



Talking Narrative: A Conversation with David Antin

EDITED BY BRIAN MCHALE

David Antin, avant-garde poet and critic, visited the Ohio State University campus in Columbus on 15–16 October 2002 with his wife, the performance artist Eleanor Antin. Their visit was sponsored by the Wexner Center for the Arts, the Institute for Collaborative Research and Public Humanities, and the College of Humanities. Among the events of the Antins' visit was a conversation between David Antin and members of the Ohio State faculty, including Jon Erickson (English), Ann Hamilton (Art), Bruce Heiden (Latin and Greek), Rick Livingston (Comparative Studies), Michael Mercil (Art), and Amy Shuman (English). Dan Boord (Theatre) introduced Antin, and Brian McHale (English) moderated the conversation. The transcript was prepared by Anita Bratcher.

Boord: David Antin is a poet, performance artist, and critic of art and literature. He is best known for his “talk pieces,” improvisational oral works which have been collected in print form in his volumes *Talking*, *Talking at the Boundaries*, *Tuning*, and *What Does It Mean to be Avant-Garde*. He has designed “skypoems,” short texts he describes as “commercials that aren’t selling anything,” which have been sky-written over Los Angeles and San Diego. He has also created “word walks” for urban parks, and has performed both improvised and scripted works for radio and television. He received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the NEH, and was awarded the PEN Los Angeles Award for Poetry in 1984. Among his critical publications is the review essay “Wittgenstein Among the Poets,” in which he explores the interesting proposition that Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* could be regarded as a poem.

Today we're having an informal discussion with David on narrative and storytelling. Brian McHale, Professor of English, has been asked to prepare a couple of questions to get the ball rolling.

I. "WHY NARRATIVE IS STILL WORTH TALKING ABOUT"

McHale: The title of your talk tomorrow at the Wexner Center is "Why Narrative is Still Worth Talking About," and that title all by itself constitutes a provocation. To prime the pump for today's conversation, you sent me a piece of yours about narrative and story, which can now be found in *Pacific Coast Philology* (Antin, "The Beggar and the King"), and I thought I would start there since that seems to be pretty much the latest draft of your thinking on this topic.

Antin: My ideas have developed somewhat since that essay, but I haven't gone too far from its central ideas.

McHale: So let's start there. As I take it, there you undertake to redefine narrative as a cognitive modality: not the concatenation of events over time, which you call "story," but the sense of someone's subject position as the defining feature of narrative. I think you would probably find some allies among the narratologists for that position. The more cognitively oriented narratologists might go along with you (Monika Fludernik, for instance). But I wonder how far they would be willing to follow you in taking your next step, which is to say, if narrative is identified with this sense of some subject position, its goal is to "make present," you say, but not to "make intelligible"—"making intelligible" being the function of story and not necessarily of narrative. I have the impression that narratologists would part company with you there. I think they want to have their cake and eat it too. I think they want narrative to "make present" but also to "make intelligible." Why can't they have it both ways?

Antin: The history of narrative is very long and tortured. I've been struck, partially confused, and stimulated by both Plato and Aristotle and the way the West has been obsessed with these two figures—obsessed for very good reasons. They're very entertaining writers and they're always worth reading. But if you look at Aristotle's *Poetics*, which I believe is actually a talk piece taken down by a marginally competent graduate student, there are certain confusions that I doubt we should attribute to Aristotle, certain confusions of terminology. It seems to me we shouldn't blame Aristotle for all of them. After all, he was known as the golden-tongued Aristotle and there is nothing golden-tongued about the Greek of the *Poetics*. In fact there is nothing golden-tongued about any of the works of Aristotle that have come down to us, which is why I assume graduate students took them down. And while I have nothing against graduate students, they appear not to have understood very clearly what he seemed to have in mind.

In any case, Aristotle has a notion of an accounting, giving an account of event

sequences, which following Plato he calls diegesis. And this is separate from the mimetic function, the shamanistic function which produces the sense of being there that Plato was so terrified of (though he generates it brilliantly himself in his terror of it); that is, the notion of mimesis as that warrant for experience that produces a kind of identification with a subjectivity in a situation that *you're not in*. And this confusion was very upsetting to Plato. It seems to me that this confusion is not a confusion; it's the testimony that narrative makes itself; it's the claim of narrative to produce subjectivity.

Brian has read my paper and nobody else here has, so let me just explain quickly why I see what Plato and Aristotle call diegesis and mimesis as the marks of two separate cognitive functions that I distinguish as narrative and story. I see story as the diegetic function, the articulation of the sequence of events and parts of events that shape a significant transformation, and narrative as the mimetic representation of a desiring subject confronting a transformation that he or she attempts to bring about or prevent or both. These two functions are usually not distinguished because they are often seen together. Narrative is often seen within story and story is often seen wrapping narrative, but once you start looking you begin to find that there are quite a few examples where they show up separately. In fact, I believe that Brian's paper on "weak narrative" is essentially in agreement with what I've been saying. What he calls "weak narrative" essentially is an example of narrative minus story—it's not weak in narrative, it's weak in story. So when he points to Lyn Hejinian, a marvelous poet, and speaks of her having a kind of persistent narrative aspect without all the aspects of what would traditionally be considered narrative, what he's calling attention to is the absence in her poems of the consistent spatial and temporal mappings that could specify unambiguously the events and relations between events producing the powerful experiences generated by the text. "Weak narrative" is naked narrative without story.

But the problem of understanding what Plato and Aristotle had to say about narrative is complicated by the fact that they were talking about something else and narrative was only incidental to their discussion. The word *mythos* is the word Aristotle uses for "story." Almost always it means plot, "an arrangement of actions," that the French would translate as *intrigue*—ultimately, the sequence of events. There are magnificent narratives found around the world in which the plot sequencing is relatively trivial. American Indian storytelling is rich in such narratives, and my case for the most brilliant examples of narrative without plot comes from the work done on Aztec—the compilation of Aztec materials put together by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún in the sixteenth century, not long after the conquest of Mexico. Sahagún was impressed by the richness of Aztec culture and the expressiveness of the Nahuatl language, and unlike many of the *conquistadores* his interest was essentially in the experiential trove of the Aztecs. And while he collected very many things—myths, rituals, ceremonies and poems—in his *General History of the Things of New Spain*, a great work in twelve volumes that has been translated very sensitively by two American scholars, Charles Dibble and Arthur Anderson, the most interesting for our purposes is the collection in the eleventh volume of a list of the things of the Aztec world accompanied by explanations or definitions of them. The

