

THE NATURE
of Narrative

FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION



ROBERT SCHOLES

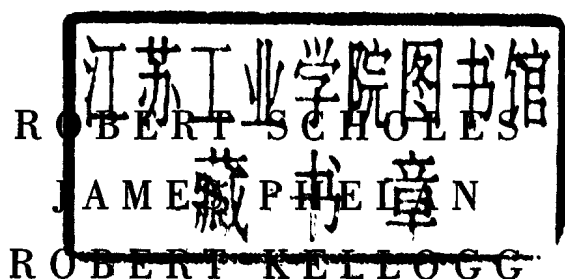
JAMES PHELAN

ROBERT KELLOGG



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Aaron's Rod by D. H. Lawrence (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988)

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Preface to the Second Edition by Robert Scholes

Forty years is a long time for an academic book to remain in print—especially one written by a couple of brash young scholars with no academic standing to speak of. But that is the case of the present volume. The book began in discussions between Bob Kellogg and myself about a sophomore course we had invented at the University of Virginia, in which we spent a year covering narrative literature from Homer to Joyce. We taught the course more than once and used to walk home together talking about it nearly every day. The book emerged from those classes and those conversations—and from the studying the course required on our parts, which was considerable.

In some ways, we were the ideal people to have done such a course. Kellogg had gone to Harvard for graduate study, driven by an interest in James Joyce. Since he was a thorough person, he started his studies with the middle ages—and never emerged from them. When we met he was working on Old Icelandic literature in particular, but his mastery of both medieval European literature and literary modernism was impressive. I had gone to Cornell, partly because their graduate program allowed for a concentration in the novel as a genre, which was quite rare in the 1950s. My MA thesis and doctoral dissertation were in twentieth century American and English fiction, but my training covered the novel as a whole, and at Virginia I taught everything from eighteenth century British fiction

to twentieth century American. Together, Bob and I had more historical range in narrative literature than any single person our age could have had.

We had been talking about collaborating on a book for a while, when I won a year's fellowship to the Humanities Center at the University of Wisconsin in Madison with a proposal for studying the history and theory of narrative literature. This opportunity meant that I would try to draft as much of our projected book as I could, leaving gaps for Bob to fill using knowledge that I didn't have. Deep in my own past were five and a half years of Latin study in the public schools of Garden City, NY, and I undertook to learn at least the rudiments of ancient Greek while in Madison. Bob knew a number of the languages of medieval Europe, and we both knew some modern languages. Neither of us knew Russian, but I had taken a year-long course in the Russian novel with René Wellek as an undergraduate. So, we had the basics.

At Madison I was able to pick the brains of a number of senior scholars ranging from Marshall Claggett, a specialist in medieval science, to Germain Brée, a scholar of modern French literature, and this was an enormous help to me. In the Humanities Center, Marshall Claggett, who was then Director of the Center, asked me if there were any books the Center could get that would help my studies. I gave him a list of some Loeb Classics—ancient Greek and Latin texts with facing English translations—and he mused on it for a while, finally saying that he thought the Center should have a complete set. A few weeks later I helped him unpack and shelve such a set, which was an great aid to my work, since I could find key passages quickly in the English texts and then study the Greek or Latin original more carefully, making my rusty Latin and rudimentary Greek functional in this way.

Well, I drafted my chapters, and Bob edited them, and then he drafted two (on the oral heritage of modern narrative and meaning in narrative) and I edited those. In this way the book got written, and ultimately published by Oxford. Nearly thirty-five years later Bob and I happened to sit opposite one another at a dinner, where

we decided to see if our publisher was interested in a second edition. They were, and we planned it, but the work went slowly, and then Bob died. He was a fine scholar, a great human being, and a dear friend. His death meant the death of the edition as well as far as I was concerned, since I did not have the heart to go on alone. But time eases such pains, and our publisher was very patient, so, after a while, I began thinking about how the book might be revised.

Reading the book over again after so many years, I was impressed by how much those brash young men had read, remembered, and pondered. They knew things that I do not know now, and they had thought about them in ways no longer available to me. Situated firmly in its own time, the book seemed to resist revision to the point of impossibility. The *Nature of Narrative*, after all, had helped to create the field of narrative studies, and I had extended my own thinking on narrative in such other books as *The Fabulators*, *Structuralism in Literature*, *Structural Fabulation*, *Fabulation and Metafiction*, *Textual Power*, and *Paradoxy of Modernism*. Many other scholars had also entered this field, producing rich and powerful studies on both the theoretical side and the historical side—scholars like Bakhtin, Todorov, Genette, Barthes, and McKeon, to mention only a few of the most obvious. Yet *The Nature of Narrative* had remained in print and seemed still to offer a useful perspective on the history and theory of narrative. This place, however, was to some degree historical—a perspective from a particular point in time, the middle of the twentieth century.

