

1 Narrative as a Mode of Understanding

Method, Theory, Praxis

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1.1 Introduction

The remarkable growth of narrative inquiry over the course of recent decades is a cause for both celebration and caution. Outstanding work has been carried out across a wide range of fields, and the result has been an extraordinary surge of intellectual energy and momentum. Indeed, in the eyes of some, the “narrative turn” in the social sciences reflects nothing less than a paradigmatic shift in thinking about the human condition and how it is best explored. At the same time, there has emerged some concern about narrative inquiry overextending its reach and thereby losing some of its specificity and value as a tool for thinking. More troubling is the notion that the narrative turn may be little more than an intellectual fad, here today but more than likely gone tomorrow. Perhaps most troubling, however, is the possibility that the narrative turn, particularly as applied to the domain of self-understanding, is simply misconceived, serving to undermine the very efforts it was thought to support.

My primary aim in the present chapter is to respond to these criticisms and the larger issues they raise by offering a defense of narrative as a mode of understanding. Acknowledging that the narrative turn has numerous sources, I will focus mainly on those sources that have sought to provide a philosophical rationale for the movement at hand. Foremost among them is the work of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, whose groundbreaking scholarship on narrative provided fertile ground for future research in the social sciences and beyond. Of special importance in this context was Ricoeur’s exploration of the interrelationship of time and narrative, which, drawing on such varied fields as psychoanalysis, historiography, and literary theory, underscored the *necessity* of narrative understanding in comprehending certain fundamental features of the human realm (e.g., 1981b, 1984, 1985, 1988). Following Ricoeur in broad outline, this necessity is threefold: methodological, theoretical, and practical. In speaking of the methodological necessity of narrative understanding, I shall advance the deceptively simple idea that there is no more appropriate vehicle for studying human lives than

through narrative inquiry. In speaking of the theoretical necessity of narrative understanding, I shall examine the relationship between time and narrative, focusing especially on the phenomenon of hindsight, the process of looking backward over the terrain of the personal past. In speaking of the practical necessity of narrative understanding, finally, I shall attempt to show the myriad ways in which narrative is woven into the fabric of life itself. Highlighting this threefold necessity of narrative as a mode of understanding will serve to underscore the pivotal role of narrative analysis in exploring the human realm.

1.2 Narrative Mania

“Narrative,” Roland Barthes wrote nearly 50 years ago, “starts with the very history of mankind” (1975: 237). From other quarters entirely, we have been told that man is essentially “a story-telling animal” (MacIntyre 1981: 201; see also Gottschall 2012). According to Paul Ricoeur, “The form of life to which narrative discourse belongs is our historical condition itself” (1981a: 285). Peter Brooks would seem to concur, especially with regard to the kinds of narratives found in the study of human lives, for “telling the self’s story remains our indispensable thread in the labyrinth of temporality” (1985: 285). Given such pronouncements about narrative from such notable figures, it might be assumed that the “narrative turn” (or “turns,” see Hyvärinen 2010) in the social and human sciences would be beyond dispute. Remarkably enough, this would seem to be so on three distinct fronts. Narrative can be, and often is, a *method*, a mode of inquiry into the human realm. In addition, the idea of narrative can be employed in the context of *theory* about some aspect of the human condition, for instance cognition or personal identity. Finally, it can be considered in the context of *practice*, that is, the various human “doings” that are part of everyday life. In view of this threefold utility and value, one might ask, how could the idea of narrative *not* be at the very center of the social and human sciences?

But of course things often don’t turn out quite as one might expect. One reason, it seems, has to do with the very utility and value just referred to. Here, I am referring to what might be considered *narrative fatigue* due to overkill. None other than Peter Brooks makes this point loudly and clearly in a short article entitled “Stories abounding.”

The notion that narrative is part of a universal cognitive tool kit, which seemed in the mid-60s a radical discovery, is now one of the banalities of postmodernism. Scholars from many disciplines have come to recognize, in a phrase made popular by the psychologist Jerome Bruner, “the narrative construction of reality.” We don’t simply assemble facts into narratives; our sense of the way stories go together, how life is made meaningful as narrative, presides at our choice of facts as well, and the ways we present them. Our daily lives, our daydreams, our sense of self are all constructed as stories.

Barthes and company were therefore quite right about the ubiquity of narrative. Little did they know, however, just *how* ubiquitous the idea would become. Brooks goes on to refer to George W. Bush’s (brief) inaugural address, which used the word “story” some ten times; to Ronald Reagan’s clear understanding of the fact that “the concrete

particulars of storytelling will always be more vivid than compilations of fact"; to pharmaceutical companies wanting us to know the story of their drugs; to the many public events – for instance, the death of Princess Diana – that cry out for "a reconstruction of its story, complete with plot outlines and diagrams and restagings"; and, not least, to countless academic discourses, including some of those "traditionally held to be governed by logic, syllogism, or mathematical formula" (2001).

Isn't all this a good thing, particularly for those of us wishing to carry the narrative torch forward? Shouldn't Brooks himself be pleased with just how far the idea has come?

