” is relegated to less economically viable time periods or is uncomfortably abbreviated (as has been widely lamented) as a result of the relatively little attention-getting potential of dialectical narratives.

Explicit rhetorical narratives are even more limited in this regard, as evidenced by the fact that they are almost never purchased in blocks of time exceeding thirty seconds. Research and experience lead advertisers and campaign consultants alike to acknowledge the limit of an audience’s attention to persuasive messages (a point made poignantly, however unwittingly, by a presidential aide who announced that President Reagan’s vitally important tax address to the nation would be brief because “audiences can’t take more than fifteen minutes on economics”).

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The different forms of narrative, then, have different economic appeal because of their form/function interaction. The relative dominance of poetic, dialectical, and rhetorical narratives in the mass media may be economically determined as a consequence of their respective forms, but those forms, particularly with regard to brevity, are controlled by their functions, not their commercial value. Consequently, the brevity of rhetorical narratives is a formal manifestation of the functional goal of moving an audience as quickly and easily as is prudent to the action and beliefs sought by the discourse.

**Contextualization describes the careful adaptation of rhetorical narratives to the specific context of the discourse in which they appear.**

Following Quintilian, and Aristotle before him, one might say that rhetorical discourse has three separate generic contexts: legal, legislative, and ceremonial. It would hardly be stretching a point, however, to suggest that the underlying context of all rhetorical discourse is its nature as essentially contested. Rhetoric typically operates in circumstances where there are conflicting and competing interests at stake. Two lawyers vie for a favorable verdict for their respective clients, two candidates do battle for one seat in the state legislature, two or more manufacturers of a given product strive to corner the market for their particular brand, and so on.\(^3\) Rhetoricians are advocates, in other words, and the functional oppositionality inherent to the contexts in which they operate imposes on the narratives they enact two unique formal requirements: unity of direction and unity of purpose.

**Unity of direction.** The oppositionality inherent to rhetorical contexts requires that advocates take one side or another in a dispute. The reasons and evidence that they offer must therefore be directed at proving a single interpretation of a claim to fact, value, or policy. Because the rhetorical narrative functions in general to compel the audience to a particular understanding of the facts of the case, to a particular point of view, it must project a voice that underscores the unity of direction of the discourse. Consequently, it is subject to a general formal requirement of public argument: it must be univocal. Quintilian emphasizes the point when he indicates the propriety of incorporating arguments and emotional appeals in the *narratio*: “We shall sometimes also, if occasion demand, insert a brief defence of the facts in the statement [narrandum] and trace the reasons that led up to

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\(^3\) The apparent exception to this would be the genre of epideictic discourse (see 49, pp. 47–55). Although space does not allow full elaboration here, we would argue that the topics of “praise” and “blame” are inherently oppositional and that epideictic’s specific rhetorical function of transcendence forces a formal sublimation of that fact (see, e.g., 31).
them. For we must state our facts like advocates, not witnesses” (51, Vol. 2, p. 109, emphasis added).

Dialectical and poetic narratives do not advocate quite in the same way as rhetorical narratives and thus are not subject to the same formal requirements of voice. This is not to say that dialectic and poetic narratives do not advocate, but that their primary goal is to advocate themselves, their beauty or truth. By contrast, the primary goal of a rhetorical narrative is to advocate something beyond itself. The distinction becomes clear, once again, when we think of it in terms of the interaction of form and function. The author of a rhetorical narrative might be content to withhold it from delivery if its end or function were to be achieved by other means. Such a possibility is unintelligible for the author of a poetic or dialectical narrative.

Dialectical narratives are univocal, but only in the sense that they are driven by the single and universal purpose of transmitting knowledge. Theoretically, at least, they do not exist in opposition to anything other than ignorance, and the formal manifestation of their unity of direction is a universal commitment to present knowledge in as objective a manner as possible. Thus, to reverse the terms in Quintilian’s prescription, a dialectician (pace Plato’s Socrates) would narrate the facts like a witness and not an advocate.

Poetic narrative poses a different discourse context altogether and thus requires special treatment. Because poetics constitute a self-contained (or closed) description of conflict, they must be multivocal. That is, the creation and portrait of a conflict necessitates at least two points of view. If Hamlet were not confronted with the choices between “being” and “nothingness,” the narrative in that tragedy would not advance. By the same token, the appeal of television’s “M*A*S*H” would be minimal or non-existent were it not for the way in which Hawkeye Pierce confronts the “conflicts” posed by Frank Burns’s paranoia, Radar’s hero worship, Corporal Klinger’s transvestitism, Major Winchester’s elitism, the military establishment’s bureaucracy, etc. This is not to say that a poetic narrative may not privilege one point of view. Like Hamlet and “M*A*S*H,” most do, but the ultimate movement of such narratives depends upon the dramatic demonstration of the “tension” between the point of view proposed and the views opposing it.

