

Narrative and Identity

Edited by Jens Brockmeier
and Donal Carbaugh



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Narrative and Identity

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Volume 1

Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture

Edited by Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh

Narrative and Identity

Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh

Narrative and identity: The conference and charge

The starting point of this book was a conference on narrative and identity that took place at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies (IFK) in Vienna, in December of 1995. Scholars from psychology, philosophy, social sciences, literary theory, classics, psychiatry, communication, and film theory gathered to explore, from the vantage points of their disciplines and their individual work, the importance of narrative as an expressive embodiment of our experience, as a mode of communication, and as a form for understanding the world and ultimately ourselves.

Indeed, a central issue around which almost all presentations and discussions revolved was the question how we construct what we call our lives, and how we create ourselves in the process. The question of what type of construction this is proved, thus, to be intermingled with the question of what type of self is being created in this construction. The various approaches to these questions and to possible answers outlined at the conference and in this book focus on the process of autobiographical identity construction. What all of them highlight is that this construction of self and life worlds draws on a particular genre of language usage: narration.

Not many questions in Western literature and thought have a longer, deeper, and livelier intellectual history than how we give meaning to our lives — and how, in doing so, we construct our selves as *Gestalten* in time, as personal and cultural beings. But this question is newly alive today, for modern scholarship in various disciplines has brought new challenging perspectives to our understanding of human identity construction. These are the perspectives of narrative study. In dealing with them, the Viennese conference addressed a number of new (and old) problems that, we believed, deserve not only more attention but

also continual reflection, study, and discussion. In fact, the Conference initiated such reflection, study, and discussion among its participants, and we are pleased to present with this publication some of the outcomes.

As a result of the Conference and its subsequent discussions, almost all papers collected here underwent far-ranging elaborations. Also, we have decided to include a difficult-to-find essay by Jerome Bruner, which formed the basis for his Conference talk. Bruner's essay has become a point of reference in many discussions included here and elsewhere. Further, two additional chapters (each jointly written by two Conference participants) have been added, as well as two invited chapters by Kristin Langellier and Jerome Sehulster. Both scholars present results of extensive case studies that shed new light on the relationship between narrative and the emotive and evaluative dimension of identity construction, an interplay that, as we will see, proves to be of central importance for what is at stake here.

Worlds in narrative

The notions of identity and narrative stand for two large areas of intellectual problems that have been studied in a variety of disciplines and from diverse theoretical points of view. Oddly enough, given the long tradition of these studies, there have been few and rather accidental connections between the areas of inquiry concerned with either identity or narrative. Consider, for example, psychology, on the one hand, and literature and literary theory, on the other hand. While the psychological investigation of human nature has claimed a particular competence for subject matters like memory, mind, and the self, countless texts of literature and literary criticism have been exploring the linguistic nature of the same aspects of human existence. In doing so, however, both approaches have almost entirely ignored each other. And that is no wonder, as literary critic Daniel Albright (1996) remarks, because they only seem to be concerned with the same subject. In reality, their intellectual interests as well as their concepts of human nature are fundamentally different. "Literature", Albright writes, "is a wilderness, psychology is a garden" (p. 19). Albright claims that literature is fascinated by undomesticated nature with all its irregularities and deformations, while psychology is obsessed with gardening instruments and methodological cleanliness. Indeed, at any dinner of academics from various disciplines, the least probable of all cases is to see a psychologist and literary critic being engaged in a scholarly conversation. And if they do, it

most likely is about “methodology”. While the psychologist might point out that in order to prove that life is short there must be statistical evidence from at least five different experimental studies, a like-minded philologist may refer to at least five quotations from classical authors in order to come to the same conclusion.

It is the idea of this book to narrow the gap between the study of human identity, on the one hand, and narrative and cultural discourse, on the other hand — a gap that in part coincides with the gap between psychology and the other human sciences. The essays presented in this volume show that the focus on narrative is not only useful, but proves to be supremely productive for the exploration of autobiographical memory and identity. We believe that traditional psychological issues of memory and identity may be enriched when they are integrated with matters of language, discourse, and narration.

In developing this line of argument, this book draws on various ongoing developments. Each has been opening up the scope of narrative study, deepening our understanding of the very notion of narrative. In a number of disciplines and fields of inquiry, a new awareness of narrative construction has grown; and it is not difficult to predict that this growth will continue. There is an increasing awareness about two aspects of the narrative fabric of human knowledge and communication. On the one hand, more and more scholars have become aware of the meandering, discursive web of narrative in which all our knowledge — what in German is called *Wissen* and in French *savoir* — is entangled; on the other hand, we have come to see that the same is true for the way we gain or construct knowledge — the German *Erkennen* and the French *connaître*. In terms of an historical epistemology of the human sciences, this narrative and discursive turn stands for a number of attempts to explore new constructionist perspectives that have come into sight as a complement to the positivist paradigm. In what follows, we want to sketch some phenomenological aspects of the inquiries that currently take place in the world of narrative studies. But we better speak of these as “worlds of narrative”, considering the many different communities and cultures of narrative study.

Let us begin with a worldview of narrative that can draw on a long intellectual history: the world of literary narrative and narratology. We are not talking here mainly about historical traditions. There is an unparalleled scholarship with which the narrative fabric of literary production and reception is being examined in hundreds of languages and literatures. Yet, as these fields of inquiry have steadily expanded, their margins have become fuzzy. For a long time, such study has developed the idea that literary texts presume “textual

realities” in a sense that goes far beyond the traditional philologist notion of text as simply the written word. New theoretical and empirical approaches have freed themselves not only from this orthodox conception of literary texts, but also of literacy. Dealing with phenomena of the mind, communication, visual and performing arts, public spaces, material artifacts, and other forms of culture, these approaches have redefined traditional concepts of narrative as well as developed different methodological instruments. Consider the following three examples.