I suppose that literary critics interested in the workings of narrative and the pervasive presence of "narrativity" in culture ought to be content that our subject of study appears to have colonized large realms of discourse, both popular and academic. The problem, however, is that the very promiscuity of the idea of narrative may have rendered the concept useless. The proliferation and celebration of the concept of narrative haven't been matched by a concurrent spread of attention to its analysis. (2001)

Barthes and others, including Brooks, had issued a plea for narratology, for a "serious, disciplined study" of the many forms of storytelling, one that "would analyze their design and intention, how their narrative rhetoric seeks a certain result, an effect on the reader, a change in reality." Narratology, of course, remains alive and well. But it "has not penetrated into other disciplines – or into the public discourse" (Brooks 2001). We therefore have "promiscuity" but without the sort of rigorous, incisive analysis that narratology can provide. The implication: narrative as method has fallen short of the mark.

1.3 Narrative Excess

At around the same time Brooks was lamenting the too loose use of the idea of narrative, in academics and beyond, Crispin Sartwell was penning *End of Story: Toward an Annihilation of Language and History* (2000). Sartwell adduces numerous reasons for casting into question the narrative turn. If for Brooks wanton sex seemed an apt metaphor for thinking about narrative's overuse, Sartwell turns instead to death: "The discourses that grow out of the obsession with discourse," he writes, "occasionally bloat language into something really hideous, like a corpse that has floated two weeks in the East River." Indeed, he continues,

Occasionally the position is so overstated that it is ... baldly ridiculous: if the assertion is that the world is a text, or people are texts, the assertion asserts what I daresay no one can actually believe. Try believing it when you stub your toe; try believing it at the moment of orgasm; try believing it while you undergo chemotherapy; try believing it in the wilderness or, for that matter, in a traffic jam. (2000: 4)

Thus far, Sartwell has only referred to "discourse," linguistic articulation. But it is not only discourse that Sartwell is after, but *narrative* discourse; for it is precisely when

discourse assumes narrative form that it becomes most pernicious. "Narrative," Sartwell continues, "has become a sort of philosophical panacea." It has been used "to explain the human experience of time" and "the personal existential project of constructing a coherent life out of the chaos of experience" and "human sociality" and has been considered "a central ethical category," even "a ground for ethical theory." Cutting across all of these functions is the idea of narrative as "a principle of or a strategy for organization. Narrative gives form, or displays form, or imposes form" (2000: 9). And in doing so, Sartwell goes on to suggest, it runs the risk of *deforming* those very persons, those very *lives*, it is thought to disclose.

Particularly problematic in this context is the idea – and alleged ideal – of narrative *coherence*. As Sartwell admits, he has tried to live his own life "with an extreme degree of coherence"; he has sought "to live it rationally" and to convince himself of having done so. At some point, however, he "came to experience the need to do that as a torture" and "wanted to learn to let the world be instead of trying to transform it into an instrument of my will" (2000: 16). On Sartwell's account, narratives, especially those that are in service of some teleologically driven life-project, can be excessively willful, domineering, controlling; they can become a kind of deadening prison, designed to tame and hold back, seclude us from the noisy clamor of experience. Speaking for himself, he wishes he could "play" more, move toward "deeper and longer forms of immersion." As he explains,

The distance I purport to achieve in the narrative – when I think of myself as a character, think myself outside myself – is a distance from myself. I can take up more and more of my purported future, guide myself more and more ruthlessly, orient myself into the project more and more thoroughly, but then I lose a succession of present moments, and more and more of what I am all the while trying to render comprehensible escapes me. (2000: 66).

It's true: "All of us participate in the making of narratives." Indeed, as Sartwell acknowledges, "The lack of narrative is a kind of madness," or at least can be. "But too much narrative is also a kind of madness" (67).

In the end, Sartwell says, "to narrate an event is to divest it of its presence" (86), with the result that "Nothing is happening now. ... What is happening today cannot be known until tomorrow, but the interpretation given tomorrow of today is indeterminate until the day after tomorrow, and so forth." This postponement, this endless deferral, saps the event itself of its being, its presence. "We live on the earth, not in history," Sartwell insists. Narrative, therefore, leads to the destruction of the very "pastness of the past" (87) through our will to interpret, and reinterpret, ever again. "I want to be able to *take shelter from my will* in the allowance of the present to lapse into the past, into a realm where it is no longer up to me what happened" (88). The challenge "is to hold onto and maybe affirm the fatality of the past," to recognize that "the past in reverse is inexorable" (89). Sartwell has more to say about all this, but I trust that his main message is clear enough: given the problems at hand, we would do well to stop telling and start living.

