**Rhetoric, Communication, Fiction**

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The subtitle of James Phelan’s target essay directs us towards a “rhetorical poetics of narrative,” and this is a theoretical orientation with which I am in strong sympathy. I agree with the principle that “*Narrative is ultimately not a structure but an action*” (2); it is a mode of communication (and behind that, a mode of cognition – but even there, a semiotic articulation of meaning, for one’s self, that is continuous with communication more narrowly understood). This shared premise has large implications and, like Phelan, I am invested in pursuing them, though with nothing like his sustained energy and industry. However the key move of this essay, its appropriation of Chatman’s narrative communication model, seems to me a misstep, and indeed contrary to the logic of a rhetorical approach.

On the face of it, a “communication model” ought to be very amenable to rhetorical theory, but their superficially congruent interest in communication hides a basic inversion of conceptual priorities between the two. On the one hand, rhetorical approaches to narrative give primacy to the communicative act, which takes place in some cognitive environment shared between the communicator and the recipient of that communication (I am avoiding narratologically loaded terms). Of course, among the things such a narrative act may represent or report is some other narrative act; the shared context of narrative logic providing for the communication itself will also substantially provide for the intelligibility of any such represented narrative act, and indeed any further narrative acts presented within that represented narration – it’s a recursive form.

The communication model, on the other hand, is founded upon a structuralist conception of narrative in which there is a something – the story – articulated in a certain form – the discourse. The story/discourse model gives conceptual primacy to the content plane (Chatman 22-23), and so conceives of narrative as a representational orientation towards an object in the first instance, and only secondarily a communicative orientation towards another subject. This, too, is a recursive model, but it propagates in the opposite way: instead of generating ever more representational levels of narration it generates ever more transmissive levels of mediation. Phelan expresses some skepticism about the story/discourse distinction, and I certainly back his implied dissent from “the majority of narrative theorists” (6) on this point – perhaps with more enthusiasm than he would wish: I think the story/discourse distinction is fundamentally at odds with the conceptual orientation of rhetorical approaches. But Phelan would also evidently like to dissociate the story/discourse distinction from the communication model, and I do not think that is possible. His reason is that he would like to incorporate characters, which Chatman locates squarely in the category of story, within the communication model’s discursive framework; in my view, this move itself confirms and compounds the communication model’s illegitimacy from the perspective of rhetorical theory.

What do the arrows in Chatman’s diagram of the communication model signify? In Phelan’s own ARA diagram this is a relatively straightforward question, despite the fact that the arrows there go in both directions (9): it is a model of the way authorial communicative purposes are conveyed through certain resources to an audience. The arrows going back in the opposite direction signify the audience’s agency in this process, through interpretative attention to those resources, and considerations about this effort in turn influence authorial choices. I wouldn’t frame it in those terms, but I might make an analogous point by drawing upon the terminology of relevance theory and noting that ostensive-inferential communication is likewise a conceptual hybrid of authorial ostension and audience inferences (Sperber and Wilson 54). Of course a relevance theory account of communication would also reframe the category of “resources” as the shared cognitive environment, which the author changes and the audience evaluates in order to maximize the relevance of the consequent contextual effects (142). This way of putting it makes explicit what Phelan’s list of resources tacitly acknowledges, which is that the parameters of the communicative act are not exclusively textual or representational.

In Chatman’s communication model, however, the arrows lead us through a nested series of narrative agents both within and beyond the text. Since this is not a game of Chinese whispers, these arrows cannot all mean the same thing unless they are abstracted considerably from the idea of communication the model purports to represent. In fact these arrows seem to signify the crossing, in both directions, of the conceptual boundaries of textuality and representation (or more specifically, fictional representation). They serve to police those boundaries in the name of a heterogeneous set of theoretical orthodoxies about intentionalism, textual media and, especially, fictionality, but the result is a multiplication of abstract agents which do not so much resolve as defer the boundary issues they are meant to address. For this reason, the communication model creates the potential, even the logical need, for an endless proliferation of discursive agents, and Phelan’s proposal to introduce characters into the communication model seems to participate in this theoretically unprofitable game.

