

The Case For Narrative

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Introduction

Our practice of narrative is individual and corporate, communal and cultural. As the stories and plots of our living, narrative is present in all social movements whether causes, groups, organizations, or corporations (Cobley, 2001). It animates social actors and is determinative for people's identity, their movements, and contributes to a sense of purpose (Currie, 1998). Narrative becomes "individual" in the stories and identities of our lives and "corporate" in the stories and identities of our organizations (Ezzy, 1998). Our understanding then of who we are and where we fit-our past, present, and future-is bound to the stories we tell (Berthoff, 1970, Cebik, 1986). By fixing our place in time, bringing coherency to our experiences, and through creation of meaning (Bojea, & Rhodesb, 2005; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riceour, 1994), the "canonical forms" of narrative become culture's stories and the plans we use to construct our lives (Bruner, 2004, p. 694). These determine what we tell of ourselves so that the self of narration emerges as coherent, recognizable, and representative of the time and place we live (Eakin, 1999; Kirby, 1991; Linde, 1993). In the process, the stories of culture rise to become the master narratives or standards against which we position our experiences and that give meaning to our existence (Mishler, 2006; Thorne & McLean, 2003).

Since narrative is endemic to culture and structurally necessary in order to communicate its norms (Bruner, 2001), it is normative then that culture, which supplies our identity and to which we conform, would also inculcate this, its principle form of transmission, into our identity (Barclay, 1994; Young & Saver, 2001). What results is our growth "into the storytelling repertoire of our language and our culture" (Brockmeier & Harre, 2001, p. 49) so that narrativity becomes a distinct human trait, albeit, one borne of a social phenomenon (Abbot, 2002; McAdams, 1996). This phenomenon is the "interlocking web of practices, ideologies, and social structures" (Kiesling, 2006, p. 262) that becomes for us the institutional slant or party line, the correct way to think, act, or believe that the self in its formation relies on and which embed us in the discourses of everyday life (Harvey & Martin, 1995; Latour, 1996; Pasupathi, 2006).

In our compulsion to narrate we reveal the efficiency of language as a mechanism of social bonding and through its modes of character, plot, and resolution display the patterning of narrative form (Abbot, 2002; Donald, 1991; Herman & Vervaeck, 2001). This is the form that Homer copied but Aristotle defined and that is inherent to human communication (Ricoeur, 1984) so that long before the advent of the novel such literary moments as the Tale of Sinuhe or Hammurabi's Code would be written or the stories that later became the Christian Bible told and enshrined in culture's discourse.

Narrative as Discourse

Discourse is a much used term and bears important theoretical implications. Its use here is after Sawyer (2004) who using a textual paradigm held discourse as the text in which a sentence is embedded. In this light the unit of expression moves from the words comprising a sentence to those giving expression to the greater meaning in which it is set. Using this modality, "discourse" refers to the unit of expression for human sociality being expanded to take in not merely the acts of an individual but the cultural acts wherein that individual is situated.

As discourse, narrative precedes text and is the formative agent in constructing human personhood,

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human identity, and human culture. Viewed this way the literature of narrative and the means of its dissemination is the result of prior discursive but non-textual practices established first in the broader discourse of human culture (Brockmeier & Harre, 2001). This has the effect of making it seem that where literature would argue for primacy of place the storyteller has already appeared (Lowe, 2000). These non-textual practices are the essences of humanity that allow and urge communication (Donald, 1991) and in their doing transcend epic. The values transmitted thereby form culture (Schiffrin, 1996) and decree limits of propriety as well as provide the stock of stories (Schiff & Now, 2006) others will, in multiple conversations, tell of themselves and heard told about them, all in the process of knowing who we are (Raggatt, 2001).

Such “conversational narrative,” said Ochs and Capps (2001), is the “ontogenic starting point of performance and literary genres of narrative” (p. 3). Donald (1991) affirmed the place of narrative in primordial humanity saying that narrative preceded language yet established the culture that allowed its promulgation. This in-built desire to narrate is germane to the human species and reflected in the demands of modern culture for well-formed stories (Mishler, 2006). It is through “the interplay between linguistic choices, rhetorical and performance strategies in the representation of particular story worlds, and the negotiation of such representations in the interactional world” that identities emerge (DeFina, 2003, p. 24). This world of stories is our world (Schechtman, 1996). When formalized we know them as literature; when told we know them as conversation. “Much of what passes for everyday conversation among people is storytelling of one form or another,” said McAdams (1993, p. 28). Yet they are the stories we constantly revise in an effort to arrive at what our lives mean and find some “sense of what our lives are about” (Linde, 1993, p. 25). Through narrative we come to an understanding of ourselves and are able to distinguish self from acts and even experiences. Schiffrin (1996) held that narrative is integral to being fully human saying its “form, content, and performance” provides accounting of our “personal selves and our social and cultural identities” (p. 194). Narrative, then, in human formation like its presence in human sociality, is pervasive (Abbot, 2002) in its ability to mediate meaning and interpret history.