The first, and perhaps most significant, example of a different vision of narrative is the development of narratology and contemporary narrative theory itself. In fact, the traditional project of narratology has undergone radical changes that sometimes make it difficult to remember its beginnings. Narratology emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a particular structuralist way of studying written narrative texts, primarily of fictional literature. Since then, narratology has moved towards an interdisciplinary semiotic and cultural theory of narrative texts, and contexts. Narrative texts, in this view, are all sign systems that organize meanings along narrative lines. This includes visual, auditive, and three-dimensional sign systems, both static and dynamic — such as physical activities like dance and sport events, artifacts of remembrance like memorials and museum displays, social rituals like funerals and public ceremonies, and other cultural phenomena like fashion and landscape design. The narratology of such texts, as Mieke Bal (1997) has pointed out, is the theory of oral and written genres of language, images, spectacles, events, and cultural artifacts that “tell a story”.

This, we think, is an important development of a discipline that came into existence under the name of *narratologie* as a child of French structuralism and as grandchild of Russian and Czech formalism. From the point of view of today’s semiotic, cultural, and “natural” conceptions of narrative — as represented by authors like Bal (1997), Fludernik (1996), Lachmann (1997), Newton (1995), Toolan (1988, 1996), and others — traditional narratology had important contributions to make, but also carried the limitations of classical structuralism. Particularly limiting, these authors find, were its adamant positivistic claims, reductionistic formalist explanations, reliance on generative causal mechanisms, and, not least, an inaccessible idiosyncratic vocabulary, its jargon of technical “scientificity”.

In order to understand these alleged limitations of structuralism, it is helpful to remember what the structuralist enterprise of narratology was about. It can be described by four characteristics. First, it conceived of narrative as a

sort of Saussureian *langue*, a system of invariant forms and rules, ignoring it as *parole*, as language which is effectively used in concrete cultural contexts. As the structuralist narratologist put it: “If structuralism generally concentrates on the *langue* or code underlying a given system or practice rather than concentrating on *parole* or instantiation of that system of practice, narratology specifically focuses on narrative *langue* rather than narrative *parole*” (Prince 1997, p. 39). In consequence, traditional narratology — and this is the second characteristic — sought to formulate what it assumed to lie beyond the “surface structure” of stories: a sort of Chomskyan “deep structure” of narrative whose studies were to reveal universal systems of codes. The classical narratological project, thus, can be viewed as a modern or modernist version of the older attempt to discover a “universal grammar” (Herman 1995). Third, structuralist narratology took linguistics as its explanatory role model, limiting it to sentence-level syntax, rather than focusing upon systems-of-use-in-contexts. And fourth, it aimed to apply universally the analytical model of “duality of patterning”, a model based upon dualistic thought that brought contrastive analyses to structures internal to language.

In contrast, an increasing part of today’s narrative theory, in extending its scope and cultural interest, has distanced itself from the “grand narratives of structuralism” and its focal concerns upon invariant rules, deep structures, sentences, and dualism. For example, Mieke Bal’s intellectual development can be traced in the three very different versions of her book on narratology (1977; 1985; 1997), which nicely reflect the transformation of the field. In her 1997 book, she points out that she has come to see narratology no longer as an end in itself, but rather as an instrument, a “heuristic tool”, that can be, and must be, used in conjunction with other concerns and theories. In this way, narrative analysis turns into an activity of “cultural analysis”, that is, into a form of interpretation of culture. Bal’s project does not have any longer much to do with the formalist theory of structuralism. In fact, her narratology is explicitly laid out as a poststructuralist project that wants “to keep present the procedures of and responsibilities for meaning” in the face of culturally oriented and, thus, necessarily “more ‘messy’ philosophies of language” (Bal 1997, p. 11). She insists, with Bakhtin, on the diverse provenance, the multivocal nature and, with Derrida, the irreducibly ambiguous meanings of any narrative utterance. As a result, in her studies, invariant structures of sentences and linguistic forms give way to variable structures of narrative texts in their cultural contexts.

As a second example of recent developments in narrative and narrative analysis we want to refer to another break with the structuralist project of

narratology that has taken place in sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, and the ethnography of communication. In these studies, it also is the context of structuralism in which we find the starting point of the narratological study of nonfictional and everyday narrative. Many scholars today would assign a pivotal place to William Labov and Joshua Waletzky's essay "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience" that was presented in 1966 at a meeting of the American Ethnological Society and published in 1967 in the proceedings. Significantly enough, the institutional context of the presentation of this landmark study of narrative analysis was neither that of literary theory and narratology, nor of linguistics, but of ethnography, anthropology, social sciences and "applied" linguistic sub-disciplines. In 1997, the four issues of the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* were published in one single volume assessing and reassessing Labov and Waletzky and its importance for the last (and first) thirty years of the field. All 47 contributions made it clear that this classic paper not only paved the way for a systematic investigation of all forms and genres of nonfictional narratives and everyday communication, but it also, in turn, has influenced the study of fictional narrative. And what's more, in the wake of Labov and Waletzky's approach to natural narrative, the seemingly clear-cut borderline between the realm of fictional and nonfictional stories has become blurred. Once freed from dualisms and binarisms, such a distinction loses its foundation. As Cynthia Bernstein (1997, p. 45) writes: "Although any given story might be classified as natural or literary, oral or written, simple or complex, those classifications are not binary opposites, but merely the definable extremes of endless possibilities". What defines the classifications along such continua is not the putative "deep structure" of formal qualities but the concrete contexts of use in which the meaning of a story is created, and in which it takes its very form as a narrative. Taking up the earlier point of Dell Hymes (1986), Bernstein suggests conceptualizing narrative phenomena in terms of "dimensions" or "continua" rather than dichotomies or dualisms.

It is true that Labov and Waletzky were particularly concerned with identifying the overall formal features or "segments" of a well-formed narrative. They believed to have found them in constituent clauses that have a tightly defined structural relation to the narratives they comprise, much as with the structural link between distinctive features, phonemes, and morphemes. But if this project ultimately "failed" — by structuralist standards — to describe the universal structure of a compositional narrative system, it nonetheless succeeded, as Jerome Bruner (1997) emphasizes in his commentary on Labov and Waletzky's paper, in blazing a trail for students who seek to explore situated

uses of narrative structures. To be sure, many of these students today are inclined less to seek such structures through formal “clausal analysis”, and more to investigate them through cultural analyses of the forms through which, and the contexts in which stories are told. Bruner’s (1997, p. 67) suggestion for such analyses is to focus on the “processes of linguistic constructions by which prototype narratives are adapted to different and varying situations”. As we will see in a moment, Bruner’s point echoes anthropological and ethnographic studies of narrative (e.g., Bauman 1986; Hymes 1981; Miller 1994), especially the idea that narratives give “voice” to social relations and locally embedded cultural meanings (Hymes 1996).