The rationale is that just as character narration (i.e. by represented narrators, so part of the communication model) requires authors to juggle representational and communicative considerations, so too character dialogue (i.e. scenes of represented communication that is not narrative, so is not part of the communication model) involves the same negotiation (7). Phelan subsequently notes that the list of resources in his ARA model includes “not just human agents (as Chatman’s model does) but also nonhuman resources such as occasion and arrangement that authors deploy for significant communicative effects” (12). And indeed, everything represented in or implied by a narrative may be deployed for significant communicative effects – but in that case, why pick on character? The reasons appear to be that characters are represented agents, and in dialogue their agency is discursive. These considerations, however, are symptomatic of the communication model’s unwarranted constraint upon Phelan’s own rhetorical approach; worse, they also participate in the drive to understand communication in terms of representation, which is to say, the communication model’s fundamental antipathy to rhetorical narrative theory.

Phelan’s first example is a telling choice, it seems to me, as the basis for his argument that character should be included in the communication model. Benjy’s section of *The Sound and the Fury* has some distinctive features that perhaps seemed helpful as a means to push the limits of that model; but actually I think they more plausibly invite us to dispose of it entirely. The opening scene of the novel includes lines of dialogue spoken by Luster and by one of the golfers, which Phelan argues constitute distinct “channels of communication” (4) conveying key details to the reader or audience (specifically, the word “caddie,” homophone for the name of Benjy’s sister Caddy; and the fact that Benjy himself is moaning). These are represented instances of language, certainly, but in what sense is either part of a *channel* of communication between author and audience? The implication is that they belong within lines of transmission; that representation here is understood as a report or relay of the discourse represented (this, of course, is the point of continuity between the communication model and the story/discourse opposition). Phelan argues further that these channels of communication are “functionally independent,” because neither mediates the other and because “the audience has access to the dialogue without any mediation of it by Benjy (he records it without any comment)” (4). This point is the beginning of Phelan’s movement beyond the communication model, but it also directs us towards a far more basic incompatibility between the communication model and this example.

Indeed, neither instance of dialogue can be considered part of a channel of communication including Benjy, since neither functions as communication *for* Benjy. Luster’s words are addressed to him, but he is incapable of understanding them; the golfer’s words are neither addressed to him nor understood in terms of their meaning, only their sound. But if these are significant points for the novel, of far more significance is the general point that Benjy is incapable of being part of any channel of communication at all. Phelan characterises Benjy as a “naïve recorder/reporter” (5), the equivocation perhaps an acknowledgement of discomfort with the very notion of “Benjy’s narration” (4). As a character, however, Benjy is not merely naïve; he has no mastery of language (and if we do not know this at the start of the novel, it is only one of many features in this novel that can only be grasped on second reading). It makes no representational sense to understand section one of *The Sound and the Fury* as narrated by Benjy. He is not its reporter, nor indeed its recorder, as for instance with respect to the dialogue: to say that “he records it without any comment” is to attribute to him an agency to record, and even a potential capacity to comment, which are representationally ruled out. The anomaly is only compounded by the communication model’s precipitation of a receiving agent for each communicative agent: when Phelan says that Faulkner “has Benjy unknowingly communicate to his narratee” (4), the conceptual exorbitance of the end of the sentence far overshadows the minimisation of Benjy’s agency at the beginning.

Benjy’s inability to comprehend or use language in his own right of course provides for the idea of functionally independent channels of communication that Phelan wants to advance. But much more fundamentally it means that Benjy himself is not part of any channel of communication. Nor will it do to rescue the communication model by saying that the representation of Benjy’s perspective in section one of the novel is not character narration but only a form of focalisation. The language of the section of course does convey something of his cognitive limitations, through formulations like “curling flower spaces” and “hitting” used without an object (Faulkner 3), a restricted kind of language that is itself, nonetheless, beyond him and not mimetically his own. But it is also a straightforwardly past-tense, first-person narrative; it lacks both the present temporal deictics and the dissociation of person that mark internal focalisation. Indeed the past tense form aggravates the incoherence of the idea that this narration represents a communicative act by Benjy. It is indeed a form of narration from Benjy’s perspective, but one that does not cohere with any represented communication, and so is unassimilable to the communication model.

Later in the essay Phelan discusses representational impossibilities and improbabilities, and suggests that they can be offset by convention: “In practical terms, then, an omniscient narrator in a nineteenth-century novel is neither an impossibility nor an improbability” (28-29). In fact the idea that an omniscient narrator presents a problem of possibility only arises within the dogma of the communication model and its role in policing the boundaries of fictionality (Walsh ch. 4); there is nothing remotely problematic about imagining events you have not witnessed, or thoughts you could not know of even in principle. Still, might an appeal to convention redeem Benjy’s section of *The Sound and the Fury* for the communication model? Perhaps, but on even worse terms. In this case there is no established critical concept to justify, so it is purely a matter of saving the theory. Worth it?

**References:**

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