Narrative in Mediation and Meaning

Language both mediates and provides meaning to human thought and sociality (Barclay, 1994; Bruner, 1990; 1991). By mediation I refer to Bruner’s (1991) construct whereby language and symbolic systems serve to mediate thought as well as convey what is real. Burke (1966) highlighted this when he said,

“We do make a pragmatic distinction between the actions of persons and the sheer motions of things. The slashing of the waves against the beach, or the endless cycle of births and deaths in biologic organisms would be examples of sheer motion. Yet we, the typically symbol-using animal, cannot relate to one another sheerly as things in motion... The human animal, as we know it, emerges into personality by first mastering whatever tribal speech happens to be its particular symbolic environment. (p. 53)

In this view the movement between humans is psychical as opposed to physical, open to interpretation and able to change over the course of its interacting (Schiffrin, 2006). Language, then, as mediator “opens a past and a future where the subject is caught in its own signifying practice, sustained by it, produced by it” (Kerby, 1991, p. 64). In effect, language as method and narrative as form serve to convey the meaning of life events (Fivush, 1994).

While narrative is a form of communication it is not its sole representation. And while narrative can

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convey meaning and serve as a means of mediation among human actors and their interests, neither is it the only communicative method by which those actors derive meaning (Brown, 1998; Chomsky, 1986; Kaye, 1979; Ong, 1982). Yet human actors general acceptance of story assures its place in their toolkit of communication, a place ratified by the persuasiveness accorded it (McAdams, 1996). In gaining appreciation of narrative's background some understanding of the origins of human communication and meaning, of which narrative is part, may be helpful.

To know our world and be known in it requires language (Ong, 1982). Through its typifications, that is, the patterned ways of thinking with which we frame reality (Berger & Kellner, 1970), we come to know our immediate environment and those removed from it. Aiding this process are those we esteem and with whom, through the speech of language, we share conversation. In the process we mediate not only knowledge of our world but the sense that it is ours and that we have place in it (Czarniawska, 1997).

Reality is both framed and created for humans through the speech acts of language, acts that are part of the larger human endeavor to communicate (Bruner, 1986). They include not just the awareness of world and place but also the "attitude of the other" as well as their response (Mead, 2002, p. 103). These efforts are in recognition that the human disposition to communicate becomes the bearer of meaning and consequently that all conversation is meaning laden. As such the interaction of speech mediates the sociality we seek through communication (Barclay, 1994; Mead, 1962; Rousseau & Herder, 1966). Therefore language and the greater human act of communication from which it derives are constitutive of human sociality (Bruner, 1986). Mead (1962) stated this as,

Meaning arises through communication. It is to the content to which the social process gives rise that this statement refers; not to bare ideas of printed words as such, but to the social process which has been so largely responsible for the objects constituting the daily environment in which we live: a process in which communication plays the main part. (p. 79)

Like the narrative form to which humans are genetically predisposed (Cobley, 2001; Dautenhahn 2002; Donald 1991), the acts of communication likewise have origins in biology (Junker, 1979; Newson, 1979). Brazelton's study (1979) of newborn infants led him to determine that when behaving in ways that invite nurture children do so because they have been pre-equipped to communicate. Kaye (1979) referred to this as a capacity that the infant begins life while Chappel and Sander (1979) saw a "biosocial" element through which intent is formed (p. 106). By use of this early communicative ability and association of event with response, the neonate develops meaning. Though elementary it serves the foundational aspect of the child's entrance to human sociality; a sociality dominated by language (Berger & Kellner, 1970; Chappel & Sander, 1979; Halliday, 1979).

While humans communicate in myriad ways, language is the paramount expression of choice and inseparable from cognitive development (Nelson, 1996; Ong, 1982). Nelson held the representations of world are "constructed according to principles that are built in to the human cognitive system [and] that have an evolutionary, biological basis" (p. 5). However, the biological basis of communication does not preclude the social conditioning of its product. That is, the communicative disposition is genetic while its act is social. Therefore the form of communication whose elements most assure its distribution socially will likely become predominant. Contributing to the predominance of speech language is the mediational quality of its interaction and the making of meaning through signs (Kerby, 1991; Kevelson, 1998; Schiffrin, 2006).

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Interaction

Interaction occurs “when we perform an action through speech” (Schiffrin, 1996, p. 196). Here we are at once intersubjective and reciprocal. Intersubjective is Schiffrin’s (2006) term for Mead’s “generalized other” (1934, p. 154) but retentive of Mead’s meaning as the prerequisite of self-development and the mode whereby one engages fully in the social moment. It speaks to an intentional presence among actors that is actualized in movement between the “self” and “other” and the “I” and “you.” This mutuality stands in for the common understanding between speakers of, “you and I share some common ground” and “I can understand what you have done” (p. 106). Reciprocity builds on the sociality of speech in acknowledgment that the social shapes what the genes produce (Chomsky, 1986). Here we communicate in the awareness that our actions are reflective of other’s acts as well as bearing upon those acts (Schiffrin, 2006). By nurturing mutuality and connectivity between actors, interaction’s intersubjectivity and reciprocity represent the possibility of our acts being mediated and thereby become the promise of creating ourselves and our surroundings (Wertsch, 1991). Tronick, Als, & Adamson (1979) spoke to this point saying,

Social interaction is a culturally modified species-specific process in which message-carrying displays, both verbal and non-verbal, are mutually exchanged by the interactants. The exchange of these messages insures our survival and integrates each new individual into the culture. (p. 349).