1.4 Narrative Illusion

But what does it actually mean to live? For many a narrativist, living and narrating are of a piece. Central to this thesis is the idea of “narrativity,” which, broadly speaking, may be understood as that condition of being which is thought to precede the actual narratives we tell. Ricoeur, drawing on the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, thus speaks of “life as a story in its nascent state ... an *activity and a passion in search of a narrative.*” Hence his decision “to grant to experience as such a virtual narrativity which stems, not from the projection of literature onto life, but which constitutes a genuine demand for narrative” (1991: 29). Indeed, “Without leaving the sphere of everyday experience, are we not inclined to see in a given chain of episodes in our own life something like *stories that have not yet been told, stories that demand to be told, stories that offer points of anchorage for the narrative?*” (30).

Galen Strawson provides a firm answer to this very question: *No*. Indeed, Strawson, in his well-known diatribe “Against narrativity” (2004), tells us that “it’s just not true that there is only one good way for human beings to experience their being in time. There are deeply non-Narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non-Narrative.” Indeed, contra those who would assume otherwise, the two views under scrutiny – which Strawson calls the *psychological Narrativity thesis* and the *ethical Narrativity thesis*, respectively – “close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and are potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts” (2004: 429). No mincing words here!

Strawson goes on to offer a distinction between “Diachronic” and “Episodic” self-experience, the former referring to those who posit their own essentially continuous being in time (who are in turn likely to be “Narrative in their outlook on life”), the latter more inclined toward discontinuity (who are “likely to have no particular tendency to see their life in Narrative terms”). These two “styles” are “radically opposed” (430), which leads Strawson to assume that, rather than there being an intrinsic narrativity – understood as a dimension of being that is deemed to be part and parcel of the human condition as such – we are instead considering “a deep ‘individual difference variable.’” Strawson writes,

I have a past, like any human being, and I know perfectly well that I have a past. I have a respectable amount of factual knowledge about it, and I also remember some of my past experiences, “from the inside,” as philosophers say. And yet I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future. (2004: 433)

Putting aside the fact that some of these statements are likely false, or at least falsely hyperbolic, Strawson wants to underscore the idea that he, as a self-professed Episodic, exists largely in the moment. Given this, he cannot help but ask “why on earth” others

seem so dogged in their support of narrativity, especially in its ethical dimension. His answer is:

I think that those who think in this way are motivated by a sense of their own importance or significance that is absent in other human beings. Many of them, connectedly, have religious commitments. They are wrapped up in forms of religious belief that are – like almost all religious belief – really all about self. (2004: 436–437)

This set of ideas could simply be considered silly if they weren't offensive. But they do bespeak a challenge, a radical challenge, to those of us for whom, *whatever* the reason, narrativity remains not only real but ethically and morally significant. Let me therefore set aside as best I can my own distaste for this particular portion of Strawson's argument and try to consider what's at the heart of his claims.

It may be, Strawson continues, that what philosophers like MacIntyre (1981) and Taylor (1989) are saying "is true for them, both psychologically and ethically. This may be the best ethical project that people like themselves can hope to engage in." His own conviction, however, "is that the best kind of lives almost never involve this kind of self-telling, and that we have here yet another deep divider of the human race" (2004: 437). Now, I am trying to be open-minded as I work through Strawson's argument. But notice what is now being said: those who engage in the kind of ethically tinged self-telling that MacIntyre and Taylor (among many others) engage in cannot possibly be living "the best kind of lives," for they are apparently too religiously self-preoccupied to do so. Who *does* live the best kind of lives? Presumably, those ostensibly humble Episodics who, like Strawson himself, never stop to ask what they have made of these lives. "Is there some burden on me to explain the popularity of the two theses [at hand], given that I think they're false? Hardly. Theorizing human beings tend to favour false views in matters of this kind," and the reason they/we do so is their/our tendency to "generalize from their own case with that special, fabulously misplaced confidence that people feel when, considering elements of their own that are existentially fundamental for them, they take it that they must also be fundamental for everyone else" (2004: 439). Narrativists are therefore religiously self-preoccupied in yet another sense for Strawson. In mistaking their own personal views for the gospel Truth, they seek to spread the good news with just that sort of cultish zeal which befalls those who imagine they have seen the light.

There is one additional sense, it would seem, in which there is a kind of "religious" commitment being made via the idea of narrativity. What the "Narrative attitude" entails is engaging "in some sort of construal of one's life. One must have some sort of relatively large-scale coherence-seeking, unity-seeking, pattern-seeking, or most generally *form-finding* tendency when it comes to one's apprehension of one's life, or relatively large-scale parts of one's life" (2004: 441). Strawson is speaking here of a kind of intelligent design, as it were, the assumption that spread throughout *difference*, the saccadic movement of one's life, is a measure of *identity*, form, continuity.