term “definitions” was up in the air—dictionaries were rather new things in the sixteenth century, and most dictionaries were dictionaries of hard terms or foreign words. The idea of a philosophical definition was perhaps available to Sahagún as a scholastically educated cleric, but you can’t imagine the Aztec informants knowing what a definition was. And we don’t know what questions Sahagún posed to the Aztec aristocrats who were his native informants. It’s fair to suppose that they were mostly very educated Aztecs within an Aztec culture; whatever education constituted for them, these people were very rich in it. But here he appears to have asked them for the meaning of very simple terms like “cave” or “mirror” or “mountain” or “mushroom.” Now put yourself in the position of an Aztec gentleman being asked about a word, “What does it mean?,” by a Nahua-speaking foreigner who apparently understands the word well enough to ask about it. What does he want from you? Apparently he wants my *experience* of a cave or a mirror or a mountain or a mushroom. So I give him my experience of a cave. But my experience of the cave is multiple and involves traversal, so I say “It becomes long, deep; it widens, extends, narrows. It is a constricted place, a narrowed place, one of hollowed-out places. There are roughened places, asperous places. It is frightening, a fearful place, a place of death. It is called a place of death because there is dying. It is a place of darkness; it darkens; it stands ever dark. It stands wide-mouthed, it is wide-mouthed; it is narrow-mouthed. It has mouths which pass through. I place myself in the cave. I enter the cave.” And this is the way the definitions unroll. Sometimes they’re crisper. Sahagún asks for the meaning of a mushroom and the Aztec answers, “It is round—like a severed head.” Clearly an Aztec response.

I was intrigued by this. Not being a Nahua scholar, I consulted one and asked him if these explanations had any grammatical markers that suggested a narrative aspect. He said he hadn’t thought about this, but he would take a look. When I saw him again he said, “It seems that there are.” Which suggests that the narrative aspect is marked in these Nahua definitions in a way somewhat similar to the marking of narrative aspect by the French imperfect. So I would say that these Aztec definitions are examples of narrative without story. Because there is no mapping of the event sequences within which the narrative experiences were produced.

Let me say what I mean by “narrative.” I offer a kind of definition: narrative is the representation of a desiring subject, that is, a subject that wants something and values something or other over other things. Narrative is a desiring subject’s confrontation with the threat or promise of transformation, or one might say the threat *and* promise of transformation, which the subject struggles to withstand or bring about—or both. It seems to me that this is the key—that all narrative has this. If it doesn’t have it, it’s not going to feel like narrative at all.

Now the subject is inherent in it, but it’s the internal view from the subject’s position that creates it, and the mimetic effect largely is involved in creating the subjectivity to generate the whole confrontation—to make it clear and compelling. What it tends to do also is, by contagion, to subjectivize the narrator. That is to say, the narrator’s subjectivization of the subject creates, by a kind of domino effect, the subjectivization of the narrator, who acts as the medium of exchange with someone to whom this is being narrated. In other words, the warrant that there is a subjectivity within the

narrative is my subjectivity as the narrator, which becomes the medium through which the subjectivity of the subject who is experiencing this struggle with transformation is felt. So there is a kind of contagion effect, which I think is suggested by Plato in several works, but for Plato this effect is always accompanied by a terrible anxiety level. Nevertheless Plato had deep insight into the effect of the creation of subjectivities.

“Story” I would define differently. It’s another ballgame. Story is the logical structuring of the events leading to the transformation. So I define story as the representation of a sequence of events and parts of events that produces a significant transformation. Notice there’s not a mention of subjectivity in this definition, and this is the way most structuralists would treat story. They would call this narrative, whether you’re dealing with Propp or Bremond or Todorov. What you’re dealing with here is a logical structure that takes you from state 1 to a profoundly different state n by a series of links in a causal chain.

Now these two modalities can be found wrapped around each other. Every trial in America produces examples of this. The definition of murder requires the prosecutor to produce the subjectivity of the killer sufficiently to show his intent to kill, as it may require the lawyer for the defense to show it sufficiently to argue that he couldn’t help it and didn’t intend it. So within the logical structuring of the story that will show the defendant did or did not accomplish the killing, narrative is brought to bear to determine the experiential meaning of the events for the actor generating or reacting to them. And the prosecutor and the defense lawyer work to produce their separate versions of the killer’s subjectivity, because what’s at stake is whether to punish someone for deliberately and intentionally destroying another human life or for culpably but accidentally destroying it. And this requirement comes up in all kinds of cases. Wherever liability is based on intent, you will find not only the story offered to explain what has happened and how it came about, but you’ll also find narrative introduced into the midst of the logical structuring, to determine the kind and degree of responsibility of the defendant for his supposed actions. That’s why they’re often found together.

But story can also be found completely without narrative. It’s very easy to find it completely without narrative in the daily papers. A police reporter writing up a crime will often piece the story together from interviews with several different people—the victim, a witness, the desk sergeant who has taken his report from a policeman, who may have arrived after it was all over—and he sews together the testimony as well as he can into a more or less logical structure that tracks the way a robbery took place or a rape was or was nearly committed. So newspapers are very rich in reports of event structures that display no single subjectivity, but from which you could infer several possible subjectivities and several possible but unrepresented narratives.

II. “IN A NARRATIVE EVERYBODY’S SUBJECTIVITY IS AT STAKE”

Heiden: I wonder, though, whether in those cases the narrative isn’t sometimes the narrative of the investigation?

Antin: That's another thing. Often it is, because you're interviewing the investigator, and so the subjectivity of the desk sergeant begins to be evoked incidentally without the reporter necessarily intending it. The struggle of the desk sergeant or the investigating detective to determine the way in which the events unfolded produces by inference a subjectivity, not necessarily desired but not refused by the reporter. When that happens you wind up with an inadvertent narrative of the investigation. But often the various parts of the investigation are pursued by different people, and the person telling the story to the police reporter has no great interest in it because he's simply giving the information that's part of the blotter. So you don't get a narrative of the investigation. But you *can* get it. I think you're absolutely right.

McHale: Pushed to an extreme you have something like the Robbe-Grillet case that Amy Shuman was talking about before we started today, where there is no subjectivity, but the structure of the story compels us to infer one that we throw around it as a frame.

Antin: More than that: it's not the structure of the story that does it. I would suggest that what happens is that the objectivity of the report creates such a pathologically bizarre notion. That is to say, what you are confronted with is an inhuman response to observation, and you have to imagine an observer who has no investment in the events he or she is experiencing. And our experience compels us to try to attribute this noninvolvement to some kind of personality, and we wind up with the autistic narrator. The objectivity produces a pathological subject, so that a Robbe-Grillet novel produces in you the notion of a narrator whose subjectivity has been destroyed, or is vacant or missing, which is itself a peculiar kind of subjectivity. And this itself becomes interesting. You end up inferring a bizarre subjectivity, and you wind up with a narration of bizarre subjectivity.

Shuman: If you push it to the other extreme of collective narrative, where you have the same sort of scenario of no single subject—where you have a whole community of people who invest in one collective narrative that recounts experiences that happened to no one in particular but represent a shared experience that happened to everyone—what do you have in that case? Do narrative and story merge?