Just as the results of interaction are noteworthy so too are the acts that may reveal its origins. These origins are in mother and fetus and mother and infant communication and well researched (Chappel & Sander, 1979; Malmberg, Stein, West, Lewis, Barnes, Leach, & Sylva, 2006; Riley, 1988; Stainton, 1985). What may be tentative, yet telling, is that the communicative act between mother and infant seems to parallel the intentional communicative interaction of adults. The presence of interaction in mother/infant communication as form, if not in toto, is marked by the response between them that bears on the activities of the other (Kaye, 1979).

To demonstrate these claims, Kaye (1979) referenced the interaction between mother and infant for an 8-day period after birth. During this time maternal acts led to increased infant alertness, which prompted greater maternal holding that in turn, again increased infant alertness. Stainton (1985) interviewed 24 expectant couples in the 8th month of pregnancy in an effort to determine if the patterns of fetal behavior provided sense of the child as individual. Parents did perceive of the fetus as person and imputed meaning to the behavior. She concluded that the fetus is aware of sound and responds at 24 weeks and is fully conscious by 32 weeks. Malmberg et al (2006) compared the interaction of fathers and mothers with their 10-12 months old infants. Among other findings, they noted that the infant’s mood changed in relation to a change in mother’s sensitivity and to change in the mood of fathers.

The patterning that enables mother and infant communication and is suggestive of biological origins (Dautenhahn, 2002; Nelson, 1996; Rogoff & Lave, 1984) may be indicative of the larger human bent to sociality that Dunbar (1996) saw in human brain physiology. The argument centers on the fact that humans, unlike other primates, speak. Yet this remarkable gift is used mainly to detail the minutia of people’s lives and not the grander thoughts of science or wisdom. It is evidence that humans are social beings and suggests our fascination with minutia is the heritage of primal “grooming” or bonding and thus a reinforcement of the social circle. The apparent patterning toward sociality that is inherent to human consciousness and that prioritizes communication, privileges language, and prepares actors for

speech is also revealed through signs.

Signs

Signs are words and language is composed of signs (Denzin, 1989; Kevelson, 1998; Morris, 1938; Ong, 1982). Human civilization as well as the human mind depends upon them for sense making or as Morris (1938) had it, a “mediated-taking-account-of” (p. 4). However, this dependence did not arise in the process of learning language but in its development. So while signs are endemic to human speech language they are so as the residue of an earlier orality (Ong, 1982). In this oral period, signs acted as referents or symbols and were used to identify professions (the barber pole), associations (the Roman battle standard) and objects (the zodiac). From these, written languages emerge through a process of reduction of “sound to script” (p. 76) and a further reduction of script into alphabets where signs come to mean the sounds of speech. The result is that signs now refer to the certain sound characters represent as opposed to the character itself.

This semiosis is reflected in the thinking of Morris (1938) who like Wertsch (1991) described the communicative act as inseparable from mental functioning, one of signs, and necessary to humans. Clearly, communication is a paramount concern of humans and like the patterning underlying interaction that of the sign can likewise be found in an earlier period of development. But unlike the constancy within human interaction of mutuality and connectedness, in a further transformation of mimesis, signs have migrated from object to representation.

Mimetic is a term is associated with Plato and used by Aristotle to generally denote a representation of human life (Halliwell, 1998). Mimesis can function as metaphor and is seen in the encoding of action into the plot of literature (Riceour, 1984). It is showing as opposed to telling and serves to depict (Cobley, 2001; Herman & Vervaeck, 2001). Donald (1991) borrowed the term to describe the “spontaneous gesture and mime” of human neuropsychology (p. 93). Speaking phylogenetically he found mimesis in human evolution, particularly in the expansion of cognitive function that allowed a form of representation prior to speech. Traces of this evolutionary history emerge in humans who unable to speak are yet able to fully participate in sociality. However, a distinction exists between the gesture of representation in the mimetic sense of what is already known to both parties and that of the non-linguistic yet fully intentional act of Donald.

Mead (1934) saw gesture as an “attitude of one individual that calls out a response in the other” (p. 14) and distinguished its use in conscious and unconscious conversation (p. 69). His efforts ground Donald’s (1991) pure imitation but non-linguistic representational gesture/mimesis, that is, the unconscious, while explicating the conscious mimetic of Plato/Aristotle. Mead (1934) summarized this as,

Gestures... are always found to inhere in or involve a larger social act of which they are phases. In dealing with communication we have first to recognize its earliest origins in the unconscious conversation of gestures. Conscious communication – conscious conversation of gestures – arises when gestures become signs, that is, when they come to carry for the individuals making them and the individuals responding to them, definite meanings or significations in terms of the subsequent behavior of the individuals making them. (p. 69)

Although gesture involves the social act it may also be our evolutionary heritage. Its patterning equips humans for communication as unconscious act prior to birth (Nagy, 2006; Newson, 1979) and consciously afterwards as a user of signs.

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Evidence of the mimetic pattern is present in Newson's (1979) study of infant movements. Here the "orgasmic language of gesticulation" refers to a psycho-biological origin (p. 209), is constitutive of communication among human beings and present before infants are able to speak (Enfield, Sotaro, & de Ruiter, 2007; Fabia, 2005). Humans, it seems, are pre-disposed in two conditions: communication and the sociality that demands it. Whereas the one requires development the other appears as a "ready-made world" formed by those before us and given as sets of expectation (Berger & Kellner, 1970, p. 52). We come to know these expectations as culture and through language gain admission to its secrets while insuring that what has been received is what will be transmitted. Genetics play a primary role in this transmission and assure the telling of the tale of our lives by insinuating into our acquisition of language narrative form (Bruner, 1994).