As a third example of how traditional conceptions of narrative and narrative theory have changed, we want to refer to the great attention that has been dedicated to an author already mentioned: Michail Bakhtin. The influence of his work has extended far beyond literary theory and philosophy of language, where Bakhtin originally began his narrative analyses. The still growing number of admirers of Bakhtin’s theory of novellistic discourse includes students of language, communication, culture, and mind across all human sciences. For example, ideas about the multi-vocal and polysemic nature of narrative, first elaborated in Bakhtin’s (1973) analysis of Dostoevsky’s novels, have been applied to the study of the narrative registers not only of literature, but also of social life. This has unveiled amazing structural analogies between novellistic discourse, life stories, and autobiographical memory, which led to new conceptions of the (“multivoiced”) mind and the (“dialogical”) self (e.g., Hermans & Kempen 1993; Wertsch 1991). Bakhtin’s ideas can even be linked to a new strand of studies in cognitive sciences, reflected in concepts such as the “poetics of mind” (Gibbs 1995) and the “literary mind” (Turner 1997) that aim to capture our fundamentally figurative way of thinking and communicating.

Bakhtin described the richness of the language of life narratives in terms of tropes (or forms of figurative language) which, he believed, are constituent features of novels. What, in his view, is distinctive about the modern novel, such as its special sense of temporality, polyphony, and intertextuality (that is, every text derives from, and refers to, further texts), is a basic characteristic of the narrative construction of a life. As every narrative self-account is itself part of a life, embedded in a lived context of interaction and communication, intention and imagination, ambiguity and vagueness, there is always, potentially, a next and different story to tell, as there occur different situations in which to tell it. This creates a dynamic that keeps in view actual stories about real life with possible stories about potential life, as well as countless combinations of them.

As a consequence, life narratives, like most literary texts, can be treated as open, without end. They are, as Bakhtin (1981) put it, “unfinalizable”, for life always opens up more options (“real” and “fictional” ones), includes more meanings, more identities, evokes more interpretations than even the number of all possible life stories could express.

In every person’s life there always remain unrealized potentials and unrealized demands, unfulfilled options of identity, as we could say. And it is this dimension of the possible, the fact that “all existing clothes are always too tight” (Bakhtin 1981, p.37), that partly makes living so, well, human. The language of the novel, therefore, is a most appropriate form to express and shape this “un-fleshed-out humanness” inherent in every identity construction. Bakhtin’s theory of narrative discourse suggests a view of human beings as always making themselves, as always able to render untrue any definitive version of identity. He came to view the novel as the genre that offers an understanding of people in just this way. For in the novel, no matter how many views and interpretations of a character it contains, something is always left over — an “unrealized surplus of humanness”, as Bakhtin (1981, p. 37) remarked. Viewed in this way, we may conclude that the study of life narratives is not only wedded to actual and particular human lifeworlds, but turns into a laboratory of possibilities for human identity construction.

The notion of narrative in the human sciences

As we have suggested, there are two developments that have shifted traditional notions of narrative. Both can be traced to understandings of fictional and nonfictional narratives that have taken form in diverse post-structuralist approaches, ranging from literary and cultural narratology to sociolinguistics, conversation and discourse pragmatics. For one, there have been extensive applications of the concept of narrative that have widened the scope and consequently the very nature of the study of narrative. At the same time, there has been a growing interest across the human sciences in treating narratives as the means through which social and cultural life comes into being, an interests that includes the narrative and rhetorical fabric that underlies most of our knowledge, including scientific thought.

Lewis and Sandra Hinchman (1997) point this out in their preface to a collection of essays on the idea of narrative in the human sciences. They note that the turn to narrative as an organizing concept in various fields can be

viewed as a classical paradigm shift, one that leads away from nomological models and towards a more humanistic approach to the study of diverse individuals and groups. The reasons for this reorientation towards a more cultural and historical vision of human reality are, as in every paradigm shift, not merely epistemological, but cultural, reflecting fundamental shifts in societal and academic institutions. Lewis and Sandra Hinchman (1997) observe that many narrativists challenge longstanding psychological and social-scientific efforts of elaborating a body of authoritative knowledge like that of classical natural science. This sort of project seems to them to be somewhat misguided, problematic, even repressive, because it presumes that there could be (or should be), today, a body of indisputable truth: an authoritarian “grand narrative”. In fact, the idea of an abstractly conceived subject of knowledge — a subject who can only exist in the metaphysical realm of “pure thought” — has been increasingly questioned by many social scientist and philosophers (e.g., Gergen 1994; Geertz 1995; Habermas 1992; Rorty 1979; Taylor 1985). Invoking this critical line in their narrative, the Hinchmans want “to reaffirm the plurality of stories that different cultures and subcultures may tell about themselves”. As an example, they affirm the current of “personal narrative” studies, a kind of narrative inquiry that focuses on personal stories that try to resist the grand narratives, adopting a view that “marshals the diverse, historically concrete stories and experiences recounted by non-elite people against the version of reality allegedly sanctioned by mainstream social science and philosophy. Story telling becomes for its supporters an act of resistance against a dominant ‘Cartesian’ paradigm of rationality” (p. xiv).

From the vantage point of the philosophy of science, we can conceive of this anti-Cartesian orientation as part of an even more general post-positivist movement. This trend is associated with further shifts in the architecture of the human sciences, shifts that have been variously dubbed “interpretive turn”, “discursive turn”, “cultural turn”, and — as already mentioned — “post-structuralist turn”. Let us highlight some more scenes in this puzzling picture. Not aiming at a complete account, we can limit ourselves to referring only to few exemplary figures in each of the fields at which we briefly want to look.