Antin: I think you have a narrative corpse or, to put it another way, you can have a fraudulently invented narrative, a pseudonarrative, as in political narratives. Historical narrative is often of this order. For example, master narratives of a nation's history are generally pseudonarratives undertaken for particular subject satisfaction, and they've tended to engender a justifiable distrust for narrative history among historical scholars. They become pseudonarratives when they begin to generate pseudo-subjects like "the people," "the working class," "the revolutionary spirit," "the citizen," "France," "the Free World," which are usually endowed with fictive feelings that suggest fantasy subjectivities.

Erickson: Actually, what you find in Robbe-Grillet's essays is that he's basically try-

ing to de-anthropomorphize literature. But it turns inside out. So if what you are talking about in the case of “the Masses” is a form of anthropomorphism, then I wonder how different that would be from the Aztec situation.

Antin: It seems different on the face of it, in that the Aztec definitions appear to be attempts by individual Aztecs to communicate concrete individual experiences as well as possible and as powerfully as possible. I believe narrative is inherently singular—because experience is singular. There may be a great deal that we have in common and we may be structurally very much alike, but we experience the world singly. That is to say, it is something like Kant’s explanation of the aesthetic response: all aesthetic responses are individual but they are grounded in human universals. Narrative is a human universal, and the tendency to resort to narrative is universal for a variety of reasons. Actually narrative is the basis of self-formation. Here I’m somewhat relying on the earlier part of Ricoeur’s theory of narrative, offered in that wonderful three-volume work which turns out to get more and more disappointing as it goes along (*Time and Narrative*). From a brilliant opening in the first volume it becomes somewhat more conventional in the second and finally deteriorates into a completely pedestrian example of literary criticism in the third. But Ricoeur’s basic proposition is that narrative represents the human being’s confrontation with the paradoxes, or what he calls the *aporias*, or the blind alleys, of the experience of time. If you could imagine a subject confronting time in a primitive sense for the first time, that calls up a Deleuzian situation. If you look to the future, something different, difference, will suddenly appear, something other will appear. Something will end and something else will appear. The problem is that if something else will appear and that something else will appear within you, you will be different, you won’t be the same, and the difference might annihilate you. And if you think of the present, the now, and look to the past, you see it separated from you as by a gulf and you’ve become other and have lost or are losing what had up to the moment of regarding been only the furthest backward extension of the now. So either you are threatened by an otherness that’s coming or you are cut off from the sameness that’s behind and become the otherness that cut you off. This is the problem of time: the present seems to erase the past, creating its pastness, and the future threatens to destroy the present by turning it into the past, while it is in turn erased by turning into a new present. So you have these ways in which time can’t be registered within experience without a loss at every turn.

Now, the center of narrative seems to me to be about the problem of the self trying to recover these losses, trying to imagine itself as a coherent entity. Narrative seems to attempt to make it unified, and it always succeeds and fails. The kind of failure it produces seems to me to be the center of the narrative idea. The self seems to be constructed over the fissure created by change. When confronted this fissure can appear annihilating, but the broken continuum can also be seen as a seal of the self, defining its grain, so to speak.

Imagine Paul de Man having lived long enough to have had the privilege of being confronted with his fascist past. When de Man wrote for the Nazi-controlled newspapers in Belgium, he was not expressing the values that seem to be expressed

by the humanistic scholarship, or anti-humanistic scholarship, of *Blindness and Insight*. In fact he might be describing himself in *Blindness and Insight*. So we have an interesting problem. Imagine Paul de Man confronted with his history. He would then have to address it, in all honesty or dishonesty—he would have to address it for himself, forgetting how he would address it to a public. If it was the de Man whose penetrating scholarship we know, he would have to ask: “Was I a different person then, and can I claim my complete otherness from the one who I was at that time? Or do I justify my connection to that other younger de Man by finding that there was something in that time that made me see things that way and I have to accept that pro-Nazi de Man as part of my being someone I can have contempt for and respect at the same time?” You can under most conditions live an unconsidered life and not have to question your self, but when you come to situations where your continuum breaks down you have to make a decision—is that me? Will I be able to adjust if I do this or don’t do that? Will I still be me? People die for that reason. People go into situations where they give up their lives in order to be who they believe they are. And there are people who fail to do that. And that’s also a narrative.

Erickson: Isn’t that the doubleness of the notion of integrity? On the one hand integrity implies continuity: you stand behind your words. On the other hand if you make a mistake, integrity means saying, “I made a mistake; I’m going to change.” But perhaps the will, whatever that means, is the same in both cases.

Antin: I think integrity is a way of speaking of it on a moral plane. Generally I would say that most people attempt to live coherent lives, lives we could say that have integrity behind them.

Erickson: When you were talking about de Man, I thought you were talking about the moral plane.

Antin: No. I was talking about something more fundamental. Integrity is a way of characterizing the desire for continuity of self, which seems to underlie it; the continuity of self is something inherently desired automatically, and there is no need to view it from a moral position. It’s “This is who I am and I want to continue being who I am.” But it’s much more profound than the notion of wanting seems to express. It’s somewhat more like the inertial principle of the soul, the self, or the subject position. It’s not the “I” of predication; it’s behind that “I.” Maybe the “eye” prior to any simply asserted “I.” And the problem is, looking out of this “I” (“eye”) how does this “I” (“eye”) face the change that may replace it with another “I” (“eye”)? If I submit to this change, what is there of me that’s left? So it seems to me that the issue of integrity is only part of the larger issue of the continuity of self, and narrative is essentially the key to the way this is both engaged with and evaded. You can use it to evade it; you can use it, as it were, to attain to it. You can do it in a great variety of ways. But it seems to me that narrative is the vehicle that makes life possible; that is, life is impossible without certain kinds of continuity, or more precisely it’s very difficult for life to exist with total discontinuity. In fact, one describes the

psychopathic personality as the personality without continuity; that is, it's the experimental person, who presumably responds to opportunity at all points as if he were reborn each time: "Now I'm this, now I'm that, now I'm the other." That's a clinical exaggeration. I can't imagine such a personality actually exists. Although one can easily imagine people who seem to have a very weak sense of the need for continuity to maintain themselves as being.

Erickson: Is this different from meaning? Because you said something about disconnecting narrative from meaning.

Antin: No, what I said was "narrative explains nothing." It seems to me that story will produce the logic, but narrative presents the experience of the failure (often) or of the gap being produced. In other words, the narrative confronts you with the struggle of the subject to maintain his existence in the teeth of the desired or undesired change and transformation, and essentially it's the dramatization of the experience of the confrontation. It isn't the full mapping. So my sense is that the narrative is the shamanistic transmission of the confrontation. It isn't the mapping that allows you to track the course of events. You need the story to grasp the logical course of the change. But without the narrative you wouldn't have the sense of what was at stake. Story as described by, let's say, a French structuralist has nothing at stake.

Heiden: I wonder if you could go a little further into that matter of transmission. What I was thinking about, which really hasn't emerged yet in your discussion but which seems, I think, to have something to do with the fissure you were describing, is the relationship between the teller of a narrative and the addressee. This story that you're describing emerges as a story not just because someone wants to construct events in such a way as to form a self, but also because they're in some relationship with some other person or people to whom it may be important to communicate about this—to transmit the experience to *them*. So in some sense their self as a communal self depends upon the crossing of *that* fissure.