Could it be that the commitment to narrativity – at least in its "big story" form (e.g., Freeman 2006, 2011) – is the product of some sort of surreptitious religious longing? Perhaps. And if so, Strawson implies, we ought to be highly suspicious of it. For, while

“the aspiration to explicit Narrative self-articulation is natural for some,” even helpful, “in others it is highly unnatural and ruinous,” and, “in general, a gross hindrance to self-understanding” (2004: 447). Why? As neurophysiological research seems to suggest, “the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being” (447). As Strawson points out, rightly in my view (see Freeman 2002, 2010), narrativity *need* not entail falsification and deception. Nor need it be in the service of portraying ourselves in a favorable light; some people revise their stories downward, as it were, rendering their lives and selves worse than what they actually were. These important qualifications notwithstanding, one’s self-narrative is “an almost inevitably falsifying narrative” (448). How could it be that so many of us have built not only theories and the like but careers based on a phenomenon that is “almost inevitably falsifying” and that thereby takes us away from the very understanding we seek?

More generally, we can, and should, also ask: *Why* narrative? Are there *any* truly substantial reasons for taking the narrative turn? Or is this one great big bit of faddish foolishness? Is it possible that we will look at this particular juncture of intellectual life and be humbled by the sheer folly of our having once been duped into supposing that what we were doing had some small measure of validity and value? It is possible. But we will only be able to arrive at this judgment through narrative. This simple fact, I believe, holds at least part of the key to narrative’s deep and long-lasting value as a mode of understanding.

1.5 Narrative as Method: Reading for Meaning

As I have argued in numerous works throughout the course of nearly three decades, at the core of the idea of narrative as a mode of understanding is its *retrospective* dimension, that is, the fact that narratives always and necessarily entail looking backward, from some present moment, and seeing in the movement of events *episodes* that are part of some larger whole (e.g., Freeman 1984, 1993, 1997, 2012). My own work tends to involve what I earlier referred to as “big stories,” which I have described as “those narratives, often derived from interviews, clinical encounters, and other such interrogative venues, that entail a significant measure of reflection on either an event or experience, a significant portion of a life, or the whole of it” (Freeman 2006: 132). It is in these big stories that the retrospective dimension is most visible, for in one way or another, they involve discrete tellings, from some present moment, looking backward. But this dimension, I would argue, is also inherent in small stories (e.g., Bamberg 2006; Georgakopoulou 2006, and this volume, chapter 13) of the sort we find in conversational exchanges and the like. These latter stories are generally more inchoate and involve less synoptic constructing and configuring than big stories, but insofar as we can designate them as *stories*, which transpire in time and have something roughly akin to a beginning-middle-end structure, the retrospective dimension remains key.

Why is the retrospective dimension important in the context of thinking about narrative as method? Among the many possible answers to this question, one strikes me as painfully obvious. Bearing in mind the abstractness and aridity and depersonalized

nature of much of contemporary psychology, it stands to reason that we might at times want to look at *people*, at the lives of real human beings, and there is no more sensible way of doing so than through the stories they tell, whether big, small, or in-between. As we all know at this point, this process is fraught with any number of potential problems, not the least of which include the kinds of distortions, illusions, and outright falsifications that Strawson and others have identified. For some critics, this fact in itself should suffice to disqualify narrative inquiry, of the big story variety especially, from serious consideration as method. But doing so would be foolish indeed. The reason is that when it comes to human *understanding* – whether of the individual person or of larger social units – there is no getting around the equally significant fact that we have to await the movement of time in order to make sense of what exactly has gone on.

This brings me all the way back to my initial musings about narrative way back when (Freeman 1984). At the time, the field in which I had been immersed – life-span developmental psychology – had been seen as being in a state of crisis (e.g., Gergen 1980). By all indications, there were as many discontinuities in people’s lives as there were continuities (Neugarten 1969), predictability was notoriously difficult to come by, and the prospect of building a systematic science of the life-span was increasingly being cast into question. Gergen (1977) had even gone so far as to propose an “aleatoric” model of development, one that emphasized chance, accident, unintended consequences. This was an important move: rather than the more lawful, predictable, quasi-evolutionary unfolding that took place earlier in the developmental process (at least as it was conceived then), it appeared that different processes entirely were occurring in the adult years, ones that were decidedly more resistant to this sort of ordering. What had struck me then, however, was the idea that this ostensible discontinuity and randomness was tied to a fundamentally *prospective* lens. As I had put the matter at the time, “the notion of chance, being tied to expectation or lack thereof, is predicated upon an essentially forward-looking perspective, a kind of stochastic unraveling of events through time. But,” I had added, “to the extent that sense can be made, that events in their unfolding can be understood – perhaps even explained – after the fact, there is frequently the conviction that what has transpired does indeed possess a certain order.” As such, “it seems evident that a viable science of the life course must admit the necessity of adopting a fundamentally retrospective perspective for at least a portion of the questions it addresses – a willingness to entertain the possibilities of *aposteriority*” (1984: 2). In sum: “What calls for the recourse to narrative is the ineradicable asymmetry between the knowledge that derives from looking forward in time and that which comes from looking back” (14).