Narrative Origins and Historiography

Oral Origin

The origins of European narrative are found in Homer. Although Aristotle is credited with giving western narrative its formalized concept of plot, the Greek epic poet Homer is generally discussed as the originator of European narrative (Cobley, 2001). The patterns of the Homeric epics, themselves in all likelihood based in oral tradition (Ong, 1982), instilled the ideals of Aristotle's plot into Attic tragedy and defined it long before (Lowe, 2000). Cobley (2001) takes these facts along with the possibility raised by Sherratt and that of Lord, whom he cited, that "Homer" was a genre of poem or that the name meant to be the best poet among poets. He suggests the greater issue is not the identity of Homer but its/his use of rhythmic formulations. For Cobley, the proof of narrative extant prior to the invention of writing and thus prior to Homer is its constitutive elements that rhythmic formulation reveals: a narrator's presence and a mnemonic device to remind that the same narrator is telling the story. These indicate, in his view, the oral origins of Homer's poems.

Narrative is an oral or written "discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events." (Genett, 1980, p. 25) Giving credence to the idea that this discourse existed prior to literacy is Abbot (2002) who said that narrative is present in "almost all human discourse," that it is "pervasive and universal," and that humans are born with the capacity to communicate narratively in the same way as is our "capacity for grammar" (2002, p. 1, 3). Barthes held that narrative is "in every age, in every place, in every society; it began with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative" (1982, pp. 251-252). Cebik took a similar tack saying, "Where narrative originated historically, we cannot say with any assurance, since even the most ancient recorded sources give us all levels of narrative" (1986, p. 61). For Berthoff (1970) the importance of narrative is that it is "the essential medium and stuff of our knowledge of life, the stuff of human understanding" (p. 267).

As the essential, formative, medium for human sociality to which humans are pre-disposed, "no single society can do without narratives" (Herman & Vervaeck, 2001, p. 1). It is "everywhere" and "ubiquitous" so that it would be "difficult to think about ideological issues and cultural forms without encountering it" (Currie, 1998, pp. 1, 96). Narrative functions as a "powerful and basic tool for thinking" (Herman, 2003, p. 163) and precedes culture (Kermode, 1983, p. 55). Finally, narrative is the way as users of oral language we "approach an objective reality and productively confront what we habitually say with what we see and with the information we continually receive" (p. 267).

Ong (1982) argued for narrative as the active agent in orality among non-literate cultures saying narrative is "in certain ways more functional in primary oral cultures than in others." Citing the inability of oral cultures to manage knowledge in abstract categories, Ong said, "oral cultures cannot generate

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such categories...so they use stories of human action to store, organize, and communicate much of what they know” (p. 137). Viewed in this manner, narrative is not merely a method of communication in oral culture but a necessity allowing the collection and expression of human thought even in the absence of text.

For Martin (1986) narratives suggest the real when telling of what should be in place. He referred to this as the “practices that make up our social world” and said, they are “mixtures of causally necessary and socially conventional behavior [that] constitute a massive store of information about reality” (p. 67). Narratives in this view are the links of human consciousness that tie past to present: “Character and plot, life self and world, derive their present significance from their position on a path that gathers together all the past and projects it toward a future” (p. 121). Here the self and story of self are inseparable where fiction and narrative are “fundamental to mass culture, social behavior, and our conceptions of our own lives” (p. 189). Martin held that the narratives of human sociality are based in universal plots from which human agents draw, as it were, templates with which to express life. These templates are known by all within a given culture and their use in narrative such that “the anthropologist, folklorist, historian, and even the psychoanalyst and theologian are all concerned with narratives in one-way or another” (p. 23). The orality of narrative lent to its being community property in much the same way as the teller of stories that would select from well-understood story forms such as the hero, the villain, etc.

Levi-Strauss (1963) approached the origin of narrative in human evolution from the perspective of myth. He saw in myth a “kind of logic...as rigorous as that of modern science.” This logic is evidence that people have always been thinking and communicating and with any improvement to thought due, “not in an alleged progress of man’s mind, but in the discovery of new areas to which it may apply its unchanged and unchanging powers” (p. 230). In the oral cultures that Levi-Strauss examined, myths were products of the spoken word. The narrative organization required to support myth suggests the first oral culture’s narrativizing tendencies and possibly the role of narrative in pre-literate human sociality. This has undertones of the evolutionary development of narrative; undertones best understood as a search for narrative origin in an inquiry of human development.

To trace this development it is helpful to understand that narratives are “literary” and “anthropological.” Where the one is written the other is told (Martin, 1986, p. 23). To explicate this Cobley (2001) borrowed from the language of evolutionary biology the words ontogeny to refer to individuals (psychological acts) and phylogeny to refer to groups of individuals (cultural acts). He saw a psychological origin for narratives in the stories of children and found such varied narrative forms as nonsense, parody, and satire as they re-presented their play. Engel (1995) seems to lend support to this view with her observation that narrative has a crucial role in the development of children’s social skills as does Read and Miller (1995) with their “humans appear to have a readiness, from the beginning of life, to hear and understand stories” (p. 143).

