

In his classic work on symbolic interactionism, Herbert Blumer states: "The interpretative process takes place by participants making indications to one another, not merely to himself [or herself]. Joint or collective action is an outcome of such a process of interpretative interaction" (Blumer 1969, 16). The analysis of such interpretative interaction, as well as the discursive products arising from such interaction, is a central focus of scholarship. Yet we not only look for *moments* of social engagement, but also those structures through which participants *make indications* to each other of symbolic values or meaningfulness. One such structure or mode of communication is narrative. People tell stories and stories are shaped by those people.

This issue of the *Bulletin* brings together a collection of articles on religious narrativity. We begin with a theoretical introduction to narrative by Armin Geertz, who explores neurobiological cognition, bodily mimesis, and expressive qualities of religious narrative. Geertz insightfully recognizes that communication—and modes of communication—is a central element in the development of social engagement and meaning making within social bodies. The other contributors, working from various beginning points, directly engage a range of case studies where narrative plays a significant role.

Kirstine Munk explores the narrative fabric among the cunning folk in Denmark, wherein, for example, narrative re-workings of life-stories affects healing practices within contexts of cultural transformation. Lars Rømer analyzes Danish folklore and ghost stories. Rømer not only explicates the narrative structures of such stories, but also articulates the cultural negotiation of local customs with broader ideological frameworks (in particular science and Christianity). Thus, ghost stories are more than ghost stories. They are the sites of asking, avoiding, and redirecting questions on such concerns as the art of dying and the alignment of the living to the dead. They are stories "played out" within actual social interaction and are not limited to the realm of the text. Laura Feldt takes us back to the murky past of the ancient Mediterranean world. By walking us through the Epic of Anzû, Feldt nicely demonstrates Mieke Bal's

point that narratological analysis is a form of cultural analysis. Myths serve various possible purposes, including reinforcing, undermining, or re-defining political power relations. Such literary-narrative contexts—and attendant meanings—are played out by the recipients. This narratological approach to myth takes us beyond functionalist and structuralist approaches to myth. To close off our set of articles on narrative theory, we return to Geertz. We are offered a walk through the "story" of one scholar, learning more about the "back story" of this theorist and thus of his own approach to narrative theory. I am thankful to our associate editor Kirstine Munk for her efforts in bringing this stimulating collection of articles together.

Finally, this issue includes another "Tip for Teaching" article. Although not part of the narrative theory collection, this pedagogical piece nicely fits into our issue's thematic emphasis. Over the past ten years, Jeffrey Staley has used film to guide his students in the critical study of the New Testament gospels. Staley suggests that cinematic "stories" can serve well in our classrooms, especially when engaging sacred texts that students may find threatened by the critical methods used by scholars. We are pleased to share Staley's experience from the classroom and, again, we would like to extend an invitation for further submissions for the "Tips for Teaching" section of the *Bulletin*.

As I read through these various articles, I am struck by the continued stress not only on the internal aspects of narrative—as if narrativity is limited to the level of the written or spoken story—but also on the ways in which story affects social relations and religious identity formation. Certainly, narrative alignments are part of the ongoing interactions of people in daily life. As social psychology continues to demonstrate, human interactions are built on a series of narrative roles, plots, and moral claims to authority. Rom Harré and Luk van Langenhove (1999; cf. Harré and Slocum 2003), in articulating what is called "positioning theory," have argued that the "self" (individual or corporate) is a product of roles taken on (or imposed by others) within narrative plotlines. Narratives serve to direct our per-

ceptions of ourselves, others, and the circumstances in which we align our relationships (and what those relationships mean to us). Such social interaction is never static. It is dynamic, continually faced with potential contestation. Alternative narratives and dramatic cues can undermine the normative status of a given narrative, thereby offering another possible set of interactive alignments between human actors. Consequently, narrative is “played out” or dramatized within those social contexts that individuals and groups define their realities, histories, and thus identities. Therefore, to study religious narrative is to study the very construction of the “religious” through lines of conversation.

Occasionally, those lines of conversation may directly use literary products, while at other times positional moves are made within posited “normative” alignments—often they are produced through the use of one to shape the other (i.e., the text and the world beyond the text). When I think of how such normative alignments play out, such as articulated in ghost stories, healing stories, ancient myths, and even the narration of a scholar’s own journey, I am continually reminded that such alignments establish and contest intentional and unintentional power relations. In my own research, I have attempted to apply just such an approach to the study of moral exhortation in Valentinianism (Tite 2009), specifically in arguing that cosmologies, mythologies, and identity indicators serve as narrative devices to direct social perceptions. I see narrative maps arising as constructed *indications* between social actors of *moments* of religious significance. Thus, we are faced with such questions as: Who gains from a religious narrative? What do they gain? How does “religion” (as an element of story) lend power or undermine

the power of a given group? In what ways is “reality” discursively produced vis-à-vis competing social narratives within a given cultural context? In what ways are narrative maps rendered religious realities? These and other questions are evoked (for me at least) by these various articles.

With this issue of the *Bulletin*, I also wish to welcome Arlene Macdonald to our editorial staff as our new managing editor. Arlene holds a PhD in religious studies from the University of Toronto and currently teaches within the Institute for Medical Humanities in Galveston, Texas. Her research focuses on religion, ethics, and medicine, drawing upon sociological and anthropological methods of study. Arlene will be assisting us in the ongoing editorial work of the *Bulletin* and we are delighted to have her on board.

Philip L. Tite  
Editor

## References

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