Three decades have passed and I still find myself returning to these ideas. Set against the still-pervasive tendency within the social sciences to seek lawful, predictive relations, narrative understanding embraces the *historical* nature of human reality, seeing in retrospection not an impediment to knowing but an inroad, a pathway into dimensions of *meaning* that cannot be had any other way. In looking backward, we not only want to know what happened when, as in historical chronicle, but how events and experiences might be related to one another, perhaps even assuming the form of a *plot*, a constellation of meaning that holds together, in some semblance of unity, the disparate threads of the past. Consider for a moment what happened in the wake of the bombings that took

place in April 2013 at the Boston Marathon, which killed three people and maimed numerous others: fingers began pointing in any number of directions, operating on the presupposition that “we ought to have known,” that is, that it ought to have been possible to identify the relevant “predictors” and prevent this terrible tragedy from happening. It may be so; given recent reports, it seems as though federal officials ought to have flagged one of the attackers for the local authorities. But even if they had done so, can we really assume that more eyes would have been on this would-be attacker that very day? What we are considering here is what might be called “bad” hindsight – as in the “20-20” idea, which essentially posits that we ought to have known then what we know now. Note too the collective, dialogical dimension of this sort of after-the-fact meaning-making, in this case, the turn toward blame serving to underscore the possible incompetence of those allegedly in charge. But there is also “good” hindsight, which looks backward in the hope of discerning connections that can only emerge after the fact.

In some ways, the perspective is a humble one. As history is unfolding, it may be virtually impossible to see what is going on. This seems to have been the case in Boston. Now that we know the outcome, however, we can see any number of factors – a trip to Russia, where one of the bombers may have become radicalized; a failed boxing career; a feeling of being an outsider, a stranger in a strange land – that, taken together, as narrative, may help to explain why this young man did what he did. I emphasize *may*: another feature of narrative understanding, particularly as it transpires in the study of human lives, is that it is irrevocably *interpretive*. Will we ever know for certain why this happened? Can we ever put together a definitive account? The answer is clearly *no*. Narrative understanding is interpretive through and through, and although we can certainly hope for *better* accounts – more comprehensive, deeper, more fully able to accommodate the known facts – there is no final point of arrival. This may be disturbing to some. But there is no getting around the fact that, in the realm of narrative, we are always and inevitably reading for meaning, knowing all the while that our accounts are destined to remain provisional.

Other features of narrative understanding may be disturbing as well, particularly to those seeking to build the kind of science that tends to be enshrined in psychology. Much narrative work is idiographic in orientation, focused on the individual life (or, as I somewhat dramatically put it a while back, “the living, loving, suffering, dying human being” [1997: 171]). It is also often qualitative rather than quantitative and seeks to take into account the cultural situatedness of human lives. What all this suggests is that portions of narrative inquiry are as close to literature as to science, at least as traditionally conceived, and that we ourselves need not only to be researchers, dispassionate data-gatherers, but ethnographers and writers, better attuned to cultural context, better able to see how this context has been woven into the fabric of both living and telling, and, not least, better able to draw upon the poetic power of language in conveying the ambiguity, messiness, and potential beauty of people’s lives (see Riessman, this volume, chapter 11).

Can there be a better means of understanding human lives than through narrative? There are of course numerous other ways of defending the idea of narrative as method. But if we wished to formulate a response to Brooks’s complaint about narrative’s

“promiscuity,” it would nevertheless be something like the following: in exploring the realm of real-life human affairs, in academic psychology and well beyond, narrative is, arguably, the most natural and appropriate means available. This is most obviously so in the big story context, when we want to know about the movement of individuals’ lives over some significant span of time. But the necessity of narrative is in no way limited to big stories (see Georgakopoulou, this volume, chapter 13). Its significance is not limited to matters of method, either. For narrative, it turns out, is of great and enduring theoretical significance as well.

1.6 Narrative as Theory: The Hermeneutics of Human Understanding

According to Sartwell (2000), you will recall, narrative is perhaps most problematic due to its ordering and function, its putative insistence on subjugating and taming experience, rendering it too coherent. He is quite right to call attention to this danger. For some – including, apparently, Sartwell himself – narratives can become veritable prisons, closing off entire regions of experience, in the name of order, sensibility, *meaning*. Narrative therapists and other such literary healers are well aware of this problem. Oftentimes, those with whom they work have come to find themselves inhabiting just these sorts of narrative prisons, the chains of the past, both real and imagined, dragging them ever down. As such, the challenge is to fashion new narratives, ones that will better allow them to get on in the world more freely. But then there is the Sartwell alternative, which, essentially, is to abandon narrative entirely – or at least to try. His call in this context is reminiscent of what my teacher would sometimes say in the mindfulness class I took a while back: “Let go of your story. ... Let your thoughts float by, like clouds. Just observe what’s there in front of you. And don’t criticize or condemn it or try to make it better. It is what it is” (Freeman 2010: 7). I found this helpful. It is indeed perilously easy to get caught up in the tales we tell ourselves.