Psychology, in this respect, is a particularly interesting case in point. In sharp contrast with the traditionally positivistic self-understanding of academic psychology, the discipline has seen in the last twenty years of the twentieth century the emergence of an amazing sub-field called “narrative psychology”. This development has been strongly influenced by the general trend that we have just outlined. Narrative psychology is not one, well-defined theory or

school. It rather names a theoretical and methodological orientation that aims at examining the nature and role of narrative discourse in human life, experience, and thought (Bruner, J.S. 1986; McAdams & Ochsberg 1988; Rosenwald & Ochsberg 1992; Sarbin 1986). The basic idea is that in ordering experiences, shaping intentions, using memory, and structuring communication, narratives are at work. From early on in human development, narrative practices provide fundamental devices that give form and meaning to our experience (Bamberg, 1997). As Bruner (1990) argued, whenever it comes to matters of identity and, inextricably interwoven with it, autobiographical memory, story-telling is needed. The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others organize our senses of who we are, who others are, and how we are to be related. How we learn to tell such stories, to understand and assess them, and to use particular ones in order to achieve particular goals is, for Bruner (1996), what the “culture of education” is all about.

Not surprisingly, this view is distinct from, and aims to complement the traditional individualistic focus and the mentalistic epistemology of psychology. How a life and, in the process, a self is constructed is a question to be examined in the light of the narrative forms and discursive formats that are provided by culture and used by individuals in certain social events. Viewed in this way, narrative is a central hinge between culture and mind.

Obviously, this “cultural way” of looking at things is not limited to psychology. Already at an early point of the narrative turn, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) set out to show that narration is the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human action. No doubt, a psychologist tells one story of human nature, an anthropologist another. And what’s more, both stories are not only bound to the inherent “narrativity” of their particular subject matter, but each also to a culturally established set of rhetoric and literary devices. For the academic author, as Clifford Geertz (1988) pointed out, these are not least devices of positioning and self-fashioning. Similarly, ethnographer Edward Bruner (1986) has remarked that there is a momentous dialectic between story and experience, and this might be true in a twofold sense. He argues that the production of ethnography is continually oriented toward what he calls the dominant narrative structure. “We go to the reservation with a story already in mind, and that story is foregrounded in the final professional product, the published article, chapter, or monograph. If we stray too far from the dominant story in the literature, if we overlook a key reference or fail to mention the work of an important scholar, we are politely corrected by such institutional monitors as thesis committees, foundation review panels, or

journal editors” (Bruner, E. 1986, p. 146). Bruner concludes that at the beginning and the end the production of ethnography is somehow being framed by a dominant story. Necessarily, this canonical story becomes the matrix of experience according to which the collection and interpretation of narratives “in the field” is being laid out. What we face here, in the end, is a double dialectic between story and experience. It seems that the only way to tackle this, as it were, inescapable hermeneutic constellation is to dedicate great attention explicitly to the “framing” that stories bring with them, and to the “local” narrative constraints that are at work in a cultural world, and explore their relationships to the possibilities of experience. In fact, such works have already begun, early on by Marcus and Cushman (1982), and later by authors such as Clifford and Marcus (1986), and Hymes (1996).

Moreover, there are a number of scholars in various social sciences who have especially reflected upon narrative frames at work, seeing narrative both as an organizing concept or a “root metaphor”, and as a methodological orientation from which to study social life. For example, in rhetoric and communication studies, Walter Fisher (1989) has suggested that all symbolic action can be understood as part and parcel of stories, in that such action is grounded in particular histories and cultures with narrative formulations creating a rhetorical reserve of those very histories and cultures. As a result, narrative is erected upon a universal value-logic of presumable “good reasons” that itself presumes particular beliefs and actions as a condition for its production — a view that is quite similar to Jerome Bruner’s idea of narrative as the very fabric of “folk psychology”. All of this, as Fisher argues, is, and ought to be, assessable through a basic human capacity, the ability of people to utilize a rhetorical logic of narration. All symbolic interaction, including its countless genres of discourse, therefore, could (and should) be read into a larger narrative, constructed by the analyst in order to provide an account of the particular values and logics that are present in the symbolic action of concern. By specifying beliefs and reasons that are symbolically active, the analyst can formulate narratives as a way of revealing how values and rationalities are pressed into rhetorical service. This is done in Fisher’s case by constructing a “logic of good reasons”, in Bruner’s, by positing a folk psychology of “narrative prototypes”.

These perspectives on narrative have also found expression in a particular approach to the study of discourse — including narrative discourse — which has become known as “discursive psychology”. Discursive psychology, as developed by Rom Harré and Grant Gillet (1994), Derek Edwards (1997), and others, combines sociopsychological and linguistic insights with a philosophical

line of argument that finds its origin in the later work of Wittgenstein and the philosophy of “ordinary language”. Jerome Bruner, in a sense, operates similarly, even if perhaps closer along the intellectual lines of psychology. Opening a new door for psychological investigations, he seeks to provide access to a space where traditional issues such as the mind, memory, cognitive and linguistic development become resituated within a larger cultural and discursive matrix. “Narrative psychology” in this sense merges into a new interpretive *cultural psychology* — a project also advocated (albeit in different disciplinary constellations) by Michael Cole (1996) and Richard Shweder (1991). As a result, classic psychological concerns are moved from internal workings of the mind into the discursive arena. Jerome Bruner, Edward Bruner, Cole, Edwards, Geertz, Harré and Gillet, Shweder, and others stand for various approaches that are sensitive to local cultural dynamics, each proposing narrative as a paradigm that promises to explore these dynamics and their sociohistorical groundings.

In conversation and discourse analysis the story of narrative, again, is told with a different, more sociological accent. Here, the focus shifts even more to narrative *in the context of its telling*, to the fact that stories are collective or collaborative productions that not only take place under particular social conditions, but *are* social actions. Harvey Sacks’ (1972) and Erving Goffman’s (1981) pioneering studies played a major role in the emergence of this current of research. Works like Barbara Johnstone’s (1991) and Keith Basso’s (1996) investigation of narrative and place, have integrated such classical sociolinguistic perspectives with ethnographic ideas of mind and self and insights about narrative from social constructionism. Examining how stories activate a personal and social dialectic, Johnstone found that in the narrative process various senses of personal identities and social relationships are constructed simultaneously. Parts of the stories she dealt with weave a robust communal narrative about a city in the American Midwest — Fort Wayne in Indiana — evoking the picture of a “city that saved itself”. Johnstone’s (1991) analyses of *Stories, Community, and Place* highlight the intimate link between narrative and environment, each providing tellers with a variety of themes that express a sense of who they are through the idea of where they are. Stories, Johnstone emphasized, are told — as identities are constructed — in particular places. It is stories that connect the identity of people with the identity of places and spaces; in fact, it is here where the very sense of a local identity emerges and takes shape.