Classically, ontogeny is the development of a human individual and phylogeny the origin/development of the human species. Further, neither ontogeny nor phylogeny is discreet but act upon the other in the sense that specie-wide development affects by causation that of individual organisms within the species (Gould, 1977). The pre-literate origins of narrative tend to be discussed using these terms not in their technical but approximate definition. Cobley (2001) is one such example. Dautenhahn (2002) in her formulation of the Narrative Intelligence Hypothesis, itself a widened pursuit of narrative’s evolutionary origin, is another. Like Cobley (2001) she has argued for a psychological, pre-literate, and

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oral origin of narrative and in doing so held that the evolutionary origin of communicating in stories “co-evolved with increasing social dynamics among our human ancestors” (p. 103). For Dautenhahn (2002) continuity exists that “links human narratives to transactional narrative formats in social interactions among non-human animals” (p. 103). In this way she found an ontogenic a priori for human language in primate evolution. Here the linkage between lower evolved (non-human) and higher evolved (human) primates is in the need each share for social cohesiveness and its preservation. Since non-human primates do not use human language, grooming instead of verbalizing maintains the desired social cohesion. She made this point by saying, “social grooming patterns generally reflect social relationships; they are used as a means to establish coalition bonds, for reconciliation and consolation and other important aspects of primate politics” (p. 101).

Lower primate sociality is limited in forming relationships by the peculiar nature of grooming as a one-on-one behavior and by the inability to hold multiple relations simultaneously (Dautenhahn, 2002). In contrast, the human primate by developing language “allowed an increase in group size while still preserving stability and cohesion within the group” (p. 102) The findings of Dunbar (1996) who predicted the individual’s capacity for relationships at 150 seems to support this as does his suggestion that in order to preserve stability and coherence in human societies human language evolved as an efficient mechanism of social bonding. Overall this has produced, on a general level, a form of communication that is a “natural format for encoding and transmitting meaningful, socially relevant information” (p. 104). This ideal form of human communication entails the following elements: an introduction of the characters, the development of a plot, a high point and resolution.

For Dautenhahn (2002) human narrative capacities “develop from pre-verbal, narrative, transactional formats that children get engaged in with their parents and peers” (p. 98). She too placed narrative development in the first years of a child’s life saying that children’s narrative style and ability develop in their daily interactions and conversations and enable them to make meaning of events. Instead of approaching the origin of narrative in solely ontogenic terms, Jaynes (1976) expressed his argument phylogenically, that is, in terms of human development as species. Using the Iliad as evidence, he stated that in this period humans functioned fully in the split hemispheres or bicameralism of their brain. Here the mind is devoid of what is now considered consciousness and “volition, planning, initiative is organized with no consciousness whatever and then told to the individual in his familiar language, sometimes with the visual aura of a familiar friend or authority figure or god, or sometimes as a voice alone” (p. 75). It was, in his thought, the breakdown of this bicameralism that signaled the rise of consciousness in humans. Saying that,

Narrativization is a single word for an extremely complex set of patterning abilities which have, I think, a multiple ancestry. But the thing in its larger patterning, such as lifetimes, histories, the past and future, may have been learned by dominantly left-hemisphered men from a new kind of functioning in the right hemisphere. The new kind of functioning was narrativization, and it had been previously been learned, I suggest, by the gods at a certain period of history. (p. 218)

Jaynes saw the use of narrative as central to human identity and enabled individuals to distinguish themselves in this reordered state. As such it was not external to the human entity but inherent. Donald (1991) viewed phylogenetic attribution within humans as prototypically evolutionary. In his schema he linked evolutionary development with the formation of culture that increasingly advances toward verbal language and semiotics. Narrative preceded language such that “the primary human adaptation was not language qua language, but rather integrative, initially mythical, thought. Modern humans

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developed language in response to pressure to improve their conceptual apparatus, not vice versa” (p. 215). Commenting upon Donald, Blunden (2006) held that in his mythic culture phase language skills developed rapidly, even ahead of material goods and led to the use of “narrative to establish social structure, a view of the world, custom and ethical life and forms of social cooperation” (p. 10). For Donald, the narrative thinking of humans is expanded and linked to semiotics in a final phase of development. In this “theoretic” (p. 333) phase memory is both internal and external to the human agent and actualized as artifacts imbued with meaning combine with the meaning of retained mental images.

Literary Origin of Western Narrative

Although in the eighteenth century Friedrich Schlegel attributed the origin of the narrative genre to epic poetry (Prickett, 1996), the texts of Western narrative have roots preceding the Common Era by several centuries. Among these are the “Gilgamesh Epic” of 2000 BCE (Hooker, 1996), the “Atrahasis Epic” of 1900 BCE (Lambert & Millard, 1969), the “Tale of Sinuhe” of 1940-1640 BCE (Parkinson, 1997), the “Code of Hammurabi” of 1750-1795 BCE (Horne, 1915), the “Hymn to Aten” of 1345 BCE and the “Tale of Two Brothers” from approximately 1200 BCE (Prickett, 1996). These along with the Christian Bible, Koran, Hebrew Bible, and Torah, among others, provide some of the earliest examples of literary narrative.