But I wasn’t at all convinced that stories had to be seen in these constricting, claustrophobic terms. Perhaps more important for present purposes, however, was my lingering conviction that narrative, for all its potential troubles, was simply intrinsic to the process of understanding the human world. This was most obviously the case when considering *self*-understanding, but it was also the case, I believed, in understanding human action more generally. Paul Ricoeur’s classic 1971 article “The model of the text: Meaningful action considered as a text” (in Ricoeur 1981a; see also Freeman 1985) was pivotal in this context. Something happens, and its consequences may reverberate into the future. But *how* it will do so will, of course, depend on what happens subsequently. It is for this reason, Ricoeur writes, that history may appear “as a play,” but “with players who do not know the plot” (1981a: 207). As a corollary to this idea, he continues, it can be said that “a meaningful action is an action the *importance* of which goes ‘beyond’ its *relevance* to its initial situation. ... An important action,” therefore, “develops meanings which can be actualised or fulfilled in situations other than the one in which this action occurred” (1981a: 208).

It is precisely at this juncture that we can begin to see the seeds of Ricoeur’s seminal work on narrative (e.g., 1981b, 1984, 1985, 1988). For, in speaking of action in

this consequential way, he is essentially speaking of the way in which actions become *episodes*, integral parts of the evolving whole that is the narrative. It is against the backdrop of these ideas that he would eventually speak in more explicit terms of the aforementioned idea of plot, that is, “the intelligible unity that holds together circumstances, ends and means, initiatives, and unwanted consequences” (1983: 178). What is important to emphasize here is that this notion of plot is itself a fundamentally retrospective idea. We do not, and cannot, know the plot of a story ahead of time; it can only emerge during the course of reading, when we begin to discern the meaning and significance of what has come before. It is with this notion of plot in mind that Brooks refers to “the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle” (1985: 19). As such, he continues, “Perhaps we would do best to speak of the *anticipation of recollection* as our chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic” (23). We might also say that “we are able to read present moments ... as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot” (94). Along these lines, it may plausibly, if provocatively, be said that “All narrative may be in essence obituary” (95).

Let us look more carefully at the process Ricoeur and Brooks have outlined in their respective perspectives on narrative, focusing especially on the process of emplotment. In reading a work of literature, we frequently encounter a scene or event, or a series of them. We know that they will likely be playing a role of some sort in the story to come, but we do not know what quite yet. This very uncertainty and open-endedness ignites our desire as readers and beckons us to keep reading. As further details emerge, we may sketch out a preliminary sense of the whole, a sense of “what’s going on,” retaining it as a kind of hermeneutic schema. Depending on what happens subsequently – and, of course, on the genre of narrative in question – we may refine this schema further or revise it entirely. Episodes thus become situated in relation to this emerging whole, which in turn continues to evolve as a function of these same episodes. Reading may therefore be understood as a hermeneutic process of “tacking back and forth between part and whole,” such that “meanings that had emerged earlier both contribute to, and are retroactively transfigured by, what occurs later” (Freeman 1997: 173). Along the lines being drawn, Ricoeur (e.g., 1981b, 1984) has spoken of the *episodic* and *configurational* dimensions of narrative, the former referring to the various events of which the narrative is comprised, the latter to the poetic process of seeing-together so as to discern in and through these events a pattern, a larger constellation of meaning.

This basic process applies not only to reading works of literature, but to reading – and, on some level, writing and *rewriting* – ourselves (Freeman 1993, 2010). Note that in framing the process at hand in these terms, we have underscored once more the *retrospective* aspect of narrative: to extract the plot of a story, whether in actual works of literature or in the quasi-literary works that are ourselves, requires looking backward and “recollecting” – in classical terms, gathering-together – the disparate episodes of the past. Such recollection, Ricoeur has suggested, “inverts the so-called natural order of time. By reading the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end, we learn also to read time itself backward, as the recapitulating of the initial conditions of a course of

action in its terminal consequences" (1981b: 176). Ricoeur is making a larger point in offering these words as well – namely that *narrative time* is part and parcel of the distinctive mode of being we call "human" and that narrative itself is intrinsic to the process of human meaning-making (see especially Bruner 1987; also Brockmeier 1995, 2001).

There are dangers involved in this process, to be sure, and Sartwell and others have done well to warn us of them. We can become entrapped by our own stories, imprisoned by their seemingly immovable hold upon us. We can be suffocated as well, so consumed by our need to tell that we fail to breathe the cool, clean air of just being in the moment. We can become fetishists of coherence, so doggedly insistent on our own unity and integrity that we gloss over the patent *incoherence* that characterizes much of our lives. We can extract plots when there really are none. All this is true. But none of it ought to lead us to assume that narrative is merely a control mechanism, foisted upon the flux in order to stem the tide of meaninglessness or to subdue recalcitrant experience. Does it make sense to consider *all* of human experience in terms of "discourse"? No, surely not; stubbing toes and having orgasms, etc. (Sartwell's examples) would seem to challenge the limits of such a perspective. But when it comes to the realm of meaning, there is no getting around the broadly hermeneutic dimension of understanding. And when it comes to understanding human lives, there is also no getting around the narrative form such understanding assumes. Some will lament this state of affairs; that much is clear. What they ultimately seem to be lamenting, however, is nothing less than being human.