There is thus no unity of direction in a poetic narrative. While in a very general sense it advocates, the context in which it operates is aestheticized, and the various perspectives it portrays invite a multiplicity of potential interpretations. Rhetorical narratives operate in a context of formal advocacy and, in keeping with their general function, may invite only one interpretation. Of course, poetic narratives need to do more than simply plot conflicts between and among characters. They must also offer some sort of formal resolution or solution to the crises they portray (17, pp. 211–213). This leads us directly to a consideration
of an independent, but related, formal distinction of rhetorical narratives.

**Unity of purpose.** By this we call attention to what we consider to be the act-centered quality of a rhetorical narrative. As we have already indicated, rhetoric is a discourse genre that exists for the purpose of wielding power by enacting the interest of a speaker in a specific, real-world context. Unlike poetic discourse, then, in which the author can rely upon a textual *deus ex machina* to resolve the conflict of a plot, the successful completion of a rhetorical enactment requires more than a simple, textual construction. Rather, it must encourage, and indeed enlist, the audience’s active participation in the solution. Ronald Reagan’s declaration that “America is standing tall,” for example, does not solve anything unless the audience to which it is directed chooses to assent to the claim and to behave accordingly.

Formally, then, rhetorical narratives develop in response to the specific purpose of the larger discourse and context in which they operate. While poetic narratives invite an audience passively to observe the “transformation of relations” (4) among characters, rhetorical narratives describe a set of relations contributing to a conflict or problem and ask the audience to participate actively in the interest of the discourse to bring about the desired transformation. The difference can be clarified by contrasting an episode of “All in the Family” with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s, “I Have a Dream” speech. In the course of thirty minutes in the Bunker household we normally observe the self-contained development and resolution of a conflict between two or more of the primary characters. When Archie and Edith finally harmonize to the tune of “Those Were the Days” at the end of the episode, the audience experiences both the (ritual) unity of the Bunker family and the formal closure of the narrative. In “I Have a Dream,” King narrates the story of emancipation that indicates a tension between America’s ideological commitment to racial equality and its discriminatory practices toward blacks. However, there is no formal resolution to the conflict: the narrative lacks closure. King does portray a vivid vision of what an appropriate resolution might be, but, significantly, the occurrence of that resolution necessitates the audience’s enactment of it.

In a sense, then, the rhetorical narrative is functionally constrained to stop short of the formal stage of plot “resolution” by virtue of its purpose to encourage audience enactment. This may even be to say that there really is no “plot,” in any traditional sense, in a rhetorical narrative. Rather than serve a unity of action, the movement of the rhetorical narrative serves a point: the unified purpose of the discourse to enact an interest that exists outside of its textualization.

The unities of direction and purpose thus combine to indicate a unique quality of rhetorical narrative: discourse dependency. The conclusion is one that we have hinted at all along. Dialectical and poetic
narratives are self-contained discourses. Rhetorical narrative, however, constitutes only one part of the discourse in which it appears. Although the narrative is necessary for linking an audience with the direction and purpose of a discourse, it is not self-sufficient. The claim supported by a rhetorical narrative must be articulated outside of the narration. Dialectical and poetic narratives must portray a logically or aesthetically complete vision, creating a whole world or a whole truth. Rhetorical narratives can never achieve such independence and completeness, for they speak of part of a whole and changing world. Thus, while the specific directions and purposes of dialectical and poetic narratives are formally and functionally self-contained, the specific direction and purpose of a rhetorical narrative are formally and functionally incomplete, dependent for both aspects upon the context in which the narrative appears and the claim that it supports.

*Material gain, whether in the form of a vote, an exchange of goods and services, or an ideological agreement, rests at the core of the rhetorical process.*

Because the speaker in a rhetorical situation always seeks material gain in some measure, he or she is literally invested in the outcome of the rhetorical process and is therefore expected by an audience to assert and accept responsibility for the power and veracity of the narratives that are featured in a discourse. The ability of the narrative to frame an interpretation of the proof and to move the audience to action is thus functionally contingent upon the speaker’s credibility. Quintilian makes the point in echoing Aristotle's assertion of the primacy of *ethos*: “There is another point to which I must call attention, namely the credit which accrues to the statement of the facts [*expositioni narrantis*] from the authority of the speaker. Now such authority should first and foremost be the reward of our manner of life, but may also be conferred by our style of eloquence” (51, Vol. 2, pp. 117–118). This contingency manifests itself in rhetorical narrative as an inherent, formal unity of narrator, author, and speaker.