A related work by Kenneth Plummer (1996) enters this scholarly conversation on narrative inquiry with an explicit interest in developing “a sociology of stories”. Plummer studies narrative from what at first sight looks like a particular

thematic perspective. His corpus consists of a rich collection of stories about sexual life. His aim is dual, to show how personal narratives of sexuality are simultaneously personal, social and political actions, and to develop a preliminary framework for a sociological theory of storytelling. Plummer's question is: How does one put a story together about personal sexual experience? More specifically, how if at all do people who have been raped, are "coming out", or recovering from sexual abuse narrate their experiences? How does narrative give a public form to what seems to be most private and personal matters? Plummer works at the juncture of several traditions, combining social constructionist, symbolic interactionist, and pragmatic thought with a conceptual frame that seeks to keep in view the features of story texts and the political conditions of their making. In what he calls the "generic process of telling sexual stories", there is a move from the individual autobiographical story to contestable discourse about individual and social problems and their remedy. Narrative, as it is viewed here, organizes the transformation of sexuality as a putatively private and intimate concern into social and political action.

Similar notions of narrative have been developed in anthropology and folklore, drawing attention to the situated accomplishment of stories and storytelling, treating them as cultural performances. Richard Bauman's book *Story, Performance, and Event* (1986) is a fine example of just this understanding of narrative. Bauman examines the oral performances of stories told by Texans on specific social occasions, bringing into view the relations between the story itself, the events which it recounts, and the social occasion in which the two are brought together. Bauman demonstrates how the investigation of narrative is a study of social and cultural life. His aim, like Johnstone's, is to offer insights into both the symbolic fabric of local lives and the general role stories play in creating and fashioning societies. For stories, as these investigations demonstrate, not only reflect and express social reality, they also are formative of societal life.

Authors like Johnstone and Bauman are influenced not only by Goffman (1981), but also by Geertz (1973; 1983) and Hymes (1981; 1996), other pioneers in the cultural study of narrative and symbolic forms. Both Geertz and Hymes suggested focusing on narrative as a form of symbolic communication in a particular cultural context, as when one tells a story to a particular audience on a specific social occasion — for example, about the great flood in Fort Wayne, or about trading coon dogs in Texas — with the local specifics of these performances themselves being worthy of careful study and reflection. From this angle of vision, narrative is a prominent and potent form of symbolic action, shaped

by historically grounded human communities, socially occasioned in particular cultural and political texts and contexts: a *situated performance* to be read close-to-that-ground.

Whether narrative is an inherent form or part of human actions, or a linguistic and mental form used to describe, reconstruct, and understand human reality, are questions whose discussion has reached a sophisticated level also in history and the philosophy of history. For many historians there is no doubt that while debates over *individual* identity and memory have been dominated by metaphysical and empirical models, *historical* memory has always been a bastion of narrative. In fact, since antiquity until the end of the eighteenth century, no scholar would have seen a particular boundary between history and “other forms of literature” (Koselleck 1985).

But what is the particular narrativity of historical memory (with individual memory being itself a form of historical memory)? What story do historians and philosophers tell about the telling and writing of history and memory? We want to mention only one issue that is subject to a highly controversial debate. This is the question of whether there is, on the one hand, such a thing as a pre-narrative experience, an original experience that is the unemplotted material of memory, so to speak, a kind of raw material on which the structures of narrative are being imposed a posteriori; or whether, on the other hand, our experience is from the very beginning organized in an inherently narrative fashion.

Roughly speaking, we can distinguish two positions in this debate. Hayden White (1987), by many considered one of the modern founding figures of the “narrative consciousness” of history, is one representative of those who claim, in various gradations, that history as narrativization of human events and evaluations primarily fulfils the function of structuring the unstructured. It turns the atomistic chaos of events, actions, and isolated facts into order and gives form and meaning to a reality that, as such, is formless and meaningless. The essential order imposed by narrativization upon the universe of our experience is temporality, which implies the structures of past, present, and future, with all its different chronologies.

One position in the contrary camp is held by David Carr (1986) who agrees on the fundamental time-ordering function of narrative, but contends that narrative is only an analytical form that has to be imposed upon our experience. Carr claims that in as far as all human reality, including experience and memory, is inherently temporal, it also is inherently narrative. We do not have experience if not in a form of sequences that are structured teleologically from a beginning to an end, quite like historical and fictional narrative. Put differently, we do not

have access to reality, including the reality of our own lives, if that reality is not intrinsically narrative. As real life and real historical process, in this view, already include many of the formal qualities of historical and fictional narratives, the grids of sense and meaning do not have to be imposed “from the outside”. Carr’s line of argument draws upon the phenomenological and hermeneutic tradition in philosophy, a tradition of thought that has influenced this debate strongly. Just think of Paul Ricoeur’s (1984/85/91) grand study on *Narrative and Time* that looms widely in these arguments on the narrative structure of time, experience, and memory, situating them within a philosophical field that ranges from thoughts of Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer to that of Derrida.

The focus of the book: Constructing human identity

This theoretical landscape of narrative study provides a background upon which the scope of the essays presented in this volume can be located. The essays included here set out to focus on one particular issue: the relationship between narrative and human identity, and the question of how we construct what we call our lives and how we create ourselves in the process. All authors of this volume share the conviction that the question of what type of construction is at stake here, can neither be separated from the question of what type of identity is being created in this construction, nor isolated from the question of the cultural and historical context of this construction. They also share the assumption that these questions are productively engaged from the perspective of narrative. Moreover, some of the papers in this book set out to show that such a complex and fleeting construction as human identity — the self in time — can *only* exist as a narrative construction. Without the narrative fabric, it seems difficult to even think of human temporality and historicity at all.