1.7 Narrative as Praxis: From Big Stories to Small

But what about this idea of "being human"? In speaking as I just have, one might be led to assume that I am arguing that there is but one way, the narrative way, and that anyone who doesn't live this way is somehow *less* than human. It's no wonder that some might be offended at this (apparent) argument: set against the storied lives of narrativists, their own lives might appear to be woefully incomplete. But, Strawson has argued, they're not. And *because* they're not, the narrativity thesis must be wrong. Now, if all Strawson is ultimately saying is that we human beings vary in terms of how much explicit self-narrating we are inclined to do, there is hardly any need to contest his perspective. Clearly, however, he's after larger game. Unlike Sartwell, who confesses to still partaking of narrative and wishing he didn't or could do so less, Strawson suggests that, insofar as narrativity is a personality trait or some such character-specific predilection, it is not to be regarded as the universal characteristic it is frequently, and erroneously, thought to be. *Some* of us may be "storytelling animals." But others, apparently, are not – not unless they are asked by social scientists and the like to tell the stories of their lives.

On my reading, big stories, of the sort promoted by MacIntyre, Ricoeur, and Taylor, are Strawson's primary target. But given that he is arguing against narrativity more generally, I assume he wouldn't be entirely satisfied with small stories either, for they too are part of the bandwagon, the movement to enshrine narrative as some privileged inroad into the human realm. It is true that small story theorists are less inclined to "ontologize" than big story theorists; they are more likely to speak of narrative *practices*, "doings," not

some existential sphere tied to the temporal structure of being. Be that as it may, strong claims are still being made, particularly about human identity (e.g., Bamberg 2011). And so Bamberg, Georgakopoulou, and other proponents of the small story approach would be fair game as well. Here, then, we can ask: Is there *any* basis for maintaining the narrativity thesis? Could it be that this bandwagon is so alluring, so positively seductive, that, despite its seemingly weak foundations, big story theorists, small story theorists, and everything in-between have been duped into hopping on board?

Let me be clear about what is, and what is not, being said in adhering to the idea of narrativity. There are unquestionably plenty of people who do not engage, or who do not engage regularly, in the kind of synoptic, stock-taking narrative reflection that I and many others have addressed. They may not *care* about the personal past, or their identity, or how they might better achieve “the good life.” And even if they do care about these things, they may not care in an explicitly narrative way. This appears to be the case with Strawson himself. But the fact that he has no particular inclination to tell his story doesn’t mean there is no story to tell. For, *others* – his would-be biographer, for instance – can jump in and tell this very story. It may not be easy, mind you (particularly if Strawson were to insist on keeping mum about the meaning of his life). But unless his life is little more than an utterly disconnected string of events, with no discernible shape whatsoever, a story can still be told. Following Ricoeur, there still remains a (quasi-)text; there still remain actions, some of which are clearly and obviously more important and relevant than others; and there still remains the fact that “the text’s career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author” (1981a: 201). It is thus an “open work,” as Ricoeur calls it, and can be read differently by different readers. Strawson’s own intentions vis-à-vis the meaning (or lack thereof) of his life, therefore, are not determinative. So, while we may wish to respect his wishes for us to desist from telling a story he himself might disavow, we are certainly not bound to do so. The author’s intention and the meaning of the text are quite separate matters.

Very well, then, Strawson might say: “Go ahead and tell your story, or my story, whichever; I can’t stop you. But what do you make of the fact that not only other individuals but entire *cultures* might find this storytelling process quite alien to their own mode of meaning-making?” This is likely so, and much ink has been spilled in support of the idea. I have even spilled some myself in addressing the oft-cited difference between *mythical* time, which tends toward the circle, and *historical* time, which tends toward the line (Freeman 1998). Just as individuals vary with respect to their narrative practices, in other words, so do cultures. Now, once again, *we* could go ahead and try to tell *their* stories. This gets us into some hotter water, however, for if in fact their most fundamental modes of meaning-making are appreciably different than our own, it behooves us to be extremely cautious about doing so (see Crapanzano 1985). Can one tell a psychologically-informed “life story” of a person for whom the very categories in question are alien? *Should* one do so? More to the point for present purposes, we should also ask: Is it conceivable that there are entirely non-narrative cultures, ones whose existence is utterly and completely momentary, for instance, such that they have no sense at all of any sort of narrative trajectory? I haven’t inspected all of them, so I can’t say for sure. By all indications, however, the answer is “No.” Not all cultures *tell* narratives the way we (most of us, anyway) are inclined to do. Nor are they necessarily

interested in “history” or “life history” or any of the other large categories with which we reckon with the movement of our lives. But it is patently inconceivable that they would step out of narrativity altogether. In invoking the idea of narrativity, we do not necessarily invoke the further idea that it must assume the classical beginning-middle-end narrative form generally found in our own culture. But amidst the vast multiplicity of ways of speaking, of reckoning with time, and of organizing the meaning and movement of one’s life, there still remains narrativity, that is, “a basic human inclination to see actions together, as temporal patterns, configurations of meaning, and to situate these configurations within larger wholes – whether myths, histories, or what have you – that serve ultimately to organize and make sense of temporal existence” (Freeman 1997: 175).

