as cut off from the colloquial world and interested in arcane pursuits like prosody, or tropes, or narratology. In this, the plot clearly has a professional function, but that function is precisely a move from public access, not toward more social relevance or answerability. *Narrative* makes claims not to worldliness (as in Said) but to literariness (construed as an institutional compartment).

I think that the new focus on history or on culture offers a strong account of what's been going on in our profession. Still, there are other stories. The stories of the advent of narrative and of history are both limited by an exclusive focus on high theory, on the hegemonic story of theory as disseminated from Yaledom and by academostars. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm a fan and purveyor of this dominant story of our profession, at least of the theoretical line of it, and I happily teach it every spring. However, I've come to realize that there are alternative narratives to be told about what people do in our profession and about what is constituted as work in the other ninety percent of literature departments. The authorized version of theory—and even more rarefied forms of it, like narrative theory—doesn't very much speak for what most people do, how they justify their jobs to a public constituency, usually one that "pays their salaries." If one teaches at a non-"prestige" university, composition is the more likely public justification.

Just as the *Annales* school has called attention to alternative and more quotidian topics for history, perhaps we would be well served to consider the previously silenced stories of this other ninety percent, stories of how bibliographies are constructed for Garland or Gale and how funding is justified to hire a few lecturers to cover comp courses, rather than stories of how the definitions of story and discourse shift in works published by Cornell. What is the theoretical rationale for these other kinds of work, which so many of us do but so few of us talk about?

Second, I would question Robbins's use of "public." Again, while I admire his commitment to the social and his bringing to bear the question of the social, I would have to ask what exactly is this thing called a "public." Who falls under that heading? The general aggregate called the public by those in the media and politics? A more selective group, the kind that is college-educated and might peruse the *New York Times Book Review*? The term strikes me as one of those that Orwell would ban in "Politics and the English Language." Without being overly cranky, I think that it is too amorphous to be of much use. It is one of those words we so frequently use that show our intent, our desire for commitment, but at the same time reveal our abstraction and remove from the concrete instantiation of that dream.

Further, the crucial question is determining not just what or who the public is but how one genuinely affects the public sphere. What are the channels of communication and what pressures do they bear? To return to Robbins's argument, how far has the news about narrative filtered to the public? And, bluntly, what difference has it made?

Perhaps this complaint about public relevance, as it used to be called, is a register of my roughly Generation X disenchantment with the hope, the dream, of a socially responsive criticism, which I look for—as Robbins does—but haven't yet fully seen.

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To the Editor:

The lateness of this response to an essay in the January 1992 issue of *PMLA* is a sign of what disturbs us. Embedded at the end of a long paragraph in the middle of Bruce Robbins's "Death and Vocation: Narrativizing Narrative Theory" is a long sentence that is disquieting precisely because it is easy to miss, even to dismiss. The paragraph analyzes the effects of "the exclusions and suppressions that [Daniel] Deronda's vocation produces" (44). Suggesting an aside, the last sentence begins, "And even . . . ," and then works up to holding historical and literary Zionism responsible for excluding and marginalizing both Gwendolen Harleth and the Palestinians. To paraphrase Robbins, it is difficult not to read this argument as a vocational allegory.

That this argument should appear in a special section devoted to literary history is extremely disturbing. In so many ways, of course, Robbins's discourse coincides with prevailing trends in literary studies. The linkage of events and peoples from different moments in history and literature is part of new-historicist methods, as is his concern with questions of domination and exclusion. Moreover, it is now a given in our profession that academic discourse itself cannot help being ideological, even political. Robbins's method, however, is dangerous in its failures to follow his own concerns. Embedded as asides, his historical, ideological, and literary linkages fail to disclose the shaping power of his own ideology. His aside functions rhetorically as a given, so that in representing Zionism as an exclusionary and marginalizing discourse, Robbins does not acknowledge his own construction.

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What is missing in Robbins's argument is the self-questioning that makes distinctions among assumptions, claims, warrants, literary and historical evidence, and conclusions. Without this questioning Robbins replicates the very dangers he deplores. He constructs a political argument that will remain unexamined because it is represented in the form of a subliminal message.

The contents of Robbins's message are as offensive as its form is dangerous. To claim that Gwendolen Harleth is excluded and marginalized by Deronda's Zionist vocation assumes that she is left at the end without a mind of her own or agency. As feminist scholars have argued, with Deronda's departure Gwendolen Harleth is freed from the confining plots both of romance and of marriage. Moreover, her plight as well as that of the Palestinians is diminished, indeed marginalized, as their linkage deflects our attention from either. The equation of Zionism with patriarchy and tyranny in itself reinscribes exclusion and marginalization. For those Jews who could not rely on any spokespersons in *PMLA* or elsewhere to save them from tyranny, Zionism was and remains a liberating, not to say lifesaving, discourse. To deny this elides their history through an essentialist definition.

Robbins all too aptly follows the editor's invocation at the beginning of this issue. John Kronik calls readers' attention to the way literary history invokes both fact and fairy tale: "Once upon a time, *history* was an innocent word in an innocent world" (9). For these readers, the time of innocence is indeed over.

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Reply:

Inside the discipline of literary criticism, which sometimes seems esoteric even to its members, there exists a rhetorical practice that can be described as public legitimation. And this rhetoric of legitimation can be observed at work in what would appear to be an unlikely place for it: the abstruse and seemingly specialized writings of literary theory. These are the two main points of "Death and Vocation," points that are lost when professions are dismissed as hermetic "conspiracies against the laity" but also when literary theory is dismissed either as "fashion" or as a principled critique of the sorts of accountability and representativeness that legitimation implies.

One result of both dismissals is that the task of explaining ourselves to those extraprofessional publics that care is not carried out as successfully as it might be. I am grateful to Jeffrey Williams, therefore, for skipping over the term "legitimation" itself, about which I'm sure he has at least as many reservations as I do, in order to focus on the more pressing question of how to make a better case to our publics than we have been making. With that aim in view, I should make it clear, however, that I was offering narrative not as the single, all-inclusive or paradigmatic term or activity that does this sort of legitimizing work or even as the term or activity that does it best. I offered it as one example among others (models like textuality, discourse, and rhetoric would have served as well) of a general practice that is usually ignored and for that reason often performed badly.

In the interest of our performing it better, I would be happy to see someone measure the political or ethical consequences of a professional concern with narrative, say, against the consequences of other conceptions of our work, including new ones like textuality or discourse as well as older ones like culture and history, which of course also continue to explain us to others and to ourselves. (This would also involve engaging with the question of what "better" might mean.) Williams sees narrative as a poor defense against the discipline's current attackers in the media. I would like to see it mobilized more enthusiastically. While much narratology leaves me cold and uncomprehending, narrative seems to me to possess persuasive resources that have not been seriously exploited. The public might well hear more about the stories we live by, the role of story in all persuasion, the empowerment of learning to write one's life history as an element of composition. At the same time, narrative also organizes a body of expertise, a range of technical and pedagogical practices and standards, which—as Williams does not seem to appreciate fully—remains necessary to the task of defending any professional jurisdiction.

Refusing to take the usual portentous but disingenuous stand against expertise seems to me of a piece with my willingness to use the term "public" as something other than a unitary amorphous abstraction. Professional critics are engaged with particular extraprofessional publics all the time—with students, trustees, state legislators, alumni and alumnae, foundations, employers who interpret grades and evaluations, colleagues in other fields, readers of *Newsweek*, and so on. But for the most part that engagement is

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