Boord: In a narrative everybody's subjectivity is at stake—right?

Antin: Yes, I think that's true. You're right about that. In fact, one of my main objections to older collections of folk stories is that very few offer you the circumstances of the teller and the telling, and they don't mark it as much as is necessary. For example, the older nineteenth-century materials: if you go to the full Grimm collection you will find in the back this vast appendix, where you will see transcriptions of the original dialect stories they collected. And in the dialect versions there are markers that suggest the actual act of the telling more significantly than the synthesized stories the Grimms produced. The dialect stories are, of course, harder to read than the Grimms' *Hochdeutsch*, but that's where most of the markers are. And the marking of the act and process of telling is now one of the most interesting aspects of narrative.

Now I was concentrating on the fact that narrative is often invoked to explain something to oneself. But it is also obviously and probably more typically employed

to explain something to someone else. And when I say “explain” here, I don’t really mean “explain.” What I mean is to produce a resonant identification with the experience. It may not be to explain at all. It may be to make sure it is *experience-able*. But how do I make this experienceable by you? Which is not to make it intelligible but to make you experience it, and that’s not the same thing.

III. “IMAGINE THE RUIN OF ART”

Antin: Somebody once mistakenly congratulated me for making the case back in 1972 that collage was the real basis of all truly contemporary poetry (Antin, “Modernism”). What I had really said was that collage was the key to all *modernist* poetry—the poetry from which we had inherited our sense of contemporaneity, and that essay was written just about the time that I was beginning to find the insufficiency of collage and move away from it as such. What I was moving toward was the view that inherently narrative structures were probably more significant than we had ever understood. The modernist rejection or abdication of narrative was based on a misapprehension of the full possibility of narrative, derived from a standardized view of narrative as linear story-structure, and I was trying to get past that. The first break with the inadequate story-dominated narratives was provided by the brilliant collage breakthrough at the beginning of the century, which often produced implicit narrative consequences. One of the things that most interests me in some of the early cubist work of Picasso is, if you look at the work, it is constructed largely as an accumulation of glances. You have a very powerful sense of the bistro that is the source of the representation, although you can’t locate the particular bistro and you can’t locate the glances as resulting from a single evening’s visit. What you’ve got is a piece of the tile roof you can see outside the window, you’ve got a music score someone is looking at, you’ve got a part of a story on the Balkan Wars because someone sitting across from you is reading the newspaper—which in some of these cubist works produces a subtle sense of the observer, giving them the sense of an implicit narrative without story. In some of these fractured still lives the intensity of the café experience is so great that it completely overpowers the formal or decorative sense of the work. This is true mainly for Picasso and only for some Picassos. Because you also have Braque’s beautiful but purely decorative cubist works. The fractured glances of the Braques don’t have this observer intensity. But Picasso is a much more narrative artist than Braque. For better or worse you sense that the experience and its narrativity is central for Picasso. *It explains nothing*. What it does is assert, “This is what it’s like to be here.”

Heiden: And isn’t there also an implicit narrative of the history of painting where you kind of imagine a painting by Picasso on the wall next to an academic painting—the way you would have looked at that sort of thing before modern painting looked at it differently?

Antin: I would tend not to think that way myself, but it can be thought. It’s what I would call the narrative evoked by academic art historians. They tend to imagine

Picasso as an amateur historian imagining a linear sequence through which he's going, and I would rather see Picasso as a man looking through a junkyard to find what's viable to do. Imagine the ruin of art. The fact is I have to find tools to be able to go on to make something that means something, and I need tools and materials, all I've got here is a junkyard, but it's a *great* junkyard. So I find archaic Iberian sculptures or I find African masks as a kind of liberation because somehow in the junk shops where they're selling these ripped-off African pieces, I see the hand of logical rationalist artists who were treating the human body as a field of rationality rather than a mimetic opportunity or challenge. So I would see him as a scavenger struggling against the gradual cliché-ing and deadening of meaning in art making. In this way I would say it's a narrative of survival, not a narrative of art history. That's my preference. But I agree it is a narrative.

Heiden: A narrative having to do with the relationship between these paintings and other paintings, which are thought of narratively as having existed before.

Antin: Yes, but that's a bit too linear for me. I think it's also a relationship to other art, to other poems, to other music that had been made and were being made at the same time. Picasso is not an academic painter, except in the sense that his earliest training was academic and provincial. He may have started as a young academically trained painter, but he was an artist and he was thrown or plunged into the Parisian art world, where his close friend is Max Jacob. The painting of Picasso and the poetry of Max Jacob probably belong next to each other in the same account. When I grew up as an artist in the late fifties and sixties, look at the things that meant something to us. The Judson dancers—I can't think of anything that meant more to me than the Judson dance group, and some of the minimalist artists and some of the pop artists and some of the composers of the time. John Cage: was he a poet? As soon as I saw *Silence*, I said John Cage is the most interesting poet working today.

Erickson: But that brings up *anti*-narrative. I wanted to ask you, what about the anti-narrative impulse in modernism? When I think of John Cage, I think of anti-narrative.

Antin: That's because John had been misinformed and he imagined narrative as a simple linear progression. This oversimplification was a widespread modernist belief, and John connected it with another misconception he got from Norman O. Brown: that syntax was a linear ordering, as the Greek word *syntagma* referred to a military ordering of troops. This etymological argument may sound good, but it's nonsense as a description of what any contemporary linguist would consider real grammar. John may even have known this. I think he tossed out the Brown quote as pure provocation. John was not the latter-day-saint they keep making him out to be. He was a marvelous provocational artist. And at the time he was attacking linearity. Syntax isn't linear. Narrative isn't linear. Narrative is synthesizing; story is linear. At the same time John told lots of stories in his published works. Like the one about overhearing his father saying to his mother one Wednesday, "Get ready: we're going

to New Zealand,” and how the ten-year-old John Cage read everything he could find in the school library about New Zealand. And Saturday came and nothing happened. And the project wasn’t mentioned that day or any day afterward. Or his story of the children who were warned about poisonous mushrooms in the morning and served a beautiful dish of mushrooms at dinner. He was really the master of cryptic powerful narratives, and I was most affected by the stories he told in *Silence*. I thought his music was brilliant, and I’d thought it was brilliant since I was in college in the fifties, but the musical works I loved were his *musique concrète* pieces—the prepared piano works, the percussion pieces for odd objects, the early string works—that produced psychic resonances that have some relation to what I call narrative, but no relation to story; that is, they don’t follow developmental lines, let’s say, like a sonata. A real sonata is a somewhat archaic form. And composers still write sonatas, some poets still write sonnets—for better or worse. Mostly worse. But they can do it. Once you don’t have to do something in the world of art, it can become possible again, simply because you don’t have to do it. As soon as you realize that something isn’t obligatory, it can become available as a possible maneuver.