The study of narrative, thus, appears to be not just one sub-discipline among others, one that is particularly helpful for our understanding of the twists and turns of human identity. There is a deeper, philosophical point about the relation between narrative and identity. We believe the essays of this volume demonstrate that narrative proves to be a supremely appropriate means for the exploration of the self or, more precisely, the construction of selves in cultural contexts of time and space. What these studies ultimately suggest is that the very idea of human identity — perhaps we can even say, the very possibility of human identity — is tied to the very notion of narrative and narrativity.

We have divided the papers of this volume into three parts. The first part introduces a number of theoretical perspectives on the problem of narrative and self construction. The chapters of the second part explore particular life stories in their cultural contexts, presenting the distinct worlds of a Blackfeet man, a woman who survived breast cancer, and the fictional and real heroes of collective American identity narratives. In the third part, essays focus on specific issues, empirical and theoretical, of autobiographical memory and narrative identity, studying self accounts (fictional and non-fictional) by a composer, a scientist and philosopher, writers, and painters. A summary commentary sets out to sketch a little colloquium among the authors, outlining several questions for further inquiry.

In the first chapter of the first part, Jerome Bruner offers a view of the autobiographical process as a process of narrative self-making. Like all other aspects of “worldmaking” — a notion Bruner borrows from philosopher Nelson Goodman — self-making (or “life-making”) depends heavily upon the symbolic system in which it is conducted, its opportunities and constraints. Bruner explores these symbolic systems as cultural constructions, focusing especially on the construction of autobiographical life narratives. He lists a number of features that characterise modern life stories, discussing several examples drawn from natural and literary autobiographies. Against this backdrop, Bruner brings to the fore a strange contradiction: While the self is regarded, in Western ideology, as the most private aspect of our being, it turns out on closer inspection to be highly social and discursively negotiable. To study autobiographies, in this view, involves not only examining the cultural construction of personal identity, but also the construction of one’s social culture.

All studies of this book draw heavily upon particular notions of narrative. Brockmeier and Harré’s chapter can be read as an introduction into narrative as a new model for the human sciences. They argue that the increasing interest in the study of narrative and its cultural contexts reflects the emergence of another strand of postpositivist method in the social sciences. Drawing on socio- and psycholinguistics as well as on literary and philosophical studies, Brockmeier and Harré offer a working definition of narrative that differentiates it from other patterns of discourse. In discussing various examples, they highlight some of the qualities that have made the study of narrative such a productive approach. But they also identify some theoretical difficulties and possible dangers of which, they believe, students of narrative should be aware. The understanding of narrative that is outlined in this essay lays a strong emphasis on its fleeting character and its particular discursive embeddedness,

qualities, the authors argue, that make it particularly appropriate for investigating the dynamic patterns of human identity.

In his chapter, Rom Harré explores how narrative can structure both singularities and multiplicities of self. His central thesis builds upon a notion of the self as three-fold: “self-1” being a context of perception, “self-2” being a context of reflection, and “self-3” being a context of social interaction. Harré points out that “self-1” and “self-2” are generally singular, with “self-3” being generally plural. These ideas are being applied to the analysis of two prominent narratives about humans and human identities: One conceives of persons as neuro-material entities, the other understands persons as psycho-moral actors. Examining the limitations of both views, Harré proposes their integration within a tool-task narrative frame.

In their study, Freeman and Brockmeier claim that one’s identity, insofar as it is tied to the interpretive appraisal of one’s personal past as it takes place in autobiographical narrative, is inseparable from normative ideas of what a life is, or is supposed to be, if it is lived well. They call these ideas conceptions of the “good life”, drawing attention to the fact that the narrative construction of identity not only has a psychological, social, and aesthetic dimension, but also an ethical one. In discussing distinct cultural and historical genres of life narratives from Greek Antiquity, Christianity, Modernity, and Postmodernity, the essay suggests that, whatever the specific form of the autobiographical process, it will inevitably be conditioned by some notion of narrative integrity. This notion unavoidably encompasses both an aesthetic and an ethical dimension. The authors argue that cultural ideas of the “good life” will affect the degree of narrative integrity that inheres in the stories people tell about their lives and, ultimately, in their identities.

Donal Carbaugh’s chapter presents an ethnographic narrative that is based upon the analysis of several oral texts. The main concerns of his study are to show how the oral texts are embedded in a specific cultural meaning system, and how such narrative can be understood and analyzed in culturally sensitive ways. Carbaugh’s analyses are focused primarily upon a narrative told by a Blackfeet, Native American man, Rising Wolf. The study points out how the particular event in which Rising Wolf’s story was told influences its structure; how that structure implies a particular view of history, memory, and identity; and how the deeper meanings and significance of that structure are dependent not only upon physical places, but also upon a system of cultural discourse that includes ritual, myth, and social drama. As the narrative activates this system of

expression, it demonstrates how intercultural dynamics and cultural preservation, as well as resistance, can be managed today by traditional Blackfeet people.

Carol Fleisher Feldman begins her exploration of group-defining stories by noting a key difference between narratives that students tell about their work in New York theatre groups. She wondered how dramatically different stories could be told about seemingly similar life worlds. Her analysis treats narratives as cultural patterns that can be conceived of as cognitive genres for creating and interpreting experiences. The same is true, she argues, for narratives of extended cultural communities such as nations. National identity narratives are a special case of a “group defining story”. By examining historical themes in American national narratives, from the plots of the romance and the quest, she proposes several properties of national identity narratives. Feldman’s essay shows that national identity narratives, like all group narrative, can provide basic forms through which personal autobiographies gain shape and meaning.

Kristin Langellier examines a series of narratives told by a ten-year survivor of breast cancer. During her ordeal, the survivor, Rhea, has confronted several potent cultural events, in addition to the cancer, radiation treatments, and surgery — all of them, as the essay points out, are deeply embedded in cultural discourses of gender and ethnicity. Rhea responded, in part, by getting a tattoo on her mastectomy scar, writing over the “writings” of cancer and surgery. Langellier’s chapter analyzes Rhea’s story as a “performance of identity” that moves from the lack of agency in getting breast cancer to the forceful agency of getting a tattoo on her scar. Five segments of Rhea’s account are transcribed and analyzed for their individual and cultural meanings, features of performance, and verbal strategies. Langellier argues that Rhea’s narrative performance of identity holds transformative potential for the cultural discourses of tattoo and breast cancer.

