

## Introduction to Special Number on Narrative Theory

by  
Leslie E. Gerber

*Department of Interdisciplinary Studies  
Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina*

THIS SPECIAL NUMBER of *Issues in Integrative Studies* provides a clear and authentically interdisciplinary look at the phenomenon of narrative theory in contemporary thought. In doing so, a conversation already well begun in the Association for Integrative Studies gains new momentum. Many readers will recall Richard Harvey Brown's keynote address at the 1988 annual meeting in Arlington, Texas. Published in this journal in 1989 under the title "Textuality, Social Science, and Society," Professor Brown's work sought to challenge the "capture of rationality by positive science and its technical extensions" (Brown, 12).

Civic discourse, Brown claimed, now seeks legitimacy by borrowing a rhetoric of objectivity and a social scientific vocabulary. This tendency impoverishes moral discourse, which—because it invokes purposes, ends and collective intentions—must operate narratively. "The polity in general has lost a reasoned narrative form," Brown lamented. "Reason in narrative discourse is being replaced in civic culture by scientific-technical calculation on the one hand, and by irrational stories on the other." Brown does not seek the elimination of technical discourse but rather the cessation of its legitimizing function. What we need, he avers, is a "technically informed civic narrative discourse" which could "humanize technicians and . . . enlighten and empower citizens" (Brown, 12, 14).

That "narration" and "reason" need not be regarded as antagonistic processes is the central conviction that binds the contributors in this volume. With Richard Harvey Brown, they insist phrases like "narrative truth," "reasoned public narration," and "reasoned narratives in moral discourse" are far from oxymoronic. Not surprisingly, the articles (with the exception of Howard Nixon's) are the work of "antifoundationalists" who reject positivist accounts of rationality. In their view, even the work of natural scientists must be viewed contextually, in terms of the historical preoccupations of particular scientific communities. This means that what counts as "data" or "facts" is determined by the theories which motivate investigations. Theories, in turn, are inseparable from larger cultural preoccupations. Further, natural science is far more playful, metaphorical, and inexact than its positivist defenders claim (Bernstein, 33). In short, scientific communities are both energized and constrained by narratives and narrativist impulses.

Readers challenged by such assertions will be especially drawn to L. Gregory Jones' opening discussion of the epistemological significance of narrative as well as J. Linn Mackey's "Narrative and the Physical Sciences." Like Richard Harvey Brown, Jones holds that "there is no 'neutral' realm of objective, public facts over against subjective, private values." Such a bifurcation rests on the assumption that a reliable picture of a lawful external reality can be gradually established by ever-improving empirical and deductive methodologies.

This assumption itself clearly is not narratively innocent but rather rests on an implied Baconian story about the goodness and inevitability of progress. Moreover, it regards the selecting of research "phenomena" as relatively unimportant, whereas to define something as constituting an "object" for study is inherently problematic and theory-laden. In the words of John Milbank (favorably quoted by Jones), "Objects and subjects are, as they are narrated in a story. Outside a plot, which has its own unique unfounded reasons, one cannot conceive how objects and subjects would be or even that they would be at all."

What replaces the old dichotomies of public-private/fact-value is a complex pluralism of narratives. Explains Jones:

The claim for the epistemological significance of narrative is that what we know, and what we take it that we know, come to us through diverse, competing and overlapping narratives of particular cultures, practices, and traditions. Our understanding of ourselves as well as the physical world is inextricably linked to those diverse, competing yet overlapping narratives.

Jones goes on to sort out the various issues raised by such a claim. In a very illuminating way, he discusses 1) the presence of "master-narratives" which serve the interests of cultural elites; 2) the charge that an emphasis on multiple narratives produces a thorough-going relativism; 3) the abiding importance of "non-narrative forms of discourse and reflection"; 4) the confusions

to which policy discussions are liable when they ignore the way particular positions spring from divergent moral traditions; and 5) the uses of narrative in overcoming the inadequacy of case-study methodologies in fields as divergent as psychotherapy and ethnography.

J. Linn Mackey's essay forms an ideal complement to those of Brown and Jones because he surveys a number of different areas in which "the resurgence of narrative is both a part of the attack on an inflated, foundationalist scientific epistemology and a sign of the attack's success": history of science, the sociology of scientific knowledge, philosophy of science, and the new pragmatism of Richard Rorty. The picture of science that emerges here is remarkably different from the received one. Scientific knowledge is shaped by the needs and preoccupation of a particular age or epoch; it "rests on no foundation more impressive than the contingent social circumstances of groups of interested—in both senses—human actors"; science is "just one of many practical human inquiries"; scientific culture must retreat in the face of a resurgent localism, the return to oral traditions, and a demand for "human-scaled epistemologies." Mackey further argues that the new science of complexity (Chaos Theory) "has adopted a perspective that is in many ways analogous to the perspective of narrative epistemologies." (The figures and equations in Mackey's final section need not deter non-scientific readers!)

Gregory G. Reek's lucid "Narrative and Social Science: Reclaiming the Existential" shows what surprising new directions narrativist ideas invite anthropologists to take. Focussing on ethnography as a genre, Reek identifies the literary conventions that have come to characterize it since Malinowski "standardized" its form. He concludes that such ethnographies maintain "the illusion of distinctiveness while melding social science with the idealized features of both social science research and contemporary civilization—objectivity and detachment, power and control, precision and efficiency, bureaucracy and standardization." In conforming to such received conventions, ethnographers thus cooperate in perpetuating "an alienated, mechanistic image of human existence."

