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Editor's Column

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Editor's Column

THE NARRATIVE TURN AND THE HOW OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY

As many readers of *Narrative* know, the scholarly organization that sponsors this journal has changed its name from the Society for the Study of Narrative Literature to the International Society for the Study of Narrative. This change is not designed to announce a radical break with the past but rather to have the name catch up with the gradual evolution in the activities and interests of the Society's members, who are now spread around the globe. Most notably, the change announces that the Society endorses the decoupling of the study of narrative from the discipline of literary criticism. Where the old name signified the "Mostly U.S. Society for the Literary Critical Study of Literary Narrative," the new name identifies the "International Society for the Promotion and Interaction of All Worthwhile Ways of Studying All Kinds of Narrative" (though I trust you'll agree with me that ISSN is a far better acronym ISPIAWWSAKN). Literary criticism and literary narrative are of course included in these Ways and Kinds, and, consequently, *Narrative* will continue to welcome work that falls squarely within the domains of literary narratology and literary history; work on nonliterary narrative, including work on narrative in media other than print; and work that explores what the findings of research in science, law, medicine, business, or other disciplines can add to our understanding of individual narratives, literary or nonliterary, or narrative more generally. But the occasion of the name change with its embrace of "all worthwhile ways" and its interest in the "interaction" among these ways provides a good opportunity to reflect not just on the what but also on the how of narrative inquiry. How does a particular way of studying narrative—and by particular I mean not just an approach to narrative but a specific

essay, book, or other such artifact—convey its worth? And how do we distinguish between better and worse interactions between and among different ways of doing narrative inquiry?

Most of us would agree on some basics. A worthwhile inquiry will address a significant question and, using a sound methodology, will reason toward a persuasive answer that can provide the basis for further significant questions. A fruitful interaction among different approaches to narrative will do justice to the core principles of each approach even as the interaction makes possible a persuasive answer to a significant question. If the interaction also shows the potential to help with other questions, so much the better. But these basics raise other issues: what exactly counts as a significant question? Who decides and where does their authority come from? Are today's significant questions tomorrow's trivial ones? As for fruitful interactions, what is the relation between doing justice to core principles and finding a creative way to combine them? Answers to these questions would generate still others, answers to which would inspire more, and soon we would find ourselves lost in that forest where the trees of epistemology become indistinguishable from those of ontology. Rather than enter that forest here, I propose to stay on its outskirts and instead consider the how of narrative inquiry in two concrete cases, one I regard as very successful, and the other as provocative but ultimately flawed. Not surprisingly, I believe that all six essays in this issue—Brian McHale's "Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry," Seymour Chatman's "Backwards" (about narratives that reverse the usual direction of time's arrow), Marie-Laure Ryan's "Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design," Kelly Marsh's "The Mother's Unnarratable Pleasure and the Submerged Plot of *Persuasion*," Aviva Briefel's "What Some Ghosts Don't Know: Spectral Incognizance and the Horror Film," and Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck's "Narrative Interest as Cultural Negotiation"—are candidates to exemplify the successful case. But I focus on McHale's essay because its concern with the interaction of two subfields of literary criticism (poetry studies and literary narratology) provides illuminating grounds of comparison with my less successful case, Mahzarin R. Banaji's "The Science of Satire," published in the August 1, 2008 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, which also is concerned with the interaction of two approaches to its object of study: scientific research on perception and humanities-based studies of irony and satire.

McHale's "Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry" itself begins by identifying a significant gap in narrative theory: its failure to attend to narrative in poetry, despite the importance of such narratives from Homer's epics down through sonnet sequences all the way to contemporary autobiographies in poetic form. For the most part, McHale notes, narrative theory has either neglected these narratives or treated them as if they were written in prose. Furthermore, on the rare occasions when narrative theorists turn their attention to such narratives, they focus on the relation between *lyric* and narrative rather than on that between *poetry* and narrative. (Full disclosure: I figure as one such example, and I plead guilty as charged.) Having identified the gap and its significance, McHale turns to the task of closing the gap by asking and answering the question, what is the fundamental identifying marker of poetry, the quality that accounts for its *poeticity*?