Jerome Schulster investigates the “historical truth” and “narrative truth” of an important episode in Richard Wagner’s autobiography. In his *Mein Leben (My Life)*, the composer recounts a wonderful creative “vision” experienced at La Spezia, Italy, in early September 1853. Ever since, Wagner’s vision has been referred to as a pivotal event in the extended drama of the creation of his epic four opera cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Examining Wagner’s autobiographical writings, letters, and other historical documents, Schulster finds amazing discrepancies and contradictions. A detailed analysis of the account of Wagner and other contemporary documents leads to the conclusion that Wagner invented and elaborated the autobiographical account of the vision to present himself, in hindsight, to others as the Genius and Artist, as described by

philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose work Wagner encountered a year after La Spezia. However, Schulster argues, the reinterpretation or even “rewriting” of an autobiographical experience does not necessarily lack “narrative truth”. The account of the vision, like many other accounts in *Mein Leben*, is far less a historical document than a mythical narrative of self presentation. It is part of Wagner’s personal myth, which supports a major component of his identity.

In his study on Jean Piaget’s self accounts, Jacques Vonèche deals with a particularly interesting case of multiple autobiographical identities. The famous Swiss psychologist wrote, during his long life, several life narratives. In each of them he presented himself in different ways and on different scenes to different audiences. The comparison among these different life narratives is revealing. In all of his autobiographies, as the study shows, Piaget is both the same and different: The facts are the same, the anecdotes are similar, but the outcome is entirely different. Autobiography, for Vonèche, is an enormously flexible genre of *Selbstdarstellung* (self-presentation). It varies according to the target audience in function of which the plot of a life and an identity is fashioned. Focusing on two wide-spread autobiographies of Piaget, Vonèche aims at pointing out the different interactions among actor, scene, plot, and audience. Facing different scenes and cultural target-audiences, Piaget changes hats and intellectual identities. This is all the more striking, since the “scientific” Piaget presented himself as a developmental theorist for whom individual development is the explanatory factor in epistemology and psychology.

Brockmeier’s essay tackles three themes. First, it raises the problem of reference in autobiography: Who is the author, the teller of the story, and who is the self behind or in this discourse? Is there a self, or *one* self, at all? Second, it examines the commonsense view that the (auto)biographical gestalt of a life is circumscribed by a natural development from the beginning to the end. This view is closely associated with what Brockmeier calls the “retrospective teleology” of life narratives, the fact that a life, if told in hindsight, seems to have been lived towards a goal, a *telos*. The third theme is the vision of time and temporality that emerges in autobiographical narrative. The author argues that human identity construction is essentially the construction of a particular mode of time, “autobiographical time”, the time of one’s life. To explain his arguments, he discusses the “visual narratives” of paintings, reading examples of portraiture as life narratives. In doing so, the essay makes the point that the history of art since the Renaissance offers a genre of (auto)biographical painting that is not only a fascinating form of pictorial life narrative, but also allows for insights into the nature of the autobiographical process.

In the final chapter, Mark Freeman offers a critical reading and summary discussion of the preceding chapters. He identifies four basic dimensions that are involved in the various explorations into the relationship between narrative and identity presented in this volume: the *historical*, *cultural*, *rhetorical*, and *experiential* or *poetic* dimension. In focusing on some key concepts that emerge from the discussion of these dimensions — “autobiographical consciousness”, “narrative imagination”, and “narrative connectedness” — Freeman suggests seeing the identity of the self as a unique narrative style, a style embodied in our life narratives. Taking this idea one step farther, he argues that there is a form of “literariness” that is in a distinct sense built into the fabric of life. Viewed in this way, the question of identity and narrative merges into the question of life and narrative. In fact, as Freeman concludes, we might speak of the poetic dimension not only of the narrative construction of identity, as it takes place in autobiographical narrative, but of experience itself.

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PART I

Narrative and Self Construction

Theoretical Perspectives

CHAPTER 2

Self-making and world-making

Jerome Bruner

I want to speak with the voice of one who takes seriously Wittgenstein's statement that the function of the philosopher is to help the fly out of the bottle. I am the fly. The philosopher who has helped me most whenever I found myself trapped in the Wittgensteinian bottle is Nelson Goodman. I propose to set forth some conjectures and hypotheses that need particularly to be elucidated by a strong philosophical mind. They all have to do with a subject that is deceptively simple: how people give account of themselves or, in its broader form, what they do when they set forth an "autobiography".

In autobiography, we set forth a view of what we call our Self and its doings, reflections, thoughts, and place in the world. Now, just what the referent is in such discourse is an extremely difficult matter to specify. And it is to some of these difficulties that I want to address my attention. I should say, by the way, that my reflections are not all hypothetical. I have what in modern jargon is called a database. We have been involved, a group of us in New York, in gathering spontaneous, non-artful, if there is such a thing, autobiographies from ordinary people. We solicited volunteers and simply asked them: "Tell us the story of your life". We assured them first that we were not clinicians but that, nonetheless, we would like very much to find out, using very Goodmanian language, how they constructed a picture of their lives. An odd thing happened. We interviewed a man, and then interviewed his sister whom he had "recommended" to us, and then she said, "You know my other brother would like to be interviewed too", and before long we had interviewed all the members of the same family: two grown daughters and sons, the father and the mother. Perhaps for the first time in human history — at least I could find no report in the literature of anything comparable — we had interviewed separately six members of the same family, all of whom had, if I may be forgiven the expression, "psychic realities" that somehow impinged upon each other. It was the material of *un roman familial*.

At one point in the proceedings, I was having lunch with an old friend, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and asked him what a family is, from an anthropological or ethnological point of view. Professor Geertz replied, “Well, a family is, in the first place, a system designed for keeping centrifugal forces from working within a group of people who have to stay together”. I found this a “cool” and useful way of looking at the matter — cool, in the sense that family life is such a heated process ordinarily. It was then that I began to realize, concretely, to what degree the construction of selves and of the “lives” of people within a family (or any other close group) consists of just such an anti-centrifugal negotiation of roles.