So my sense is that anti-narrative was a provocational strategy, an attempt to wipe the field of the tiresome. Think of the standard novel that was available in the fifties and sixties. It’s filled with furniture. With imaginary things called “characters” and they all have “psychologies,” but what everybody keeps forgetting is that a novel is built out of words. A novel involves a lot of linguistic accumulations. But what Wesley thought on that Saturday morning as he walked across the Brooklyn Bridge doesn’t strike me as linguistically interesting at all. And John’s anti-narrative stance was part of his attempt to liberate himself from the kinds of intelligibilities that are bought too cheaply. On the other hand there’s the intense experience of those lectures in *Silence*—the “Lecture on Something,” the “Lecture on Nothing.” Who can forget that glass in the “Lecture on Nothing,” that begins as a glass of milk and becomes an empty glass into which at any moment anything might be poured, and becomes an image of Kansas—or traveling through Kansas (110). I hitchhiked through Kansas in 1952 on my way to Idaho and I can confirm that it was very much like the experience generated in the “Lecture on Nothing”—an empty road between cornfields lit by moonlight or a diner with apple pie made of paste and glue. The sense of subjectivity and narrative generated by John in those lectures is very intense. There’s a great difference between what “John Cage” the character says and what John Cage the artist does. I did two talk pieces for John at the Strathmore festival back in 1989, that I’ve made into a little book I call *John Cage Uncaged is Still Caged*, which is an indication of how I think of him and something of a warning of my feelings. He’s a complex figure. I love him but I’m not going to be taken in by his giness.

IV. NARRATIVE AND LYRIC, OR, “HOW ABOUT FEELING LIKE A BASKETBALL?”

McHale: Before you started this morning I had a suspicion, and nothing you’ve said so far has relieved me of this suspicion, that what you call “narrative” is what most

people in the twentieth century have called “lyric.” Your definition of narrative approaches the definition of lyric. Once you’ve stripped away a sort of musicality that lyric had before the twentieth century, what’s left is pretty much what you are calling narrative. And I know that you’ve gone on record as saying you’re impatient with lyricism. So is this lyric smuggled in the back door?

Antin: Well I like the accusation; it amuses me. The difficulty of the term “lyric” is what comes with it—the history of what comes with the term. And one of the key terms that gets smuggled in, or freighted in, with the history of the lyric is the term “emotion,” and “emotion” seems to overstate a case for something that could be described a lot better or dispensed with. Subjectivity and emotion are not the same thing, or not according to what most people call emotion. Certainly people have feelings and certainly we can work out a reasonable meaning for the word emotion as a kind of cognitive feeling-complex. But the problem is essentially that the term “lyric” is situated in a constellation of terms—music, emotion, imagination—to which special values were attached, the justification for which had a peculiar philosophical history. It depended on a faculty psychology—developed basically by the predecessors of Kant—that supposed a hierarchy of mental functions. At the bottom is sensation, which is the direct connection of an organism with the external world, and at the top is reason and understanding in some particular arrangement. Below that—in the middle—you have a faculty that somehow mediates and brings perception, conceived as the site of low-level cognitive organization of sensations, up into an engagement with the understanding and reason, and this meeting is seen as saturated with emotion as it takes place on a ground invested by memory and desire, and this meeting place is called the imagination. Since it was seen as the sensate aspect of intellection, suffused by memory and desire, the imagination, the image-generating or image-receiving faculty, was inevitably connected with creative fantasy and emotion; and it was only a short step to the connection with music and the older notion of the lyric.

When I was in school I read Eliot and Pound, who both used the word “emotion” in ways I didn’t understand. What do you mean—*Hamlet* is about an emotion that we can’t articulate? I don’t have any difficulty understanding *Hamlet*—insofar as any work of art is understandable. But I don’t see that the apprehension of the play has any connection with emotion. You mean I have to have an articulate grasp of the details of Hamlet’s subjectivity and not merely sense it? It’s very easy to see what’s wrong with Hamlet—or his situation. It’s not hard to see how he couldn’t have seized power without being someone else. He was an intellectual who didn’t want to be in the power struggle. His desire was apparently to be somewhere else. So he was a misplaced prince. If you ask how come, you have something of an enigma in terms of seventeenth-century English pop culture. The idiosyncrasy of a prince not wishing to seize power was created by Shakespeare when he turned the story of a twelve-year-old boy who was too weak to seize power into the drama of a thirty-year-old melancholic who didn’t want to. So Hamlet was misplaced—somewhat in the way an intellectual Roman emperor was who had no place to go but to carry out what the empire and the army required, though all he wanted to do was write meditations. The situa-

tion is not hard to understand, and Hamlet's subjectivity is easy enough to grasp. But Eliot's notion that a play, an artwork, or a poem functions as a surrogate object for some complex emotion I find not only incomprehensible but also ridiculous.

In art the term "emotion" is a disaster. It's not that artworks don't promote feelings. So do most things. I have feelings drinking a cup of coffee. I have wonderful feelings when I'm solving a problem in an artwork. I have feelings when I walk out in the sunlight. I also have feelings when I'm getting drenched with rain and the rain is pouring into my shoes. But so what? As long as we're alive we're always suffused with feeling. But the invokers of "emotion" aren't referring to this continuum that is simply a strong and ongoing connection to our sensorium. They mean something more important. They mean something that justifies poetry, because, as they see it, thought will not justify the existence of poetry. Because they've identified thinking with rationality. So poetry can't compete with philosophy because philosophy thinks better. It can't compete with science because science thinks even better than philosophy. "Newton destroyed the rainbow," right? So as a result of this imaginary competition, what's left for poetry? *Emotion*. In the imagination we can invent pastries that nobody has ever seen. They taste magnificent. We consume them with delight. We're pastry providers to the world.

Now that's what I don't like about the history that the lyric drags in like a dog. It turns poetry into a noble Afghan with tin cans tied to its tail. One tin can is called "imagination," another one is called "emotion," and a third is called "music." And these tin cans keep rattling. To keep them from rattling I tend to avoid the word "lyric."

Livingston: What if you substitute "subjectivity"? That's not a tin can?

Antin: If all you mean by subjectivity is the evocation of a person's state of mind, I don't see it as a tin can. If that's the understanding of the lyric, I'm perfectly happy with it. And in that case I would agree that narrative involves a lyric stance. But the problem with using the term is that it will require you to say, "But I don't mean it because it invokes emotion. I mean only that it allows us to identify a subjectivity." Now a lot of poems that are not called lyric invoke subjectivity. Homer brings it into the epic. Brian, in your piece, where narrative and story are synonymous, you mention that an epic is based on story, and even in my usage, where the two terms are distinguished, I would agree that narrative is heavily committed to story. But there are very powerful narrative elements in the *Iliad*.