McHale's answer involves the synthesis and elaboration of the work of two theorists of poetry in the 1990s, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and John Shoptaw. Following DuPlessis, McHale proposes that the defining feature of poetry is segmentivity, the way in which spacing (indicated primarily by typography in print) creates "bounded units . . . operating in relation to . . . pause or silence" (quoted by McHale 14). Poetic segments include stanzas, lines, metrical feet, even words. Following Shoptaw, McHale defines poetic measure as "the smallest unit of resistance to meaning" (quoted by McHale 16) and notes the overlap between the concepts of segment and measure. Just as a segment is marked by some space that can be made to signify, a measure is marked by a "resistance" that activates our meaning-making capacities. Furthermore, just as DuPlessis discusses how poetry makes meaning through the interplay among its various segments (for example, a metrical foot signifies not simply by itself but also in relation to the words within it, to the line containing it and to the stanza containing that line), Shoptaw points out that poetry depends on a relation between measures at one level and countermeasures at another. Thus, the poeticity of poetry resides in the way its segmentivity and the consequent movement of measure and countermeasure is an integral part of its signification.

Armed with this understanding of poeticity, McHale turns his attention back to narrative and argues that, though narrativity not segmentivity is its defining feature, narrative too relies on segmentivity. Narrative is segmented into events (and clusters of events that form episodes or subplots), voices, focalizations, temporalities (e.g., iterative narration gives way to singulative narration, narrative present to analepsis or prolepsis), and so on. In addition, the interplay among these various segments in a given narrative influences its signification. Consequently, McHale reasons, narrative in poetry will signify differently from narrative in prose because the segmentivity of poetry provides another set of resources for the play of measure and countermeasure in narrative. As he puts it, "that segmentation *must always* contribute meaningfully (for better or worse) to the structure of poetic narrative" (18). McHale then clinches his argument by offering an extended illustration of this central theoretical point by analyzing four different translations of sixteen lines of *The Iliad*. His analysis focuses on the signification arising from the interplay between, on the one hand, each translator's choices about poetic segmentivity, especially about how to treat the epic simile in these lines, and, on the other, the narrative's concern with two planes of action, one involving the human warriors and the other involving the gods.

McHale's essay satisfies the basics noted above: the gap in narrative theory he identifies is a major one, and he proposes an answer that is both persuasive and well-pitched in its claims: this answer is a first rather than a final step. But it is his handling of the interaction between poetry studies and literary narratology that I most want to call attention to. On the surface, the essay seems to give pride of place to poetry studies. That subfield gets the most space, and, as McHale both extends and synthesizes the work of DuPlessis and Shoptaw, he makes a genuine contribution to that subfield. But this attention to poetry studies is the necessary means by which McHale can accomplish his main purpose of beginning to fill the gap in narrative theory. If he were to elevate poetry studies above literary narratology, then he would argue that in his corpus poeticity dominates narrativity. Instead, by proposing that

poeticity becomes another layer of signification in such narratives, he retains the importance of literary narratology for their analysis. In short, a major part of the appeal of the essay is that it demonstrates that his object of study, narrative in poetry, is best served by the interaction of concepts from both subfields.

None of this is to say that McHale's argument is perfect or otherwise beyond questioning. To take just two of many possible objections, I suspect that some readers will find that the concept of segmentivity does not satisfactorily identify the distinguishing feature of poetry because it says nothing about poetry's content or purposes. Other readers (or, indeed, some of the same readers) will question the analogy between the segmentivity of poetry, which typically is marked by vocal or typographical means, and the segmentivity of narrative, which typically is not. But objections such as these are of the "yes, but" kind, and as such confirm rather than undercut the essay's value, because they implicitly participate in McHale's larger project of thinking about narrative in poetry.