In another view of literary narrative origin, Stephen Prickett (1996) in an analysis of Romanticism posited the Christian Bible and its precursor, the Hebrew Bible, as a template from which literary narrative has drawn influence. Since the possibility exists that the Hebrew Bible, specifically Genesis, is a “rewriting or a commentary...of yet older literary texts” (pp. 23-24), then the legends of surrounding peoples may have, in a form of appropriation, become part of Hebrew mythology. For Prickett, appropriation is germane to narrative and carries the meaning of revealing in itself the human tendency to let one thing stand in for another. Citing the Old Testament story of Jacob stealing his brother’s birthright as the example of narrative appropriation, he argued the tension between what is in one view theft but in another “creative acquisition,” (appropriation), is endemic to the form if not its motive. “At some deep level” said Prickett,

That tension may actually be essential to our idea of what constitutes a book, as if the original sin of Eden were not merely part of the foundation myth of Western civilization, but was somehow encapsulated, even mirrored, in the form by which that myth has been transmitted. (p. 34)

The form of transmission, he continued, is the written word, the bearer of myth and story since the beginning of literary history.

As Prickett (1996) viewed it, appropriation is in the permeability of narrative as story builds upon story. Appropriation is what readers do to make sense out of what they read by providing a “new way of reading the past” as well as a “hermeneutic principle to explain the present” (p. 39). Through its auspices Rome claimed the richness of Hellenic tradition as its own and Jacob rose to be the Father of a Nation instead of a failure. Appropriation makes narrative a device of attractive tension able to suspend the ordinary in favor of the extraordinary and is narrative’s gift to human communication that allows successive agents to recreate what has been heard into what will be told. And history is found in the telling.

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For the classic and medieval reader, history was a “series of moral exempla” (Prickett, 1996, p. 43) informed by biblical tradition whose meaning the historian sought in order to learn a moral truth. “Historical legitimation,” said Prickett, “did not depend so much on a belief in the truth of the sources... as on the fact that they constituted a written tradition” (p. 45). The narratives of history, then, could be created to reveal the greater story: its meaning or moral. By privileging metaphor in this way a model to which later, especially Romantic, writers turned was established. The tradition included such thinkers as Chateaubriand whom Prickett cited for his stance that Christianity was a framework to explain all of human history. History viewed in this way is appropriable and the purpose of its narratives to reveal the “collective character of mankind” (pp. 177-178).

Chateaubriand (1768-1848) had good reason for his view. He stood in a well regarded tradition of Christian biblical exegesis accepting of well developed metaphor (Prickett, 1996), a tradition inherited from Jewish appropriation, itself already well established in the formulation of their sacred texts. It was this “new Christian interpretative theory” that was an “essential ingredient in its becoming a world religion” (p. 61). By it Israel’s chosen people became, in the Church, the whole of the human race, Israel’s codes and laws were reread as pointing to Jesus as promised Messiah, and “every event of the history of the Old Testament could be simultaneously read as world history and as the key to contemporary events” (p. 60). Regarding these phenomena, Auerbach (1959) stated,

Figural interpretation changed the Old Testament from a book of laws and a history of the people of Israel into a series of figures of Christ and the Redemption – so Celtic and Germanic peoples, for example, could accept the Old Testament as part of the universal religion of salvation and a necessary component of the equally magnificent and universal vision of history conveyed to them along with this religion. (p. 28)

In the Christian tradition (sans Jewish economy of interpretation by appropriation), history was teleological and providentially ordered (Auerbach, 1959). This view found its way into the traditions of narrative interpretation of Western civilization and produced meanings that “reflect in microcosm major shifts of political and social power over the last two thousand years” (Prickett, 1996, p. 51). Such was our oriental heritage that the “English language found itself shaped and even dominated by the terms and figures of a book inherited from another time, culture and place” (p. 70, 72). But this dominance would be challenged.

By the time of the Renaissance subtle fractures had occurred in the biblical monolith allowing it be recognized as supreme morally but which also acknowledged the “literary supremacy” of the classics (Prickett, 1996, p.76). However, in the migration of narrative interpretation from East to West, by the 1800’s the Bible had “replaced the classic as a model of literary form” (p. 79). This is not to say that Western civilization tilted to theocracy, it did not. But that the tacit understandings of how narratives were to be apprehended bore the indelible marks of those earlier periods when the Bible was considered a metatype” of “literary form... invoked to encompass and give meaning to all other books.” Curiously, as acceptance of the Bible as literary form broadened, its historical accuracy was questioned. This questioning led to new understandings about the Bible as literature and the ways its narrative traditions were assimilated.

In a testimony to the acceptance of the Bible’s narrative form while rejecting its historical accuracy, German and French scholars of the early nineteenth century sought to expunge Christianity of “Semitic features” while retaining a hoped for and appropriated Hellenized faith (Prickett, 1996, p. 71). This was

preceded by the fractures representing acceptance of duality in authority within human thought and that had continued since the Renaissance. In this vein are the writings of Richard Simon who, in the seventeenth century, applied to the Bible the criticisms being developed for classical texts (Prickett, 1996). By the eighteenth century the dialogic plurality of the new novel form had impacted the reading of scripture. What happened, said Prickett, is that the “Bible-in particular the Old Testament-ceased to be read as though it spoke with a single omniscient dogmatic voice, and began instead to be read as dialogue, with a plurality of competing voices.” By reducing what had been “an essentially polysemous narrative, with many threads of meaning,” to a single story the narrative took on the force of being historical (p. 108).