This formal unity is illustrated best in an extended example. When Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher stood before the British Parliament to explain and justify her military actions in the Falkland Islands, it is almost certain that her speech had been written, at least in part, by a staff of advisers and professional speech writers. In a very real sense, the

4 Current rhetorical narratives in the mass media, particularly political and product advertisements, seek to imitate poetic narratives as much as possible, for a variety of reasons. In these cases we may find instances of a rhetorical narrative that is “independent.” Such cases are probably best viewed as hybrids of poetical and rhetorical narratives warranting further investigation.
narrator, author, and speaker of that discourse were three separate entities. The author would have been those nameless people, perhaps including Thatcher herself, who were directly responsible for the writing of the text of the speech. The narrator, in all likelihood, was a mythical composite of the personae of England’s popular wartime ministers, from Walpole to Churchill. And the actual speaker, of course, was Margaret Thatcher. Nevertheless, the contingencies of the situation necessitated a rhetorical identity between author, speaker, and narrator. Because Thatcher is the chief executive officer in the British government, and because she was placing demands upon the beliefs and behaviors of her subjects, she alone was responsible for justifying her actions. And even though the narrative frame that she presented may have been authored by other individuals, or merely re-presented the conventionalized narratives of two hundred and fifty years of British foreign policy, as she spoke them they became her assertions and part of her public persona, integrated with and subject to her credibility.

Two key points need stressing here. First, in rhetorical narratives, the narrator, author, and speaker are always treated as one. The nature of the situation that they address, the very fact that interests and gains are at stake, necessitates a locus of moral responsibility. To separate the author, narrator, and speaker of a rhetorical narrative, whether formally or functionally, would be to create an unmanageable (and ultimately an immoral or irresponsible) situation for an audience being asked to judge and act upon the words before them. Second, and of no less practical importance, the narrative itself interacts with the speaker’s credibility, both drawing strength (or weakness) from it and ultimately contributing to (or detracting from) it. In practice, of course, rhetoricians frequently make “the worse cause appear the better” in ways that are ultimately harmful and irresponsible. Nevertheless, the overriding presumption remains that they will practice their art in such a manner as to at least appear to be sensitive to and responsible for the effects of their discourse.

The role of credibility and the importance of the relationship between speaker, author, and narrator are treated quite differently in dialectical and poetic narratives. With dialectical discourse, the audience’s assumption is that the speaker has no special self-interest in the narrative, and his or her credibility is at least theoretically presumed. Accordingly, there is no formal or functional requirement that the author, speaker, and narrator of a dialectical narrative be identical; it is assumed that the story itself will remain objectively the same whoever tells it.

Poetic discourse, on the other hand, features a clear and distinct distance between the author and narrator or speaker of a story. Poetic narrators can lie, make incompetent judgments, and even insult their
audience without necessarily reflecting on the credibility of the author or speaker of the narrative (e.g., 13, pp. 146–262). In part, this is a formal result of the multivocal dimension of poetic narrative. Although the authors of such narratives may frequently give hints, it is ultimately impossible to know with which of the various voices they would identify. More probably, however, this distance between author and narrator is a result of the poetic function itself, the privileged expression of beauty, to the exclusion (in its “pure” form) of any explicit or specific interest or gain that might be accrued through the discourse for the author.

An agenda for the study of narrative requires careful attention to the interaction of narrative forms and functions, the similarities and differences of narratives across the full range of discourse genres, and the social and political consequences of particular narrative forms.

Fisher (24), echoing what might be called an emergent “movement” within the human sciences, has argued that the appellation *homo narrans* be incorporated into the list of root metaphors designed to characterize the essential nature of humanity. A number of authors have already borrowed from and contributed to Fisher’s search for a narrative paradigm (see 5, 25, 55). Although we applaud the contribution that this makes to the ongoing rejection of what Bernstein (8) has referred to as the “Cartesian Anxiety,” the Enlightenment’s privileging of Reason and Truth over all challengers, we believe that our analysis warrants a modicum of caution for that narrative project. We advertise this conclusion as a polemic then, not in the sense of a dogmatic disputation, but as an argumentative challenge to ourselves and to others who would pursue the role of narrative in the process of human communication.

1. Interaction of narrative forms and functions. As our analysis has implied, current studies of narrative discourse that focus on form to the exclusion of function are inadequate. Different narratives exist in a variety of different relationships with the “real world,” are constituted by different sets of unities, and wield moral force in a variety of different ways. These differences, though represented by various isolatable narrative forms such as folktales, protest music, situation comedies, and presidential declarations of war, are not simply formal; rather, they represent the interaction of the functions of a particular discourse genre with the formal requirements or elements of narrative (e.g., plot, character, narrative voice, plausability, unity) to produce widely varying formal characteristics. So, for example, we have suggested here that, by virtue of their specific function to enact interest or to wield power, rhetorical narratives must display brevity, avoid contradictions, demonstrate uni-
ties of direction and purpose, and integrate the credibility of narrators, authors, and speakers. By contrast, we have observed that poetic narratives, functioning to a different end, routinely flout or reconstitute these same rules of form. To treat narratives as simple form(s), then, is essentially to reify a process of human communication and thus to distort our understanding of its role in the creation and maintenance of social and political consciousness.