Remember how Priam, the king of Troy, wants to reclaim the body of his son to give him proper funeral rites, and to do this he has to request the return of the body from Achilles, his absolute enemy and the killer of his son. And Achilles has this horrible history of having had his best friend killed by Hector, whom he therefore hates and whose body he has humiliated. So there is going to have to be this very nearly impossible coming together with Priam if he is going to surrender the body. This is the great narrative, you can call it the lyric, moment in the *Iliad*. In fact you could say that the entire *Iliad* is constructed for this incredible moment. And the Greeks generate it somewhat differently; I mean their epic system generates it differ-

ently, but the coming together of Priam and Achilles is the center of the *Iliad*. Though there are other great narrative moments—like the separation of Hector and Andromache. But this is a kind of culminating narrative moment.

So my sense is yes, we've always had this kind of lyric or narrative moment—I prefer to call it narrative—that is essentially filled with the sense of subjectivity. This is the sense in which I think Eric Auerbach was absolutely wrong. That is, Greek literature was filled with interiority, generated by their complex representation of exteriority. Auerbach's book *Mimesis* is a great book, but I believe he was mistaken about the difference between the Greek epic and the Hebraic biblical sensibilities. He was too taken by the clear-cut surface differences. Anybody who looks at the confrontation of Priam and Achilles and the difficulty of its happening, and has to experience the long and painful approach of Priam that takes several books of the poem to come about, has to experience something of the painful subjectivities in the culminating moment. This is an astonishing example of what I call narrative and what Brian suggests calling lyric.

Heiden: Why exactly is it that you're calling the scene between Priam and Achilles "lyric"?

Antin: I'm not really. I'm merely entertaining the possible equivalence between my notion of "narrative" and the notion of the "lyric," once the "lyric" is stripped of all its historical baggage but subjectivity. It's the issue of subjectivity that's central for me. You see, if all you wanted to accomplish was to make clear that Priam would by convention want to recover the body of his son for proper burial rites and that Achilles would have strong motivation to refuse this because Hector had killed Patroclus, Achilles's dear friend and maybe lover, all you have is a situation. But the complicated path that Homer takes to bring off the meeting is so time consuming, that in any Greek performance of the poem you would be anticipating and waiting for it through all the nearly endless preparation. And you would have all the opportunity to imagine yourself in Priam's circumstances. You might even have the possibility of imagining yourself in Achilles's circumstances, grief stricken and enraged at the loss of his friend. So my sense is that organization of the poem forces the kind of profound evocation of subjectivity that is associated in one way with the lyric and in another with mimetic narrative, which I call simply narrative. So I was merely entertaining Brian's suggestion that narrative and lyric may turn out to be ultimately the same thing, though I don't really think so.

Erickson: My *métier* is talking about theater and performance. I've also been fascinated with the relationship of text and performance, and therefore I guess with the question of narrative. It's implicit in a very simple phrase familiar from grade school: "show and tell." A narrative tells, drama shows, and presumably that's the distinction between them, one I've always had problems with. For one thing *Oedipus* is nothing but a series of narratives—a series of reaction shots. What you're talking about here really strikes me as being that moment of tableau that one always finds within drama, constituting what people see as its distinction from narrative. Drama has a flow in

some sense, but that flow is always concentrated most in the moments of tableau in which people can suddenly *see* in that kind of mimetic experience. What you were calling “shamanistic” before, I think, has to do with that. Actually this comes across in Plato too, in the third book of the *Republic*, where he says narrative is okay as long as Homer is talking in his own voice, but the moment he speaks in the voice of a priest he’s doing drama and he’s being somebody else.

Antin: Absolutely. I just want to point out that the word he will use for the sense of narrative he approves will be *diegesis* as opposed to *mimesis*.

Erickson: Right. And then he moves to *mimesis* and then the question is, well, where’s the line really between these two things? Perhaps this is a question of the line between lyric and narrative.

Antin: It may not be the line between lyric and narrative; it may be the line between lyric and story, or between narrative and story. The line is tricky. So you’re right to point out that it’s been very much problematized. And the problematization is interesting. Bertolt Brecht is a good example of the difficulty of it, with his supposed alienation or estrangement technique. Because what he writes are essentially melodramas. That is, Brecht has written, I think, sparkling melodramas that he holds at bay—well, depending on who’s performing them. What he does is try to hold them at bay. He doesn’t try to annihilate them. *Mother Courage* is a perfectly good example of a play in which he attempts to hold off the sentimental in a situation that could immediately evoke sympathies—cheaply bought sympathies—if it was presented head-on. He’s constantly wrestling with exactly this line; that is to say, he wants to tell you a story in such a way that you can think about it. But if you don’t sympathize with the characters, you won’t have any reason to think about them. There would be nothing at stake. But once you sympathize with the characters, once you place yourself in the subjective position of *Mother Courage*, you’re swept into it. So he’s trying to hold you in a situation that encourages you to keep coming toward it while he keeps trying to hold you back, but not completely. He isn’t annihilating your identification with the subjectivity of his characters, but he’ll hold you back. That’s why his plays are so difficult to act. I’ve seen most of the plays several times and I’ve never seen one done very well. Because the difficulty of Brecht is that he’s not annihilating the passion of his melodramas, he’s problematizing it. What he tries for is a thorny engagement with the difference between narrative intensity and the logical structuring of the events. Usually the logical structuring is more defective than he thinks it is.

Erickson: Very Aristotelian.

Antin: Now take a classical Greek tragedy like the *Agamemnon*, which I always thought should have been called the *Clytaemnestra*, because in a certain sense it’s *Clytaemnestra*’s tragedy; *Agamemnon* is only a secondary character—he’s the victim. The agent essentially is *Clytaemnestra*. She’s not lovable but she’s easy to iden-

tify with on the grounds that her daughter has been murdered in the interests of a war she has no commitment to, and she's been dragged into this situation. And she develops a volcanic hatred of her husband that has led to her alliance with Aegisthus. So you begin to get this image of Clytaemnestra's subjectivity. Agamemnon's subjectivity never appears at all. He basically makes his ceremonial return, gets into his bath, and is killed. But Clytaemnestra is the one who is more powerfully there, and of course the chorus is there to fill in the story context of the disasters that befell and were yet to come. But all of the characters—the Watchman of the prologue, certainly Cassandra, the Chorus Leader, and even at times the Chorus itself—arrive at profound mimetic moments we can call narrative or lyric because of the way they generate a sense of intense subjectivity. It's a play with multiple shifting subjectivities, which seem to problematize it.

Oedipus is structurally simpler. Oedipus is the investigator trying to find out and not find out. He's trying to find out and not find out whose guilt is responsible for the plague that's ravaging Thebes. And in the end he doesn't learn *anything*. He finds out he killed a nasty old man at a crossroads who turns out to be his father. He's married a beautiful queen who happens by accident to be his mother. In an objective sense, this is a frightful crime he's guilty of, but in terms of his own experience he's still a total innocent, since he intended none of it. And the paradox of the coexistence of his innocence and guilt explains nothing. What the play does is present the incommensurability of the two points of view. One is of the engagement of intention with the contingent and accidental, and the other is of its engagement with the fated and factual. Oedipus's struggle with these two oscillating images of his own actions is the subjective center of the drama and is the driving force of the narrative.