Historiography

The broadness of narrative entails that it both convey history and is its subject. Historiography deals specifically with the methodology guiding historical research and its writing based on a critical analysis, evaluation, and selection of authentic source materials and composition of these materials into a narrative (historiography, n.d.). In the discussion that follows historiography refers to the creation of this history as well as the necessity of its creation by and for human actors.

The word “narrative,” said Abbot (2002), “goes back to the ancient Sanskrit ‘gna,’” a root term that means know and comes to us through Latin words for both knowing (gnarus) and telling (narro). In human discourse, verbal narrative has been and is the universal means for both knowing and telling (Martin, 1986). As such verbal narratives serve as a digression from the larger narratives of everyday life. When narrative discourse concerns the past it is but a retelling of story (Lowe, 2000). It follows then that in telling stories authors “tend to interpret events succeeding each other in time as events with a causal connection” (Herman & Vervaeck, 2001, p. 12). That is, what is told and what is read must have a sense of coherence in both time and space, cosmically and socially (Kermode, 1979).

The sense of and need for coherence results, at least in part, from the desire to see ourselves in story. Lowe (2000) suggested as much when he said one important strand of historiographic theory approaches narrative history as “fundamentally a mode of rhetoric.” This rhetoric is developed as past events are related in the direct speech of the first person even though access to those words could not be available. History, in this mode, becomes intertextual and epic. In the one meaning is appropriated to actions and events; in the other audiences, as well as authors, relive the past in what is both a telling and creation of history (p. 90).

Rather than being merely another form of narrative, literature from history (Bennett, 1990) is the way humans make sense of the world, the object of which is a story that makes sense of our own actions. In this way, “all history is one fragment or segment of a unique world of communication” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 151). Conversely, Cebik (1986) urged restraint of the human capacity to narrate seeing in it the potential loss of factual mooring. He warned that “if we ignore history’s regulative commitment to telling the truth... to being bound within the limits of reliable evidence,” the narrative form would make history “no more than a variant of literature” (p. 59). In this vein is Sommer (1990) who saw in narrative the ability to intervene in as well as construct history.

In the main, however, the communication of history through narrative is concerned with the factual representation of events and sequence (Berthoff, 1970). The effort is to tell what happened “according to the discoverable testimony about it and by means of certifiable techniques” (p. 270). Yet in the modern and post-modern era, history thought of in this way is at a disadvantage. It is so because

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the narrative influenced sense of reality by which we live demands greater ability to present fully the potential of human life, a fullness that strict inquiry into the past cannot provide (Berthoff, 1970). Even so, history is a story that in our desire to achieve a totality of experience competes with those of fiction and myth.

Although truth and not fiction or myth is the structure of historical narrative (Barthes, 1974), the malleableness of narrative to incorporate narrator and naratee in ever changing modes places the history it relates between a “what I think happened” and a “what happened.” Ultimately these are truth claims that from the perspective of the text’s author are true: either in what the events and sequence mean or in fact. For Kermode (1979) this distinction was thought of as between the meaning of something or “what is written” and the truth of a narrative as “what is written about” (p. 119).

Is It Reliable?

For Bal (1997) narrative may not reliably convey history. He held that in narrative historical events are always presented and a “point of view is chosen, a certain way of seeing things, a certain angle, whether real historical facts are concerned or fictitious events.” (p. 142). Point of view has its source in Plato (trans.1992) as diagesis in the “presence of a narrative voice outside and beyond the direct speech of the characters” (Lowe, 2000) or as mimesis in drama (p. 18). Constituting the two degrees of separation inherent in every narrative, the difference between digesis and mimesis equals the difference between “telling and showing, between summary and scene” (Herman & Vervaeck, 2001, p. 15). Imposing a point of view upon a story allows authors to choose and change who hear the story and how it’s heard; whether that story is told (digetic) or shown (mimetic) (Lowe, 2000). Booth (1961) demonstrated this in his analysis of Jane Austen’s “Emma.” He held that by having the reader hear the story somewhat through Emma’s voice, Austen elevated her character’s shortcomings into a touchstone for sympathy instead of revulsion. Those who plot our stories, then, hold sway over the shape and meaning of what is told (Ricoeur, 1984). White (1973) agreed saying that historians compose a history by emplotting its events according to a particular view.

“History generally relies on narrative conceived as a form of explanation,” said Bevir (2000, p. 13). For Ricoeur (1984) this is Aristotle’s one because of the other and forms the basis of narrative plot. The narration of history, in this view, is uncoupled from chronology, or at least not dependent upon it, and becomes a work of judgment (Ricoeur, 1984). That is, real events did occur but their ordering and the narrative’s dependency on time (Heise, 1997) may slip in favor of a given meaning the narrator wishes to communicate. This “explanation by emplotment,” Ricoeur (1984) continued, “becomes part of a new explanatory configuration by linking up with explanation by argument and explanation by ideological implication” (p. 179). Narrative thus employed in the telling of past chronological events is able to change perception of the real by its “hermeneutic interlacing of past and present within an overarching horizon of meaning” (Bennett, 1990, p. 68). For those seeking real event chronology the fear remains, however, that narratives are formed in the fancy of the writer (Bevir, 2000).