Given all those considerations, I saw no way to re-write the book and produce a new edition. Gradually, however, I realized that it might be possible to republish the original text, making minor stylistic adjustments, and to invite some younger scholar to supplement that text with a section on developments in the study of narrative since the first edition. And that is what has happened. The author who has joined this project is not a brash young man, but he is younger than me, and in a better position to speak of what has happened to narrative studies in the past few decades than anyone else I know. James Phelan has been for many years the editor of the

leading journal in the field of narrative studies, the official journal of the Society for the Study of Narrative, called simply *Narrative*. Without his collaboration, this second edition of *The Nature of Narrative* would not exist. And I think he has done an excellent job of covering what has happened to narrative studies in the forty years since this book first appeared.

Preface to the Second Edition by James Phelan

I was first introduced to *The Nature of Narrative* in my own brash youth: in 1969 in a required course for sophomore English majors at Boston College taught by Robert E. Reiter. I then studied the book more carefully in 1976 when I put it on the reading list for my Ph.D. special field exam on "Theories of Narrative" supervised by Sheldon Sacks at the University of Chicago. In the years since, I have had occasion to consult it and recommend it to others, but I was never expecting Bob Scholes's kind invitation to contribute "a section on developments in the study of narrative" to a new edition. Being asked to contribute to a book that has been part of one's formative experience is a surreal experience. If I were a novelist, I imagine I'd feel the same way if, say, Henry James or Virginia Woolf invited me to write a concluding chapter for a new edition of *The Ambassadors* or *Mrs. Dalloway*. Of course you feel flattered and say yes. Of course you also feel terrified and inadequate. But then you go and make some decisions about how to do the job and then, when they turn to be obviously the wrong ones, you make some new ones, and you keep going like that until you get something you can live with.

Of the many decisions I have made, there are three that I want to highlight here. First, I retain Scholes and Kellogg's focus on literary narrative because I believe that is the best way to underline the continuity between their work and developments over the last forty

years. At the same time, I point out that narrative theory has expanded its scope to include nonliterary narratives of all kinds and that this expansion has consequences for work on literary narrative. Second, I hew closely to Scholes's request for a discussion of "developments in the study of narrative." What this means, in practical terms, is that rather than tracing the history of narrative since 1966 (post-modern experimentation, the emergence of digital narrative, the memoir boom, and so on), I offer a narrative about narrative theory, and I punctuate that narrative with examples from both pre-1966 and post-1966 literary narrative. Proceeding this way, I hope, will allow the reader to see more connections between the theoretical parts of Scholes and Kellogg's work and more recent advances and proposals, even as it gives me more space to present those developments.

Third, I steer a middle course between presenting the developments totally on their own terms and offering my version of a Grand Unified Field Theory of Narrative (GUFTON). To do the first would be to adopt a false and, I suspect, unsustainable pose of objectivity; to do the second would be to exhibit a misguided narrowness of vision about the field and of rhetorical purpose on this occasion. Contemporary narrative theory is too diverse for "a section on developments in the field" since 1966 to become the presentation of a GUFTON. But the very diversity of the field also means that any narrative of its evolution over the last forty years must involve a large degree of selection. That selection in turn must inevitably reflect the storyteller's view of the field, including how different aspects of it relate to each other. Consequently, while I have reached the point where I can live with my decisions and selections, I am acutely aware that my narrative is not the only plausible one that could be written, and I think it would be healthy for my readers to have a similar awareness.

I am grateful to David Herman, Brian McHale, Peter J. Rabinowitz, and Bob Scholes for their helpful comments on my narrative. I am also grateful to Elizabeth Marsch for her eagle-eyed copyediting and her diligent assistance with the Works Cited. Above all, I am deeply

grateful to Bob Scholes for making the leap of faith that led him to invite me to contribute to his and Robert Kellogg's landmark book.

A few pages of my contribution have previously appeared in my entry on "Rhetorical Approaches to Narrative" in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (pp. 500–504), edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005) and in my entry on "Plot" in the *Encyclopedia of the Novel* (pp. 1008–1011), edited by Paul Schellinger (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998). I am grateful to both publishers for permission to reprint those pages.

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The Nature of Narrative

1

The Narrative Tradition

For the past two centuries the dominant form of narrative literature in the West has been the novel. In writing about the Western narrative tradition we will in one sense, therefore, necessarily be describing the heritage of the novel. But it will not be our intention to view the novel as the final product of an ameliorative evolution, as the perfected form which earlier kinds of narrative — sacred myth, folktale, epic, romance, legend, allegory, confession, satire — were all striving, with varying degrees of success, to become. Instead, our intention will be almost the opposite. We hope to put the novel in its place, to view the nature of narrative and the Western narrative tradition whole, seeing the novel as only one of a number of narrative possibilities. In order to attempt this it has been necessary to take long views, to rush into literary areas where we can claim some interest and competence but not the deep knowledge of the specialist, and perhaps to generalize overmuch in proportion to the evidence we present. For these and other excesses and exuberances, we apologize, hoping only that the result will justify our temerity in having undertaken such an elaborate project.