Banaji's "The Science of Satire," which, as a one-page piece in *The Chronicle Review*, has a narrower scope than McHale's essay, provides the opportunity to look at another model for managing the interaction of different domains of knowledge. As I noted above, the domains are scientific studies of perception and humanities-based studies of irony and satire. Banaji's general object of study, as his title suggests, is satire, but his particular focus is Barry Blitt's *New Yorker* cover, captioned "The Politics of Fear," and the controversy it generated. This cover, you'll remember, depicts Michelle Obama, in Black Power guerrilla-fighter garb, complete with a rifle over her shoulder, and Barack Obama, in Muslim attire, complete with headwrap and sandals, fist-bumping in the Oval Office while the American flag burns in the fireplace just below a portrait of Osama bin Laden (<http://www.newyorker.com/online/covers/slideshow_blittcovers>). Blitt's image is arresting in large part because it concisely encapsulates the following hypothetical narrative: "If Barack Obama wins the November election, he and Michelle will celebrate their subversive triumph by burning the American flag and giving Osama bin Laden a place of honor in the Oval Office—and that's just for starters." The controversy is largely about how the image invites that narrative to be taken; how coherent that invitation is; how easily the image and the invitation can be misread, ignored, or appropriated; and, thus, whether the cover is effective or ineffective—even offensive—satire. As we'll see, Banaji regards scientific studies of perception as far more important than humanities-based studies of irony and satire, and it is the troubling consequences of that position that I will pay special attention to. Indeed, though I realize that by the time you are reading this column, the cover and the controversy are likely to be no more than small footnotes in the history of the 2008 U.S. Presidential campaign, that loss of urgency serves my purpose because it makes it easier to focus on the how of Banaji's inquiry.¹

Banaji's specific question is what light scientific studies of perception can shed on the controversy generated by the cover and especially on the core debate about whether it was well- or poorly-executed satire. He offers a very direct two-part answer. First, these studies show that it was clumsy, ineffective satire at best. Second, artists such as Blitt should become familiar with these studies in order to inform themselves about how their work will be perceived. More specifically, studies of "in-

formation transmission" tell us that the image's very association of Barack Obama with Osama bin Laden dooms Blitt's satiric intentions. "When presented with A and B in close spatial or temporal proximity, the mind naturally and effortlessly associates the two. Obama=Osama is an easy association to produce via simple transmogrification. Flag burning=unpatriotic=un-American=un-Christian=Muslim is child's play for the cortex. . . . There is no getting around the fact that the very association Blitt helplessly confessed he didn't intend to create was made indelibly for us, by him" (B13). Although Banaji admits that it is possible to recognize that Blitt's cover is intended to be a caricature, he emphasizes that, even then, its literal associations would exert their power: "To some part of the cognitive apparatus, that association [between Osama and Obama] is for real. Once made, it has a life of its own because of a simple rule of much ordinary thinking: Seeing is believing" (B13).

Banaji's analysis has the genuine appeal that invocations of the firm findings of science frequently do to those of us who dwell so much among the uncertainties of interpretation and evaluation. Furthermore, if we agree that Blitt's image is ineffective satire—and even if we don't agree, we have to acknowledge that the large negative reaction to the cover gives Banaji a good warrant for his position—we are likely to find the analysis offering useful insight into its flaws. In this way, his essay appears to be an efficient example of a productive use of the findings of one field to address a controversy in another, and I infer that that's one reason *The Chronicle* published it.

But let's look more closely at what Banaji assumes about the appropriate interaction between science and the arts. Banaji's assumption comes into clear relief in the second part of his answer. He contends that if Blitt and David Remnick, his editor and a defender of the cover, had not remained "isolated in the world of art or publishing, cut off from the basic facts of human nature and experience, of conscious and unconscious social perception" then they would not be "so startled by the mismatch" between their intentions and "the results of their clumsy actions" (B13). And he concludes the essay by identifying what he regards as the negative ethical dimension of this isolation: "Good intentions are always present, even in the naïve, and so it must be that Blitt's artistic endeavor, Remnick's printing of it, and the responses of both can most parsimoniously be explained as ignorance about the mind and how it learns. But as our worlds get more complex, as we know more about what the outside does to our inside, it is the moral responsibility of the artist to know about how art is received by its intended audience" (B13).

