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Response to James Phelan's "Authors, Resources, Audiences: Toward a Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative"

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I would like to begin by thanking John Knapp and James Phelan for the invitation to respond to Phelan's target essay. After briefly describing the way in which I see Phelan as an academic, I situate the target essay in the broader context of his thinking over the last 20-30 years and then move on to talk about some reservations and hesitations, I have about aspects of the essay, including the Author-Resources-Audiences chart suggested by Phelan. I argue that the chart or model is neither a chart nor a model of what it claims to be; but that this makes it even more important.

As collegial participant in and organizer of conferences, as editor of the journal *Narrative*, and of the Ohio State University Press book series, *The Theory and Interpretation of Narrative*, and as a teacher, Phelan has influenced generations of narrative theorists, literary scholars, and students. Not just in the formal capacity of possessing these duties, but because as an editor, a supervisor, a mentor, Phelan has no equal. Phelan writes on the first page of the target essay: "As a pluralist, I have always valued—and I continue to value—the diverse kinds of knowledge produced by these different narrative theoretical projects". It is safe to say that in his life as an academic, he practices what he preaches also when it comes to disagreements, exchanges and diversity. He is extremely generous, and he has an enormous intellectual capacity to process, understand, and improve strands of thoughts, including those he does not agree with.

With this in mind, it seems worthwhile to me to situate the target essay very briefly in the broader context of Phelan's thinking. His work is presented on his webpage in a way that describes most of his books as part of *one* large project "that develop the contours of a rhetorical theory of narrative". The same kind of modesty characterizes "Toward" in the title of the target essay. The rhetorical approach to a poetics of narrative laid out in the essay, and much more thoroughly in the course of the five books, is as comprehensive as it gets. It is distinct from most other schools and strands of thought within narrative theory, let alone from specialized monographs by embracing narrative poetics as a whole, more than any one specific topic, theme, period or formal feature such as gender, postmodernism, experimental literature, mind etc.

The ambition of comprehensiveness is perhaps captured most clearly in the suggested definition of narrative that opens the essay, and versions of which form a red thread through all five books: "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened". I wish to compare the first version of this definition from 1996 to the current one in order to suggest what is most fundamentally important about the approach as a whole¹. Very early in *Narrative as Rhetoric* the following definition is offered: "It means instead that narrative is not just a story but also action, *the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose.*" (8). While it is clearly useful to stress narrative as action and especially to stress that it always comes with a purpose, the definition is somewhat circular by using the non-defined, almost synonymous "story" as part of the definition of "narrative". This problem is solved in the more recent versions, including the current one: "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened". Here "story" is exchanged for "something happened". The latter version, however, brings with it a different issue, since the idea that narratives are always about

¹ See also Stefan Iversen in the current volume.

something that happened seems to come with a strong bias towards non-invented narratives² as opposed to a description like “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose about something invented, imagined, or actually happened.”³

I wish to keep this reservation in mind while stressing the important insight in a model that stresses narrative as an action and as something that comes with a purpose. For me, accordingly, the strongest and most important claim in the target essay is also the last one:

But, as I hope is clear by now, rhetorical poetics consistently subordinates its claims about the nature of any element to its concern with how somebody uses that element in the service of accomplishing some purpose(s) in relation to somebody else. (43)

This seems to me a reverse return to the roots of narratology. In theory, classical narratology celebrated Barthes’ claim that the narratives of the world are numberless and covers an enormous variety of genres, media and permeates every culture, and aspired to develop a science or even syntax of narratives equally multifaceted. I am not the first to point out that at the same time it did in practice read and theorize almost only novels – particularly canonical novels from the western culture in the latter half of the 19th century. There seems to have been a pre-theoretical or just implicit assumption that what might be learned from studying novels could be applied to all kinds of narratives. In a sense, I think Phelan is – but I would be very curious to hear him respond to this claim – taking the full consequence of the reverse assumption in a form like; “what holds true for all narratives (that they are actions and have purposes and have senders and receivers) also holds true for literature.” This might sound so fundamental, that it seems almost self-evident. In reality, it is very far from it, and breaks away from decades of established dogma in literary and narrative theory.

It is entirely un-controversial to say that narratives have purposes and senders but it is very controversial to apply the consequences of this insight to literature because it entails assuming that literature is a communicative phenomenon with everything that follows from that. If narrative is a fundamentally communicative phenomenon, then narrative exists only in communication. This means that all narrative discourse (such as advertising, history writing, and everyday reports) and all fiction (such as novels and short stories and feature films) are communicative. This means again that the various examples and manifestations, despite their great diversity, can be part of a completely general communication model – a version of which Phelan presents with his Chart of Constants and Variables in Narrative Communication. When narrative and fiction are approached from within a communicative context then the assumption has to be that someone is intentionally using narrative with a purpose aimed at some receivers. For fiction, this means that the author of a novel is the sender. However, the sender of narrative discourse in general does not have to be an author but may also be an advertising agency, a politician, an NGO organization or, for that matter, a math teacher telling a story about several men building bridges or digging holes at an hourly rate. The communication also does not necessarily have to be a message and, does clearly not have to be written. Finally, the recipient is obviously not always a reader, and not always the one to whom the communication was originally addressed, but may be a television viewer, a passerby of an open window, or just a person listening to his friend. The simplest possible model that accounts for this complexity thus looks something like this:

² Alternatively, a bias towards treating fictional narratives as if they adhered to the rules of non-fictional, non-invented narratives where we do tend to tell that something happened.