Martin (1986) held that history, until the end of the eighteenth century, was considered part of literature. By saying that, “many of life’s incidents lack clearly identifiable causes, and our mania for understanding leads us to make up explanations where none are in fact possible,” (p. 60) he posited the author of modern history attempts to explain what has happened the same as does the author of fiction. In his view the two authors faced a similar problem: “that of showing how the situation at the beginning of a temporal series leads to a different situation at its end” (p. 72). On the part of the historian this is not capriciousness but necessity as the facts at his or her disposal either overwhelm

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with volume or abandon in their starkness. It is the quantity of historical data that mandates history be created and occurs when the historian, by taking stock of his or her audience and aware of what is of significance to them and the social structures that mediate meaning, forms a hypothesis that determines not only what happened but why (Martin, 1986).

Is It Meaningful?

Since we desire to have an awareness of the “full present possibilities of corporate human life” and the method of historical inquiry and explanation is “inadequate to our narration-ordered consciousness of reality,” it becomes essential we construct our past (Berthoff, 1970, p. 274). Consequently, history competes with fiction for completeness resulting in a history that has been altered to accomplish our own ends. Berthoff referred to this penchant of humans to narrate as the desire to leave behind an artificial account that tells our story according to our view of it. In a similar vein is Currie (1998) who stated,

History and literature are discourses that construct rather than reflect, invent rather than discover, the past. It is a recognition that the history carries with it the values and assumptions imposed on it by narrative exclusion and plot, so that historical knowledge often unwittingly subscribes to those values while assuming some transparent access to the past. (p. 88)

If as Martin (1986) suggested, “we impose a pattern on the past so that we can tell a coherent story about it,” (p. 43) then that pattern at least contains what we value, what is of significance, and a temporal sequence that is meaningful (Lowe, 2000). Such historical constructions determine how we see our world, past, present, and future as well as unify what has happened into a cogent meaning (Bennett, 1990; Cebik, 1986). For humans, time is meaningless without narrative to reveal it. Far from a literary genus alone, narrative, finds its source in the human experience, explicating and endowing with meaning.

As the “organizing principle for human action,” (Riessman, 1993, p. 1) narratives, historical or romantic, provide meaning for human actors. These constructions combine with what Levi-Strauss termed “pre-existing structure” (1963, p. 202), that is, the life stories that define life itself (Riessman, 1993). Martin termed this underlying sympathetic bundling of human cognition “deep structures” saying that they likely are patterning agents for the surface stories that comprise our narratives (1986, p. 99). For Levi-Strauss (1963) who seminally posited that “pre-existing structure” (deep structures) in the psychic life of all humans comprises the unconscious, their patterning ability is de-facto. These structures, he said, are by that same unconscious imposed “upon inarticulated elements which originate elsewhere—impulses, emotions, representations and memories” (pp. 202-203).

If awareness of communal life’s proscriptions is the pre-existing structure of the unconscious, personal memories are elsewhere. Levi-Strauss held they were in the preconscious. Here, in the space of not always available recall, we collect the “vocabulary of our personal history” yet aware of our memories only as the unconscious structures that have been stored into language. Because pre-existing structures are few in number and universal to all humans but language is infinite, we “understand why the world of symbolism is infinitely varied in content, but always limited in its laws” (Levi-Strauss, 1963, p. 203). The intimation of Levi-Strauss (1963) that memory unless told is non-memory comports with the universal tendency of humans to voice memory as the “representation of identity” either personally or in groups (Currie, 1998, p. 2). This thought is expressed by Bal (1997) who said, “the interpretation of metaphor as mini-narrative yields insight, not into what a speaker means, but into what a cultural

community considers acceptable interpretations” (p. 35) and Bennett (1990) who said “there exists a universal tendency for all experience and textuality to be transcoded into the totalizing narratives of religious systems or philosophies of history” (p. 212).

Ricoeur (1984), borrowing from Schapp whom he cited, used the expression “entangled.” By this he meant the “prehistory of a story” whose beginning, chosen by the narrator, gives the larger story background. “This background is made up of every lived story with every other such story” and are where our stories have origin (p. 75). Lowe (2000) held that “stories, like other kinds of mental and cultural structure, are organized and understood through syntactic mechanism similar to those of natural language” (p. 10). Abbot (2002) said that the pervasiveness of narrative gives rise to its being thought of as a “deep structure” or that “capacity genetically hard-wired into our minds in the same way as our capacity for grammar” (p. 3). As the origins of narrative are in orality (Ong, 1982) so too it seems are those of the social self (Martin, 1986). Through story our actions become sensible (Lowe, 2000) and our history restated to a version of our liking (Bennett, 1990; Berthoff, 1970). Perhaps unaware of the evolutionary pre-disposition that it be so (Donald, 1990), we nonetheless live within narrative’s structure and by it organize our living (Abbot, 2002; Levi-Strauss, 1963; Riessman, 1993). Here we live and act and in those processes contribute evidence to the supposition that to be human is to narrate (Herman & Vervaeck, 2001; Kermode, 1983).

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