If you turn to the modern, or postmodern, performance works by Yvonne Rainer in the early 1970s, you get the sudden appearance of narrative in the work of a dancer/choreographer who was a central figure throughout the sixties in the minimalist esthetic of the Judson dance group. This was a thoroughly modernist esthetic imbued with all of modernism's anti-syntactical and anti-narrative prejudices, which also showed up later in most of Yvonne's film work. But her early seventies performance works were very different. *This is the story of a woman who . . .* was in format a typical mixed media performance in which three actor-dancers, two women and a man, perform prescribed actions in relation to each other, accompanied by slide-projected images and texts. But the piece was radically different because of the powerful personal narrative that was woven into the work. In spite of the fact that the verbal narrative was discontinuous, fractured, and divided in its delivery—some of it was narrated over a microphone by one of the female performers, much of it was projected as text on slides, and some of it presented as a tape recorded voiceover—or maybe even because of it, it developed an intense female subjectivity as it traversed in concrete detail the personal difficulties between men and women in a world everyone in the audience knew.

This was a considerable shift from her early deadpan dance works, with their literal and unidealized movements and spare athleticism or occasional goofy gestures. The earlier Judson work was often referred to as “anti-dance” because it was directed away from the dance esthetics of “beautiful movement” or “expressive ges-

ture.” But individual Judson artists, and foremost among them Yvonne, often brought a certain degree of subjective intensity to their works through personal presence—simply by being there on stage. Still her early dance works were so literal that when one of her male dancers asked how he should feel when performing a certain prescribed set of actions, she suggested helpfully, “How about feeling like a basketball?” This was a sixties sensibility we all understood. It was a kind of confidence that if one did exactly what one had to do physically, it would generate whatever meaning could be generated by a human body behaving in a particular space. I’ll never forget a passage in a piece Yvonne was in with Robert Morris and Lucinda Childs: the idea was for Bob to keep his body consistently between Lucinda and Yvonne, and the way he interpreted the instruction was wonderful. He covered Lucinda like a basketball guard, steering her to the outside away from the basket. But the sense of frustration that was developed in it was fairly intense, even if it was only dubiously related to any narrative significance—let’s say, the fictive romantic relation between Lucinda and Yvonne. So even here it acted as a kind of Brechtian effect.

V. IRONY AND ESTRANGEMENT, OR, “WE MUST HELP OUR FREHNDS IN VEETNAEHM”

Mercil: There’s a term that hasn’t come up yet. When you were talking about Brecht you mentioned sentimentality, but the term I was thinking of was irony, and the relationship between irony and sentimentality relative to the problematic of subjectivity. Picasso’s rejection, as a modernist visual artist, of a kind of nineteenth-century sentimentality in that junk heap is interesting when you think about it, because it’s through his subjectivity that he’s burrowing into the junk heap. And so despite his refusal, in one sense, of sentimentality, one doesn’t, at least I don’t, ever experience it as the distance of irony. There is a kind of double refusal there. And at least for me, it’s long been a question of where is the line where one refuses sentimentality but also chooses to refuse irony? It’s almost as if irony has become an academic position, in a funny way, that we have inherited, and this evocation of subjectivity is of interest because it seems necessary to a genuine practice as an artist. Even when you’re talking about Yvonne Rainer and the problem of her modern education, where is the place of irony in all of this? There’s a part of me that says it’s absolutely necessary or the world is crushing. There is another part, though, that says that irony can also distance you from your subject in a way that makes the evocation of subjectivity impossible.

Antin: Let me respond to that. When I think of irony I think of Quintilian’s attempt to deal with it. Quintilian’s is a very sophisticated position. Irony is conventionally defined as a reversal, as a tactic of saying or representing something whose apparent meaning is the opposite of its intended meaning. A more sophisticated version of irony is to suppose it’s a destabilizer, that it’s the tactic of presenting things in such a way as to produce an undecidability of the meaning of what’s presented. In other

words, irony is a trope that makes its apparent literal meaning doubtful. It's one of the distancing devices, but what it distances you from is its own utterance. Consider, for example, a clever bumper sticker that used to show up in California that read "NUKE THE WHALES." It's hardly possible that this means what it says. The likelihood that it is intended directly as an incitement to bombing these marvelous sea mammals is very low. At the very least we are dealing with hyperbole, someone's vastly exaggerated exasperation. But whose—and at what? So the question "What does it mean?" is thrown back upon the question "Who's saying it?" Is this a technician in the nuclear industry indicating his exasperation with the Greens, or is it a Green writing in the voice of the nuclear technician who is exasperated with the Greens for their environmental pickiness? This is a very unstable bumper sticker. What you have to do is follow the car to see who's driving it. Is it a guy in a baseball cap with a toolbox by the back window or a girl with long hair and no makeup? And even if he's driving, maybe the car belongs to his sister, who could be a pro-life activist or a member of Greenpeace. It seems to me that's the basic form of irony. This kind of destabilization. It doesn't stop you but it destabilizes meaning.

But there are other ways of distancing. Estrangement. I prefer the Russian Formalist version of estrangement to the Brechtian notion of alienation, although the German *Entfremdung* reads like a literal translation of the Russian *ostranenie*. *Ostranenie* really means estrangement, making something strange, which can be said to make it new. That sounds a little like Ezra Pound, though it isn't. The term comes out most brilliantly in Shklovsky's analysis of *Tristram Shandy* or Tolstoy, where something is described in a way that it has never been described before. One of those ways, though not the only way, is to describe something that would ordinarily be deeply emotional in a nearly clinical manner, without any subjectivity, as if the observer were autistic or some kind of clinician or taxonomist. That was the essential method of Robbe-Grillet. But you can also do it as an ordinary child watching adults do something you have no grip on. So you describe it, so to speak, from below—from the point of view of an observer watching the curious maneuverings of people about whose motivations you have no clue. Or you can describe it as if you were a Martian. In other words, you can represent things from an angle that causes you to rethink them and deconventionalize them. Which begins by de-subjectivizing them but may end up re-subjectivizing them in a new way.

But irony is a more radical mode. The problem with irony is that it's difficult to tell where its destabilization will end, in other words, whether any meaning is finally assumable at all. The clue to the extent of this is given by Quintilian, who suggests that a whole life might be an irony and offers the example of Socrates. Which is a brilliant insight, though it leaves a certain ambiguity—whether it's the literary figure constructed by Plato or the life of the man Plato describes that is the essential irony. At the very least, Quintilian's insight points a way to read the Socratic dialogues. Socrates as having no point of view but the point of view of destabilization.

Erickson: Can I make the opposite argument?

Antin: Sure.

Erickson: Which is that, in fact, Socrates's point of view is that of stabilization. This doesn't preclude destabilization, because I think they occur almost simultaneously, but irony is in fact the thing that allows emotion to become material.

