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In Pursuit of Narrative Dynamics

A Study of James Phelan's
Rhetorical Theory of Narrative



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In his oft-quoted monograph *Recent Theories of Narrative* (1986), Wallace Martin (1986: 15) claims that narratology “has displaced the theory of the novel as a topic of central concern in literary study.” Three years later, Martin’s view is reemphasized by James Phelan, who argues that narratology “is already taking its place at the centre of contemporary literary criticism” (Phelan 1989a: xviii). In the similar vein, at the turn of the century, Brian Richardson makes a positive prediction that “narrative theory is reaching a higher level of sophistication and comprehensiveness and that it is very likely to become increasingly central to literary studies” (Richardson 2000: 174). In *A Study of British and American Narrative Theories* (2005), Shen Dan and her co-authors argue that the present age witnesses “the most flourishing of narrative studies and narrative theory” (Shen, Han and Wang 2005: 203). Perhaps, all these scholars’ points are best summarized by David Herman, who has recently observed that “The past several decades have in fact witnessed an explosion of interest in narrative, with this multifaceted object of inquiry becoming a central concern in a wide range of disciplines and research contexts” (Herman 2007a: 4). Along with this overwhelming “narrative turn in the humanities” (Kreiwirth 1992, 2005), the United States has become, in replacement of France, a global centre of narrative theory, and of postclassical narrative theory in particular (Shen, Han and Wang 2005: 2; Shen 2008b). And in North America’s rise and flourish of narrative studies, James Phelan deserves our greatest attention, whose rhetorical theory of narrative will be a central concern of this book. As an introduction to the whole book, the current chapter identifies four major goals. First, it seeks to provide a brief introduction to James Phelan’s life and works. Second, it attempts to draw a brief sketch of Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative, namely, its basic principles, major issues, and significant contributions. Third, it tries to conduct a comprehensive survey of the studies of Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative, with their strengths and weaknesses critically examined and exposed. Fourth, the organization and structure of this book are to be disclosed briefly.