In offering this perspective, I join the ranks of those who see narrative not as some sort of fictive imposition on the (allegedly) chaotic flux of experience but as woven into the very fabric of experience. David Carr speaks cogently and compellingly to this very idea. As a student of the philosophy of history, his main interest is in big stories. But he is no less attentive to those smaller stories that are part of everyday life, wherever it may be found. According to Carr, “the flow of conscious life, like the temporal objects (events) we encounter around us, is lived as a complex of configurations whose phases figure as parts within larger wholes” (1986: 28). We must therefore “correct the view that structure in general and narrative structure in particular is imposed upon a human experience intrinsically devoid of it so that such structure is an artifice, something not ‘natural’ but forced, something which distorts or does violence to the true nature of human reality” (43). From Carr’s perspective, then,

the real difference between [narrative] “art” and “life” is not organization versus chaos, but rather the absence in life of that point of view which transforms events into a story by *telling* them. Narrative requires narration; and this activity is not just a recounting of events but a recounting informed by a certain kind of superior knowledge. (59)

The retrospective dimension of the endeavor is again central: “What is essential to the story-teller’s position is the advantage of *real* hindsight, a real freedom from the constraint of the present assured by occupying a position after, above, or outside the events narrated” (60). At the same time, however, Carr continues, action itself – and conversation, of the sort we find in small stories – bears within it a measure of narrativity, which in turn suggests that “the retrospective view of the narrator, with its capacity for seeing the whole in all its irony, is not in irreconcilable opposition to the agent’s view but is an extension and refinement of a viewpoint inherent in action itself” (61). If Carr is right,

no elements enter our experience ... unstoried or unnarrativized. They can emerge as such only under a special analytical view. It is this latter, not the narrativization, which is “artificial” and runs so counter to the normal current of our experience that it requires a special effort. (68)

What Carr is suggesting here, rightly, is that what transpires moment to moment, in the course of ongoing life, is of a different narrative order than what goes on when we

step out of this flow of experience to reflect upon or tell about our lives. As I have emphasized in my work on hindsight (Freeman 2010) especially, this sort of reflective pausing entails an element of *poiesis*, configurational meaning-making, that is less operative in the flux of the present moment. The point, in any case, is to see the difference at hand as one of degree. Following Ricoeur (1991), it is the difference between the “virtual” or incomplete narrativity that is part and parcel of ongoing experience and the actualized narrativity that emerges in the act of storytelling. We have thus come full circle, and are in a position to understand more clearly the aforementioned idea that, in the flow of ongoing experience, we find “something like stories that have not yet been told,” the notion being that we are “entangled” in stories and that narrative proper is to be understood as a “secondary process” that is “grafted” onto this entanglement. The implication: “Recounting, following, understanding stories is then simply the continuation of these unspoken stories” (1991: 30).

There are exceptions to this state of affairs. There are, for instance, people without language and without a sense of the very ongoingness of experience. There are also people who have been brutally traumatized, whose very world has been so corrupted and reduced that they have been virtually exiled from the narrative order. And there are those like my mother, a 91-year-old woman with dementia, whose experience is at times so limited to the present moment, shorn of any connection to past or future, that it is difficult to see in her world any evidence of narrativity at all. At times like these, my mother is a true Episodic, providing ample testimony that there are indeed people, millions in fact, who fall outside the realm of narrativity. Or at least appear to: my mother’s disturbance at her own sorry state still bespeaks the vestiges of narrativity, or perhaps more appropriately, of a kind of narrativity *in absentia*. We should remember these people before forging ahead too surely in our proclamations about the narrative fabric of life. But we should also remember that these same people are hardly to be seen as exemplary – except, of course, in one way: in showing what a life largely devoid of narrativity can be, they also show how integral it is to the practice of everyday life, at least before the ravages of disease set in.

To *choose* to live more in the moment, as Sartwell and others recommend, is one thing. I can also see the virtue of being so narratively carefree, in the manner of Strawson, that one needn’t busy oneself with pondering the past or the future; one can just go on, this way or that, and enjoy the ride. But this very enjoyment is itself contingent on knowing who and what one is, on being located, in having an address, a home, a place in the world. Perhaps, following Brooks, those of us who carry the torch of narrative should ease up in spreading the good word and be a bit more cautious about colonizing the whole of reality. And perhaps, following Sartwell and Strawson, we should be more attentive to those momentary pleasures, and pains, that bring us outside the narrative order. Nevertheless, there can be no home, no place in the world, without the kind of existential rootedness that narrativity provides. I will be going to see my mother shortly. I hope she’s out of the terror today and that my presence makes some sense to her, that she can recognize me and, in turn, become located. This is what will allow us to speak with one another, mother and son, living in a shared world, filled, albeit obscurely, with our own unspoken stories.

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