Antin: Show me how.

Erickson: Well, I think this is Schlegel's sense: that irony implies objectification. You used the word "subjectivization" any number of times, but interestingly you never used the word "objectification," although *ostranenie*, I think, has some relationship to it.

Antin: Yeah, I think that objectification can actually be looked at in terms of Eliot's brilliant essay on the objective correlative ("Tradition and the Individual Talent"), which proposed that to write a poem was to construct an object that could stand in some concrete way for a kind of perceptual complex that he would have called an emotion. In this sense objectification is, among other things, a method for concretizing something. But I don't see that in connection with irony.

Erickson: Well, Schlegel's notion is that somehow an artist, in order to manipulate the material at all—whatever human material you're using—has to have distance on it, and that distance is what Schlegel calls ironic. He doesn't mean in the sense of reversal, necessarily. But he means that you're not feeling the emotion, that you're manipulating it so that someone else feels it. It's like Diderot's "Paradox of the Actor": you're presenting an emotion that you're not feeling so that other people will feel it.

Antin: Schlegel's a very brilliant early writer on it, but I think that ultimately his version of irony may have been a false step. I don't think it is the best way to look at what Schlegel and his fellow romantics were in fact doing. Historically the notion of irony has been essentially some form of destabilization. My bumper sticker employed outrageous hyperbole. You could describe hyperbole as a kind of distancing effect in the sense that it distances both originator and the audience from the utterance. Understatement can work the same way. There are many kinds of distancing effects, some of which will and some of which won't read as irony. If you take a Socratic dialogue, an early one, like the *Greater Hippias*, which is about the meaning of the term "beauty," all that Socrates does is destabilize the meaning. He lures Hippias into a typical Socratic inquiry in which he gets the famous rhetorician to offer a series of plausible definitions, each of which has a basis in conventional Greek esthetic thinking and each of which he progressively reveals to be insufficient. In the end all that he accomplishes is to get Hippias to agree with him in a conclusion that "beauty is difficult," which may be interpreted ironically. Certainly, Socrates's overall performance can be called ironic because of his treatment of the celebrated sophist and rhetorician. At the same time, he comes to a conclusion that can be taken quite seriously—that the various notions underpinning the Greek judgment of beauty may involve potentially conflicting ideas that are partially valid but not reconcilable. A reading that might suggest agreement with Wittgenstein's hostility to definition.

The fact that you can interpret the conclusion of the dialogue both ways is a destabilizing effect. It's a distancing effect in that it holds off any conclusion and forces you to think about the subject more intensely than you did before. It also estranges you from your previous understanding and your confidence in it. It seems to say, "People know too goddamn much."

As a poet I'm always faced with the problem that other people seem to automatically know the answers to questions I never understand. I'm usually not sure I understand what the question is—though here in this conversation I may seem much more confident than I am ordinarily. My relation to narrative is to problematize it because I don't think we fully understand it. One of the ways of problematizing is through irony, but I wouldn't suggest it's the only way, and I think Schlegel was ill advised to regard objectification as irony. He's running against history, which is fine but inconvenient and probably a losing battle. My preference is to regard irony as a destabilizing effect that raises questions.

There's a Charlie Chaplin movie—I think it's *Modern Times*—in which the little bum is out of work. He's walking around and he's very disconsolate. It's a time of unemployment and great labor unrest. There are strikes going on and it's a terrible time. This huge truck carrying some dangerous load drives by and has a red flag at the back to indicate danger. The flag drops off and the sweet little bum picks it up and tries to hand it to the guy in the back of the truck. But just as he raises the flag the truck speeds away and a crowd of strikers surges around the corner in back of him, pushing him to the front. And there he is with a red flag in his hand, the leader of the crowd. Now I would call this a profoundly ironical commentary on radical leadership. Charlie Chaplin with a red flag at the head of the crowd. The crowd created the leader in this bizarre contingent manner. It raises the question, was Lenin really the guy who just picked up the red flag, or not? But it raises the question in a whimsical way like a wisecrack and doesn't pretend to answer it. It's not even clear that Chaplin himself would have raised the question. But the film does.

Erickson: Is irony destabilizing for the ironist? Because in fact a lot of people who are notorious ironists are doing it for defensive reasons. You could say that the very act of defense is destabilizing to them at the same time, but in fact it's being used to destabilize others in relationship to them, but not to destabilize themselves.

Antin: I don't know. I think it could be used both ways. I think you could use irony as a kind of destabilization for yourself, of your own overconfidence. It may not be used often enough that way. I've often thought that perhaps one of our problems as intellectuals and artists is that we don't often turn our doubt on ourselves in our work, because we need confidence to do our work. So it would probably be beneficial to turn it on ourselves from time to time. But I think you're right that generally irony is directed at everyone else. Once it's unleashed, though, you're no longer in control of it. One of the problems is that once an utterance is public, it's out there for better or worse, and there's not much you can do about it.

The reading of irony is very much determined by circumstances outside the actual work. I have a poem I wrote back in the sixties, when I was still writing poems

that looked like verse. The poem was called “who are my friends?” (*Selected Poems* 34–36). And it began with a quote from Lyndon Johnson, delivered in his West Texas accent, that I could only approximate on a page as “who are my frehnds in veet-naehm?” And the next question, delivered in my own accent, was “who are my friends in viet nam?” The poem consists mainly of questions, and it goes on to ask,

who are my friends in indianapolis
 who are my friends in washington
 who are my friends in kalamazoo

And I start trying to identify and remember them, but I have trouble identifying my friends in viet nam—because there were so many of them, and they don’t write me letters, and many of them are no longer in viet nam, I’ve never been to viet nam, and it costs so much to go there. And it develops as a meditation on friends and foes and finally comes to the conclusion that I don’t even know how to pronounce viet nam, because my friend in washington doesn’t pronounce it the way I do, but probably neither of us pronounces it the way our friends in viet nam pronounce it, so we must all be talking about a different place. The poem was intended as an ironical commentary on the utterances of a president and on American foreign policy and, I thought, fairly obvious. But we had a huge reading at the Fillmore East called “The Three Penny Poets Reading Against the War,” where I was planning to read it. But I’d never read before fifteen hundred people and I was curious how it would turn out. I felt like a Russian poet reading in a stadium, but I didn’t have the Russian poet reading style, which was something of a cross between a Soviet general addressing his troops and a Russian lover breathing into his girlfriend’s ear. And I hadn’t figured on how the nature and size of such an audience would interact with the ironic structure of the poem. The size of the audience seemed to produce a delay in the audience response and I was really confused by it. It took something like five or six seconds for them to process a single line and then they had to worry about it—to figure out, did I have a Texas accent and which side was I on and what did my friend in Indianapolis have to do with Vietnam? So I would be two or three lines past them and I was never sure what they were laughing at, if they were laughing at all. I learned that an audience of fifteen hundred thinks a little bit like Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*, and that’s not a very good audience for an ironic poem.

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