These complaints and admonitions reveal that, for Banaji, the traffic between science and the arts and humanities properly flows in only one direction, from the sciences with their superior wisdom (down?) to the arts and humanities. Just how powerfully this assumption influences Banaji's conduct of the argument becomes evident in his claim that artists and humanists have the moral responsibility to keep up with the science of perception. Conspicuous by its absence is any statement about a similar moral responsibility for scientists to keep up with developments in the arts and humanities. Perhaps even more conspicuous by its absence is any role for humanities-based studies of irony and satire in analyzing the image and the controversy it generated.

Let's test Banaji's assumption by placing it within a larger framework about the interaction of worthwhile areas of study (whether these areas constitute disciplines, subfields within a discipline, or some other appropriate divisions). In this view, the interaction depends upon the question being asked and the relative state of relevant work in the different domains. Banaji's assumption may be warranted in cases where work in one domain is either far more advanced than it is in the other or where work in one domain clearly trumps work in the other. (In effect, I want to ask whether Banaji is right to treat Blitt's cover as such a case.) But in many other cases work in each domain will be relevant to but not decisive for a persuasive answer to the question. In these cases, as we have seen with McHale's essay, the researcher needs to determine how best to combine the findings in each area—and often what else is needed—in order to supply a persuasive answer to the question. One way to test whether Banaji's assumption is actually warranted is to ask what, if anything, humanities-based work on irony and satire, and more specifically, literary critical work on these modes, would bring to his task of assessing the effectiveness of Blitt's cover. Indeed, we have additional motivation for this question if we replace Banaji's assumption that because Blitt and Remnick don't know the science of perception, they are naïve and ignorant about "information transmission" with the assumption that their respective experiences have given them some worthwhile knowledge about "how art is received by its intended audience." What is it about the design of the cover and its context that would have led both of them—and that significant subset of readers who liked the cover—to deem it effective satire?

Of course not all literary critical work on irony and satire comes together in a grand chorus of agreement. But for my illustrative purposes, it is sufficient to focus on a rhetorical approach to them and on how it confirms, challenges, refutes, or otherwise links up with Banaji's analysis.² From this perspective, one of the salient features of Blitt's cover is that it employs irony in the service of satire, or, to put it another way, that it has a satirical purpose that it seeks to achieve through irony (with an assist from hyperbole). Irony is a rhetorical device in which an author communicates to an audience that the literal meaning of a communication should be rejected and replaced by an alternative meaning that entails a critical perspective on that literal meaning. Sometimes the alternative meaning includes (though it is rarely limited to) the antithesis of the literal meaning; sometimes the alternative does not go all the way to antithesis. Irony can be an end in itself—a display of wit for its own sake, for example—but it is more often a means to some other ends: enhancing an argument, ridiculing something, separating insiders who get the irony and outsiders who don't, and so on. In this respect, irony is similar to hyperbole, the device of deliberate exaggeration—that is, less often an end in itself than a means to another end. Because irony works by indirection, by saying one thing and meaning something different, it is a very risky rhetorical device, one that can easily misfire. It is this quality of irony that lies behind the U.S. National Transportation Safety Administration's decision to declare airport security areas "no-irony zones."

Satire is a communication designed to mock or ridicule some particular targets that may or may not be directly represented in the communication. Satire can be used as a means to other ends (it can, for example, be an integral part of a larger, non-

satirical argument), but, as the definition suggests, it is often a rhetorical purpose itself. Satire can vary in its tone from gentle to biting, and the more biting it gets the more the apt term for its purpose is *ridicule*.

From this perspective, Blitt's cover, as I suggested above, is a satire by means of irony (with the irony signaled by hyperbole). It is designed to encourage an interpretation such as the following (whether viewers will so interpret it is another matter): the artist no more intends to endorse the narrative that "the Obamas will celebrate winning the election by burning the American flag in the Oval Office" than Jane Austen intends to endorse the idea "that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." At the same time, just as Austen's statement would be endorsed by some other people, so too would some of Obama's opponents like to promulgate the image's implied narrative as truth. Just as Austen signals her distance from the literal meaning of her sentence through various devices (especially the antiphrastic structure of the sentence), Blitt uses the hyperbole attached to just about every element of the image to signal both his distance from the implied narrative and his mockery of those who would spread it. The hyperbole simultaneously keeps the tone good-natured and serious. Finally, both the context of the image—it is on the cover of *The New Yorker* and not, say, on a Fox News broadcast speculating whether an actual Obama fist bump was a "terrorist fist jab"³—and the caption contribute to our understanding of the image's satirical purpose and ironic means: this outlandish stuff belongs to the "Politics of Fear."