2. Similarities and differences of narratives across the full range of discourse genres. We have plotted in this essay what, since classical antiquity, have been considered the three “pure” genres of discourse. If narrative does constitute a paradigm of human communication, then it must operate in every imaginable genre of discourse, not just the purified forms of rhetoric, poetic, and dialectic, but in all of the alloys of these forms that seem to dominate contemporary mass society. To fail to account for the form/function interaction of narrative throughout the full range of discourse genres would be to distort our knowledge of the narrative paradigm in at least one of two ways.

First, if we were to rest content with analyzing narrative from the perspective of the three pure forms of rhetoric, poetic, and dialectic, we would be guilty of a genetic fallacy. Too many discourse genres in the postmodern world defy simple and rigid classification. Of course, we are guilty of having adopted such a perspective here, but only as a function of serving our interest to highlight the significance of the form/function interaction in narrative. In the future, we promise to eschew such easy categorization and to work even harder to bring Isocrates, Aristotle, Longinus, Cicero, and Quintilian into active conversation with Marx, Kenneth Burke, Barthes, McLuhan, Ricoeur, and a welter of others too numerous to mention, as we employ case studies to probe the full range of discourse genres.

A second and perhaps more serious distortion would occur if we allowed our study of narrative to be dominated by one particular genre of discourse. This we take to be the common malady of most contemporary studies of narrative, which, we maintain, privileges poetic. To treat all narratives as if they were only poetic is to encourage attention to criteria that are significant for accommodating the poetic form/function interaction but to ignore or underplay other criteria more relevant to other types of narrative form/function interactions. So, for example, if we rely exclusively on poetic conceptions of narrative to characterize the paradigm, we are likely to conclude that narrative expresses irresolvable social contradictions in a “safe” form, thus promoting catharsis, and that it provides “solutions” to human problems through plot resolution. If, on the other hand, we rely exclusively on the rhetorical tradition of narratio, we are likely to conclude that narratives require authors to assert explicit responsibility for one side or another of a social conflict.
and to "force" the audience to resolve such conflicts actively and actually, not cathartically. The point is that narrative does not constitute a unified or fixed set of options for either authors or audiences; like any pragmatic metacode, it offers a full range of options (40, pp. 18–23). Of course, "conclusions" about narrative such as these have drastically different implications for both social policy and scholarship.

3. Social and political consequences of particular narrative forms. In the final analysis, studies of narrative must be judged according to how useful they are in enhancing critical awareness of human interaction. Such a criterion of evaluation necessitates careful and sustained attention to the social and political implications of particular narrative forms, as well as to their intertextualization in particular narratives. The wholesale adoption of poetic conceptions of narrative as the basis for a theoretical description of a narrative paradigm or metacode, for example, could encourage an aestheticization of politics reminiscent of the use to which such forms were put in Nationalist Socialist Germany (see 6, pp. 241–242). By the same token, the wholesale adoption of dialectical or technical conceptions of narrative could lead to the tyranny of science and rationality (see, e.g., 23). Our first task as critics, then, is to be sensitive to the specific implications for social and political policy of the particular forms that we privilege.

Perhaps more important, however, is the demand for vigilance in attending to the consequences of the intertextualization of various narrative forms in specific narratives. During the summer of 1985, Americans were held hostage by the media's treatment of terrorism in the Middle East at the same time that they were cheering Sylvester Stallone's Rambo as he single-handedly defeated the Communist government of North Vietman. It should have come as little surprise when President Reagan intertextualized these narratives in the narratio of an address designed to promote warlike behavior. To study the decontextualized structure of narratives is not only to ignore the fact that they are listened to and read by audiences, but also to neglect the fact that those audiences use those narratives to contextualize their own understandings of the world. To fail to attend to the social and political implications of specific narratives, then, is to undermine our purpose in searching for a narrative paradigm or metacode in the first place.

In conclusion, then, if there is a unified narrative paradigm of human communication, or a universal narrative metacode, they have not yet been discovered. If we would continue to search for them, we must begin with a catalogue of "differences" rather than the assumptions of similarity. The presence of narrative must be explored in all of its functional contexts, and it must be systematically compared in each of these contexts to the full range of alternative modes of discourse, not just "inference" but "naming" and "valuation" as well. Finally, careful
attention must be directed at the social and political implications of the usages of narrative in different contexts. Whether such a critical praxis will eventually produce a theoretical description of a paradigm or universal metacode called “narrative,” we cannot at this time know; if rigorously pursued, however, it should at least illuminate the full range of communicative practices in which narrative participates.

REFERENCES