The object of this study of narrative art is not to set a new vogue, in either literature or criticism, but to provide an antidote to all narrow views of literature, ancient or modern. In any age in

which criticism flourishes, and ours is certainly such an age, a conflict between broad and narrow approaches to literary art is sure to arise. An age of criticism is a self-conscious age. Its tendency is to formulate rules, to attempt the reduction of art to science, to classify, to categorize, and finally to prescribe and proscribe. Theoretical criticism of this sort is usually based on the practice of certain authors, whose works become classics in the worst sense of the word: models of approved and proper literary performance. This kind of narrowing down of the literature of the past to a few "classic" models amounts to the construction of an artificial literary tradition. Our purpose in this work is to present an alternative to narrowly conceived views of one major kind of literature — which we have called narrative.

By narrative we mean all those literary works which are distinguished by two characteristics: the presence of a story and a story-teller. A drama is a story without a story-teller; in it characters act out directly what Aristotle called an "imitation" of such action as we find in life. A lyric, like a drama, is a direct presentation, in which a single actor, the poet or his surrogate, sings, or muses, or speaks for us to hear or overhear. Add a second speaker, as Robert Frost does in "The Death of the Hired Man," and we move toward drama. Let the speaker begin to tell of an event, as Frost does in "The Vanishing Red," and we move toward narrative. For writing to be narrative no more and no less than a teller and a tale are required.

There is a real tradition of narrative literature in the Western world. All art is traditional in that artists learn their craft from their predecessors to a great extent. They begin by conceiving of the possibilities open to them in terms of the achievements they are acquainted with. They may add to the tradition, opening up new possibilities for their successors, but they begin, inevitably, within a tradition. The more aware we are — as readers, critics, or artists — of the fullness and breadth of the narrative tradition, the freer and the sounder will be the critical or artistic choices we make. For mid-twentieth-century readers a specific problem must

be overcome before a balanced view of the narrative tradition becomes attainable. Something must be done about our veneration of the novel as a literary form.

With Joyce, Proust, Mann, Lawrence, and Faulkner, the narrative literature of the twentieth century has begun the gradual break with the narrative literature of the immediate past that characterizes all living literary traditions. Specifically, twentieth-century narrative has begun to break away from the aims, attitudes, and techniques of realism. The implications of this break are still being explored, developed, and projected by many of the most interesting living writers of narrative literature in Europe and America. But, by and large, our reviewers are hostile to this new literature and our critics are unprepared for it, for literary criticism is also influenced by its conception of tradition.

Rather than pick out one or a dozen reviewers to exemplify the hostility of contemporary criticism to much that is best in contemporary narrative art, we can take as an example a great scholar and critic, whose views are now acknowledged to be among the most influential in our graduate schools of literature (where the teachers, critics, and even the reviewers of the future are being developed) and whose attitude toward modern literature, for all the learning and sensitivity with which he presents it, is surprisingly similar to that of the most philistine weekly reviews. This scholar-critic is Erich Auerbach, whose book *Mimesis*, in its paperback, English language version, is one of the two or three most widely read and currently influential books in its field. And its field is a broad one: Western narrative literature. It is a great book, but Auerbach's single-minded devotion to realistic principles leaves him unwilling or unable to come to terms with twentieth-century fiction, and especially with such writers as Virginia Woolf, Proust, and Joyce. He finds *Ulysses* a "hodgepodge," characterized by "its blatant and painful cynicism, and its uninterpretable symbolism," and he asserts that along with it, "most of the other novels which employ multiple reflection of consciousness also leave the reader with an impression of hopelessness.

There is often something confusing, something hazy about them, something hostile to the reality which they represent.”

Auerbach's dissatisfaction with post-realistic fiction is echoed by the dissatisfactions of lesser men, which we meet on nearly every page of current literary reviews and journals, where much of the best contemporary writing is treated with hostility or indifference. And current attitudes toward contemporary literature also carry over into current attitudes toward the literature of the past. The tendency to apply the standards of nineteenth-century realism to all fiction naturally has disadvantages for our understanding of every other kind of narrative. Spenser, Chaucer, and Wolfram von Eschenbach suffer from the “novelistic” approach as much as Proust, Joyce, Durrell, and Beckett do. In order to provide a broader alternative to the novelistic approach to narrative, we must break down many of the chronological, linguistic, and narrowly conceived generic categories frequently employed in the discussion of narrative. We must consider the elements common to all narrative forms — oral and written, verse and prose, factual and fictional — as these forms actually developed in the Western world. While fairly rare, an undertaking of this sort is not without precedent.

Such, in fact, was the aim of the first book in English wholly devoted to the study of the narrative tradition, Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance through Times, Countries, and Manners*, which was published in 1785. Clara Reeve, confronted by the common eighteenth-century prejudice against romance, endeavored to provide a pedigree for the form, to show especially that “the ancients” employed it, and to distinguish it from its follower, the novel, without prejudice to either form. Her distinction, indeed, is the one preserved in our dictionaries today, and it is still employed by critics who make any pretensions to discriminating among narrative forms:

I will attempt this distinction, and I presume if it is properly done it will be followed, — if not, you are but where you were before. The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things.