
Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than 1,000 words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981.

Narrative and Vocation

To the Editor:

I admire Bruce Robbins's recent work on professionalism and institutionalization. Perhaps more than anyone else, he has underscored the important point that we should "learn to pronounce the word institutionalization without the usual sinister innuendo" and should "distinguish particular institutional alternatives from each other rather than condemning . . . them" (*Poetics Today* 9 [1988]: 768). His recent *PMLA* article ("Death and Vocation: Narrativizing Narrative Theory," 107 [1992]: 38–50) continues his intervention in the conversation on profession and institution, brilliantly spinning out the story of how literary studies, in part, has redefined its object of study under the sign of narrative and how this concern with narrative in turn provides a symbolic public justification for what we do in literary studies.

However, I would diverge from Robbins's story on what I think are two significant points. First, I would question his focus on narrative, his taking narrative as the hero of his story. There are, I think, alternative stories that might be more compelling, that better account for the field as it is currently constructed and that better fit Robbins's bill as both redefining the object of study and providing a degree of public responsiveness. One obvious example would be the current invocation and use of *history* as a salient term in critical discourse. Another would be the ascendance of cultural studies and the push to extend our disciplinary bounds from literature (usually implying poetry like Pope's or Spenser's) to the broad category designated *culture* (encompassing everything from anthropology to television cartoons and ads). It seems to me that both of these make for far stronger stories of the "socially responsive" chord of our profession.

I think the best evidence of how this shift to history or culture hits home—somewhere in the public sphere—is all the flak that the humanities are taking. To put it in a slightly roundabout way, I don't think that people like Roger Kimball or Lynne Cheney are very worried when we talk about narrative, but they tend to get upset when we talk about things like history and ideology.

While I think that Robbins is absolutely on target in charting the rising career of narrative and in claiming that it has refigured contemporary critical discourse, thus reorienting our object of study, I would argue that the stress on narrative goes directly against being "socially responsive" or "socially representative" (49), despite Robbins's claims to the contrary. In one significant way, *narrative* suggests an insular realm of technical literary terms, the realm where symbol, allegory, and prosopopoeia live. In other words, I would say that it functions to reinforce the public conception of literary academics

as cut off from the colloquial world and interested in arcane pursuits like prosody, or tropes, or narratology. In this, the plot clearly has a professional function, but that function is precisely a move from public access, not toward more social relevance or answerability. *Narrative* makes claims not to worldliness (as in Said) but to literariness (construed as an institutional compartment).

I think that the new focus on history or on culture offers a strong account of what's been going on in our profession. Still, there are other stories. The stories of the advent of narrative and of history are both limited by an exclusive focus on high theory, on the hegemonic story of theory as disseminated from Yale and by academostars. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm a fan and purveyor of this dominant story of our profession, at least of the theoretical line of it, and I happily teach it every spring. However, I've come to realize that there are alternative narratives to be told about what people do in our profession and about what is constituted as work in the other ninety percent of literature departments. The authorized version of theory—and even more rarefied forms of it, like narrative theory—doesn't very much speak for what most people do, how they justify their jobs to a public constituency, usually one that “pays their salaries.” If one teaches at a non-“prestige” university, composition is the more likely public justification.

Just as the *Annales* school has called attention to alternative and more quotidian topics for history, perhaps we would be well served to consider the previously silenced stories of this other ninety percent, stories of how bibliographies are constructed for Garland or Gale and how funding is justified to hire a few lecturers to cover comp courses, rather than stories of how the definitions of story and discourse shift in works published by Cornell. What is the theoretical rationale for these other kinds of work, which so many of us do but so few of us talk about?

Second, I would question Robbins's use of “public.” Again, while I admire his commitment to the social and his bringing to bear the question of the social, I would have to ask what exactly is this thing called a “public.” Who falls under that heading? The general aggregate called the public by those in the media and politics? A more selective group, the kind that is college-educated and might peruse the *New York Times Book Review*? The term strikes me as one of those that Orwell would ban in “Politics and the English Language.” Without being overly cranky, I think that it is too amorphous to be of much use. It is one of those words we so frequently use that show our intent, our desire for commitment, but at the same time reveal our ab-

straction and remove from the concrete instantiation of that dream.

Further, the crucial question is determining not just what or who the public is but how one genuinely affects the public sphere. What are the channels of communication and what pressures do they bear? To return to Robbins's argument, how far has the news about narrative filtered to the public? And, bluntly, what difference has it made?

Perhaps this complaint about public relevance, as it used to be called, is a register of my roughly Generation X disenchantment with the hope, the dream, of a socially responsive criticism, which I look for—as Robbins does—but haven't yet fully seen.

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To the Editor:

The lateness of this response to an essay in the January 1992 issue of *PMLA* is a sign of what disturbs us. Embedded at the end of a long paragraph in the middle of Bruce Robbins's “Death and Vocation: Narrativizing Narrative Theory” is a long sentence that is disquieting precisely because it is easy to miss, even to dismiss. The paragraph analyzes the effects of “the exclusions and suppressions that [Daniel] Deronda's vocation produces” (44). Suggesting an aside, the last sentence begins, “And even . . . ,” and then works up to holding historical and literary Zionism responsible for excluding and marginalizing both Gwendolen Harleth and the Palestinians. To paraphrase Robbins, it is difficult not to read this argument as a vocational allegory.

That this argument should appear in a special section devoted to literary history is extremely disturbing. In so many ways, of course, Robbins's discourse coincides with prevailing trends in literary studies. The linkage of events and peoples from different moments in history and literature is part of new-historicist methods, as is his concern with questions of domination and exclusion. Moreover, it is now a given in our profession that academic discourse itself cannot help being ideological, even political. Robbins's method, however, is dangerous in its failures to follow his own concerns. Embedded as asides, his historical, ideological, and literary linkages fail to disclose the shaping power of his own ideology. His aside functions rhetorically as a given, so that in representing Zionism as an exclusionary and marginalizing discourse, Robbins does not acknowledge his own construction.