Although this rhetorical analysis offers an account of what the cover was designed to do—and thus, at least a partial answer to the question of why Blitt and Remnick thought it could work—Banaji's argument, in effect, is that this analysis is beside the point because scientific studies of perception show that Blitt's attempt at irony inevitably works against his satirical purpose. "There is no getting around the fact that the very association Blitt helplessly confessed he didn't intend to create was made indelibly for us, by him." If Banaji is right, then we have the basis for a startling hypothesis about the difference between verbal and visual irony. Verbal irony, though it can easily misfire, is also something that frequently goes well (think, for example, of how readily we get the joke about the grammarian who tells his students that two negatives make a positive, but two positives don't make a negative only to have one student reply "yeah, right"). Visual irony, by contrast, is, if not impossible, much more difficult to pull off, and, indeed, over time the literal meanings are likely to dominate the ironic ones. We can begin to explore this hypothesis by considering Banaji's comments on some of Blitt's other covers and by bringing in for comparison, another famous cover, Saul Steinberg's "View of the World from 9th Avenue," in which Manhattan dwarfs the rest of the U.S. and the world.

Banaji notes that Remnick defended Blitt's cover by comparing it with two others, one from December 5, 2005 titled "The Odd Couple" that depicts George W. Bush standing with a dust mop and a bemused look on his face, while Dick Cheney sits in an easy chair reading the newspaper and smoking a cigar (http://www.newyorker.com/online/covers/slideshow_blittcovers), and another from September 19, 2005 (approximately two weeks after Hurricane Katrina) titled "Deluged," showing a White House cabinet meeting in a flooded Oval Office

(http://www.newyorker.com/online/covers/slideshow_blittcovers). Banaji comments: "Let's analyze Remnick's logic that those are psychologically equivalent to the Barack-Michelle image. When the artist's intention was to depict Cheney as the boss, he faithfully drew Cheney as the boss. That's satire? When the artist's intention was to depict the drowning of the administration, he sketched the drowning of the administration. Far out!" Although one does not need to be grounded in the science of perception to notice the difference Banaji astutely points out here, I would venture that his grounding highlights the difference as he views the three covers. Similarly, although the rhetorical perspective is not a *sine qua non* for questioning Banaji's leap to his conclusion that the difference in artistic means signals a difference in artistic purpose, that perspective highlights the leap. The Bush covers are satires because their respective purposes are to hold up for ridicule the Bush-Cheney relationship and the Bush administration's response to Katrina. They're different from the Obama cover because their satire works by means of hyperbole rather than irony. The Bush covers invite their audiences to take the surface communications as *metaphorically* accurate and thus as endorsed by Blitt. The Obama cover, as we have seen, does not ask its audience to take the surface communication as literally or metaphorically accurate, literally or metaphorically endorsed by Blitt, even as it asks its audience to recognize that someone else—the target of the satire, the victim of the irony—buys into it metaphorically (and even perhaps literally).

Putting these points together—Banaji's highlighting of the difference between the Obama cover and the Bush covers and the rhetorical explanation of that difference—leads to another hypothesis. The difficulty with the Obama cover is neither, as Banaji would have it, that its very association of Obama and Osama works against the satire, or, as our more general hypothesis would have it, that visual irony is by its nature so much more difficult to communicate than verbal irony. Instead the difficulty is that this particular execution of the indirect ironic communication makes it hard for many viewers to assign source tags to the image and, thus, raises doubt about the target of the satire. Since there is no explicit source for the image of the Obamas, the default source is Blitt—and, more generally, *The New Yorker*—and, thus, they may seem to be targeting the Obamas rather than those unrepresented fear-mongers and their followers who view the Obamas this way.⁴