For Reek, narrative theory opens entirely novel perspectives on the ethnographic enterprise. It invites social scientists to see themselves and their "subjects" as fellow storytellers who are "existentially situated." Among other things, this means that ethnographers do not stand within a "scientific framework"—resting on an unassailable foundation—looking out at a world of "data." Rather, they operate "dialogically" as selves-in-process encountering both subject and reader as selves-in-process. The literary result of such an approach may be highly unconventional yet—in Reek's view—entirely legitimate. He usefully analyzes Manda Cesera's *Reflections of a Woman Anthropologist* and Jose Maria Arguedas' *Yawar Fiesta*. Both are "the direct and primary product of field work"; yet the former work includes excerpts from personal journals and letters. The latter is an *ethnographic novel*, one which Reek believes deserves a *higher* epistemological status than those written within the received scientific conventions.

Just what is at stake in the turn toward narrative is made clear in Howard Nixon's forceful critique of Reek and Jones. A sociologist with strong loyalties to positivism, Nixon wonders if the aims of useful generalization and causal exploration are being discarded by proponents of narrative approaches. He also questions whether an adequate account of truth-validation is present in the discussion. Jones asserts that the criteria used in making judgments between competing narratives include "comprehensiveness, ability to explain and/or account for weaknesses or problems in rival narratives, as well as moral and political judgments about the character of the people who are the adherents as well as the protagonists and victims of those narratives." Nixon worries that this suggestion will result in (1) endless problems of textual interpretation and (2) a premature abandonment of the criterion of falsifiability. He also asks an obviously important question: "Is the emerging metalanguage of narrative analysis" and related rhetorical, discursive, semiotic, linguistic, and cultural analysis—creating another inaccessible and perhaps obfuscatory form of interpretation of the world?"

James A. Winders' interdisciplinary *tour de force* "'Narrative': Postmodern Temporality and Narrative" demonstrates that obfuscation is not an inevitable component of discussions about either narrative or postmodernism. Sharing with Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth the conviction that modern scientific culture depends on the concept of neutral historical time, Winders faults professional historians for helping sustain such a construction. Historical processes are often highly non-linear, anti-progressive, dialectical, relativistic, and "retrograde." Yet historians live too much in a form of Newtonian Standard Time: in the doing so, "they domesticate and make routine the potentially explosive and contradictory character of historical study."

Winders' essay then considers postmodern fiction, art and performance, and technological advances in recorded music. His aim is to display the rich complexity of our actual experience of temporality, thus challenging his profession to rethink both research and teaching. Of the "multiple narratives and myriad temporalities at work in history," he is drawn to those which—because they come from the margins and "lower" layers of culture—invite suppression. Like Greg Jones, Winders is much influenced by Fredric Jameson's account of how subversive narratives constitute a repressed "political unconscious." Not surprisingly, in the section entitled "Writing and the Aesthetics of Postmodern Space-Time," Winders celebrates the art of Jenny Holzer, whose printed texts appear on billboards, railway cars, and baseball scoreboards. Holzer thus escapes the rationalistic space-time created in gallery culture and imposes a "new temporal rhythm" on familiar urban surroundings.

Winders' preoccupation with speeded-up and slowed-down temporal experience is interestingly shared by Greg Jones. In the final article, the latter relates narrative perspectives to recent discussions of "the virtues" in moral philosophy and theological ethics. The connection is that "diverse and competing yet overlapping narrative traditions have similarly diverse and competing

yet overlapping accounts of what it means to be a human and what virtues people ought to have if they are to live well.” But, properly understood, virtues are not something the self “possesses.” Rather, since the self becomes itself through its interaction with others, the virtues are recognized and established communally, “in dialogues with friends, strangers and even enemies.” The virtues are most effectively developed within a “narrative tradition,” wherein members help each other master the skills and habits without which virtues like patience, hope, or justice are only aspirations. Such an activity requires time and the willingness to take time. This perspective leads the author to discuss “the commercialization of social relations” in American culture and the viewing of time as a commodity. Such a culture underestimates the requirements of forming virtuous people. As an antidote, Jones commends attending to “counternarratives” within Christian and Jewish traditions. Here one finds “accounts of saintly people, people whose lives challenge our instrumentalist and consumerist mentality.”



The origin of this Special Number issue was a conference sponsored by the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at Appalachian State University and held there in March of 1991. Entitled “Shaking the Foundations: The Challenge of Narrative Epistemologies to Ethics. Literary Theory and Social Analysis,” it included all the authors present in this publication. Greg Jones served as keynote speaker. The papers received thorough review and some underwent very extensive changes. Julie Thompson Klein read and critiqued all manuscripts. Stanley Bailis performed the same office. The overall referee was Thomas Shaffer, the Robert and Marion Short Professor of Law at the University of Notre Dame Law School, A legal ethicist, Shaffer has pioneered in the application of narrative perspectives to legal theory and education. J. Linn Mackey’s paper was also carefully read by Katherine Hayles, Carpenter Professor of English at the University of Iowa. As members of the Association for Integrative Studies know, Professor Hayles’ current interests include the intersection of fiction, natural science, and information theory. Professor Joel Black of the Comparative Literature Department of the University of Georgia served as a second referee for Jim Winders’ contribution. Dr. Black is the author of *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).



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This issue is dedicated to AHANA MARIA RECK, whose narrative is just beginning again.

**Biographical Note:** Leslie E. Gerber is Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Appalachian State University. He is the director of Watauga College, a residential general education program with an interdisciplinary core curriculum. The co-author of *Loren Eiseley* (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1983), he is a frequent contributor of reviews and articles in the areas of ethics and political theory to *Religion and Intellectual Life*, *Cross Currents*, and *First Things*.

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