³ I am overstating the problem slightly, and Phelan himself has dealt with similar concerns. However, as I explain below, I still contend that the bias towards non-fictional storytelling situations and assumptions is a real issue.

Sender – Text/Story/Message – Receiver

I use "text" about not only written products, but also about visual, verbal, and auditory, and naturally a text does not always have to be a narrative. It seems to me immediately obvious that Phelan's Author-Resources-Audiences-model is not a communication model in this general sense. Already the first word, "author" is a giveaway that Phelan is predominantly if not only interested in literature. In addition, many of the resources, like Narrator(s), FID, Style, Arrangement/Gaps, and Narratee are usually closely associated with literature and literary theory⁴.

This is a good fit with Phelan's consistent interest in fictional and non-fictional literature; in graphic novels, short stories, memoirs, illness narratives, and novels. The model is so different from Chatman's which it purportedly replaces that it is more like a model for something else than an alternative model for the same. Chatman's model is as acknowledged by Phelan all about discourse, and all instances in it are communicative agents. Phelan's model, instead, is a flexible, heuristic description of some of the resources an author has at her disposal in literature.

Literature, in Phelan's thinking here, as perhaps to some degree in general, seems to be at the same time paradoxically excluded and presupposed. It is excluded in the sense that it is not mentioned in the title of the essay or in the name of the chart or used to delimit the territory described. It is presupposed in the sense that the sender is assumed to be an author and most resources and all examples are tacitly literary. Now, if this was just a question of changing "narrative" to "literature" it would be a real minor point. I do think, though, that it points to something deeper that might provide a fruitful perspective to be more fully developed by Phelan and others in the future: the importance of fictionality.

In responding to an earlier draft of the chart, I pointed out that Fictionality was conspicuously absent.⁵ Compared to resources like Narratee (aptly described by Phelan himself elsewhere as the freeloaders of narrative theory), Narrative Audience, and Intertextual References, Fictionality is such an overarching, all-decisive resource in narrative communication in general and in literary communication in particular that it should rank very high on the list.⁶ I see in Phelan's earlier omission of Fictionality a sign of a bias towards the non-invented also entailed in the definition with "something happened." I am sure, and it is clear from many texts, that unlike, say, most cognitive narratologists, Phelan does not have, nor encourage this bias in practice and in close reading, but even so I think his theoretical account of narrative could be improved by more explicitly taking into account the invented and fictional. One very beneficial consequence of such attention would be to distance Phelan's model from the position immanent in Chatman's scheme, which is to conceive of fictionality and literature as isomorphous with report. In "Natural Authors, Unnatural Narration" I argue that the standard narratological model of the relationship between narrator and author has served to naturalize the understanding of fictional narratives and of fictionality in the sense that fictional narratives are understood along the lines of everyday reports since a narrator supposedly reports what he or she "knows". In its attempt to understand fiction as a form of communication from a narrator, narratology has rarely

⁴ For a more detailed comment on this, see Iversen in the current volume.

⁵ If an author can use fictionality in the form of intentionally signaled invention in communication or licensed departure from the actual, this would clearly seem like a resource. In addition, several of the listed resources only come into play on the background of an assumption that fictionality is in play, like when Phelan states "narrative audience, present only in fiction".

⁶ It speaks to Phelan's responsiveness that he is always willing to consider comments as well as to respond and help improve the other way round. I am happy to see fictionality/non-fictionality included in the chart. In my opinion, it would not have been covered by "genre" since fictionality as a rhetorical resource is prevalent across genres, let alone by "etc".

devoted much attention to the author. My main argument is that the real author is the narrating agent who can invent what no one knows and narrate what no one else communicates. By acknowledging this, readers can more easily account for undisguised inventions and transgressions of communicational models as they frequently occur throughout literary history. When communicational models are transgressed and techniques of fictionality (zero focalization, etc.) are employed, these phenomena cannot helpfully be acknowledged or explained by assuming the existence of a narrator distinct from the author. Instead, they are techniques at the disposal of the real author – not of a narrator modeled on everyday non-inventive, reporting language. Further investigations of the author as narrator could also shed new light on the history of literary and narrative theory and the reasons for the emergence of the concept of the narrator as invisible mediator of fictions. I think that Phelan more than anyone else provides a model for thinking about the purposes of literature and reasons and methods to read and to study it, but that his thinking and model would benefit from taking the full consequence of explicitly acknowledging what might well be its single most important feature; fictionality.

To conclude, therefore, one advantage of Phelan's model is that it makes author and audience the only constants. The insistence by Phelan that all narratives – and by implication all literature – serves to accomplish some purposes (ethical, aesthetical, didactical, for instance) is immensely fruitful. When literature is at the center of attention, I think there is valuable work to be done by specifically investigating fictionality as a choice, a resource, and a rhetorical strategy, and by asking why an author employs or refrains from employing fictionality. Asking questions like these is not a means to leave the text behind, but on the contrary to supply new ways to examine it closely as Phelan has already partly captured with his concept of reasoning backwards.

Phelan's rhetorical theory is much needed in literary criticism, caught up as it has been, in a crisis between the Scylla of disinterested pleasure and the Charybdis of utilitarian approaches. Examining intentional and affective aspects of literature becomes remedies rather than fallacies in that landscape, and I would warmly invite Phelan to elaborate on the role of fictionality specifically in a context where we examine the purposes of literature as communication.