We can begin to test the plausibility of the hypothesis—and clarify its difference from Banaji's contention that it is the very juxtaposition of images that works against the satire—by a thought experiment in which we imagine a revision of the cover along the lines suggested by various commentators. Suppose Blitt had drawn the current image as a thought balloon attached to the mind of an avowed and recognizable Obama opponent such as Rush Limbaugh, who would himself be portrayed in an unappealing way. This revision, by putting an explicit source tag into the image and marking the source as not to be trusted, eliminates the irony (as in the Bush covers, Blitt would endorse the image as a metaphorical truth—this time about the mind of the fear-monger) and narrows the target of the satire to Limbaugh (or whatever figure is chosen). From the rhetorical perspective, these two consequences of the revision would weaken the potential power of the image, but they would also significantly reduce the chances of the communicative misfire. Because the image clearly

assigns both the implied narrative about the Obamas and its attendant stereotypes to the satirized opponent rather than to Blitt and *The New Yorker*, viewers would not share in that narrative and its associations themselves. If that's right, then we would want to qualify Banaji's conclusion that "seeing is believing" by adding "unless the source of the sight is marked as not to be believed."

Steinberg's cover would seem to support these conclusions. It is another satire, albeit a gentler one, that works by means of irony with an assist from hyperbole. Steinberg does not use a thought balloon, but the caption does give us a general source tag (the view from 9th Avenue) that the hyperbole signals his ironic distance from. Consequently, we see this view of the world, but don't take it on as our own, because the irony undercuts rather than endorses the source tag. While some New Yorkers buy framed copies of the image to hang above their mantelpieces, they typically do so not to proclaim their belief in the image's view of the world but rather to announce that they get and endorse its irony and are willing to direct it at themselves.

I want to stress that my conclusion about qualifying Banaji's claim that "seeing is believing" is only tentative and that this conclusion should be subject to further testing, including testing in laboratories devoted to the science of perception. At the same time, the analysis suggests that those scientists will be better able to design and evaluate those tests if they attend to the indirect nature of ironic communication, verbal or visual, and the way that experience with irony teaches us that not all seeing is believing. In other words, I do not claim that putting the rhetorical perspective on irony and satire in dialogue with Banaji's essay definitively shows fatal flaws either in his analysis of Blitt's image or in the conclusions of the science of perception. But I do claim that the interaction between scientific study and rhetorical analysis underlying this dialogue will typically generate more productive inquiries than Banaji's underlying assumption that science should dictate to the arts and humanities.

ENDNOTES

1. One more caveat: The question of the cover's merits and demerits is complex, because it involves so many variables, including the cover's formal features (e.g., the fist-bump as the center of the composition), its satiric targets (specific practitioners of the politics of fear, or a component of the national imaginary?), its timing (before rather than after the political conventions), its appearance on the cover of *The New Yorker* as opposed to, say, *The National Review*, its multiple audiences, hypothetical and real, its susceptibility for easy remediation and appropriation for uses Blitt and his editor, David Remnick, did not anticipate, and more. Similarly, there is work in multiple disciplines including art history, performance theory, critical race theory, visual rhetoric, and more, that could be brought to bear on the question of the cover's efficacy. I possess neither the space nor the expertise to engage with all these variables and all these disciplines, and so I will not offer any final evaluation of the cover's effectiveness. Instead, my goal is to analyze how Banaji's assumptions about the interaction between science and the arts and humanities influence the way he conducts his argument.
2. Of course I choose this perspective because I often work within it. What I say about irony and satire is also influenced by the work of Wayne C. Booth and Sheldon Sacks, respectively.
3. After the Obamas bumped fists on the night that Barack clinched the Democratic nomination, E. D. Hill on the June 6, 2008 edition of Fox News's *America's Pulse* led into a discussion of the gesture with a body language expert by querying whether it was "a fist bump? a pound? a terrorist fist jab?"

and then describing it as “the gesture everyone seems to interpret differently.” Shortly after, Hill was taken off the air and reassigned to another position, with Fox News denying that it was a *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* situation.

4. This discussion of source tags draws on Lisa Zunshine’s discussion of source-tracking or “metarepresentation” in *Why We Read Fiction*.

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