But the negotiations in question, it soon appeared, were not, as it were, *ex nihilo*. Rather, they were patterned into something that I can only call genres — fairly easily recognizable literary genres. There must, then, be some deep sense in which Henry James was right when he said that adventures happen to people who know how to tell about them. If he is correct, he must be profoundly so. To what degree is one impelled, once one launches on a genre account of oneself, to stay with it forevermore? We shall return to that issue presently. But let me first go back to the beginning and discuss more freely the curious process by which people construct what we call “a self” and “a life”.

Not so terribly long ago, certainly at the turn of the century, the process of self-creation did not seem to bother students of autobiography very much. The great volumes by Georg Misch that appeared prior to the first World War had other concerns. He was interested in “lives” in so far as they represented exemplary and representative expressions of the culture. A contemporary, touched by the doubts of postmodernism, can only be astonished by what one reads in Misch’s volumes. To begin with, how was he able to judge what was representative of any era? And why was he so little interested in the epistemological issues involved — both for himself and for the “exemplary and representative” men (he is, of course, very male-oriented)? How did he deal with the fact that there were *inventions* in autobiographical form that were themselves as important as any events in forming the kinds of autobiographies that then followed them? Thomas à Kempis was one such innovator. But it was not just autobiographers who set the new forms, but philosophers and novelists as well — like Rousseau or Flaubert. There were, to be sure, autobiographers aware of the “constructivist problem” — from Augustine to Henry Adam — but most of the writers on autobiography up to the end of the nineteenth century conceived of autobiographical writing as writing about an “essential self”, and as writing about a “life”, in Goodman’s terms, as “an aboriginal life” that was independent

of the process of constructing it. All that was necessary was to capture it, write it, put it down. It was a point of view not far from the conviction that lead well-meaning aunts to assure writers starting an autobiography that “it should not be hard; you’ve led such an *interesting* life”.

Today, the tide has turned completely. We have come to reject the view that a “life” is anything in itself and to believe that it is all in the constructing, in the text, or the text making. If you read contemporary writers on autobiography, like William Spengemann or Janet Varner Gunn, you will find them thorough-going constructionists. Their concerns are with literary-historical invention, with form, with the *depiction* of reality. Like me, they are concerned with the literary forces that shape autobiography. Is an autobiography, say, a *Bildungsroman*, premised on the accretion of wisdom from experience, as a British empiricist might put it? As if, so to speak, one gradually transforms the primary qualities of direct experience into the secondary qualities of higher knowledge.

But it is not only genre that has this forming function, but certain organizing metaphors as well. Take the following instance. One of the participants in our study, when asked about his life, started right off with a metaphoric event that shaped the entire interview. He himself was a published writer, a teacher of English, and had been born in England, in a Midlands town where he spent his childhood and adolescence. Here is how he started: “My parents ran a small hotel on the edge of a small Midlands town. When I was born, they called the obstetrician. The obstetrician, finding that I was having difficulty breathing, raised me by my heels, slapped me on the back, and broke two ribs. You see, I had osteoporosis. Rather like the story of my life: people breaking my bones in the interest of helping me.” He never returned to that episode again or even repeated those terms. Yet, each of the turning points in his life (I shall return to turning points later) contained a variant of that same metaphoric theme: harm coming to him by dint of another’s good intentions. And so we began asking what role a genre or a metaphoric theme serves in a life account. Let me dwell on that problem for a moment.

What after all is an autobiography? It consists of the following. A narrator, in the here and now, takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name. He must by convention bring that protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the protagonist and the narrator eventually fuse and become one person with a shared consciousness. Now, in order to bring a protagonist from the there and then to the point where the original protagonist becomes the present narrator, one needs a theory of growth or at least of

transformation. You need a prescription that will allow the callow pear-stealing boy to turn into the thoughtful St. Augustine now caught in a struggle between faith and reason. The boy, of course, becomes an instrument in the telling. His life becomes dedicated to the theory or story into which his destiny is fitted. In stories of this kind, it is not amiss to say that the old adage is turned around. If initially the child was father to the man, now (in autobiography) the man reclaims the role of being father to the child — but this time recapturing the child for the culture by the use of the culture's theories and stories.

There is an interesting anomaly here. The theories or stories one constructs about one's growth and, indeed, about the "stages" along the path of that growth are not verifiable in the usual sense that that term is used. The best one can do is to check them against one's own memory — which, of course, is notoriously fallible and open to schematization, as Sir Frederic Bartlett (1932) long ago reminded us — or to check them against "family recollections" (Rubin 1986). Or, indeed, to check them against what elsewhere I have called "culturally canonical accounts" of what growing up and what childhood are about (Bruner 1990). Strictly speaking, such "checking" is guided not by ordinary verification but by a criterion of verisimilitude, lifelikeness. That is to say, "the story of my life" — and I'll come to "story" in a moment — is not composed of a set of testable propositions in the usual sense, but is composed as a narrative. And this imposes constraints that have as much to do with the requirements of narrative as they have to do with what "happened" to one, or what one remembers as having happened. Recall the obstetrician who broke those two ribs. The "facts" (though culturally transmitted) are probably right. The interpretation and its later metaphoric use is a narrative invention that provides continuity both with the received facts and with the autobiographer's conception (or invention) of his "life". But it must also fit the requirements of narrative as a form of organizing experience. What can we say about these requirements of narrative?

Narrative accounts must have at least two characteristics. They should center upon people and their intentional states: their desires, beliefs, and so on; and they should focus on how these intentional states led to certain kinds of activities. Such an account should also be or appear to be order preserving, in the sense of preserving or appearing to preserve sequence — the sequential properties of which life itself consists or is supposed to consist. Now, in the nature of things, if these points are correct, autobiographies should be about the past, should be *par excellence* the genre (or set of genres) composed in the past tense. So just for fun, we decided to find out whether in fact autobiographies

were all in the past tense — both the spontaneous ones we had collected and a sample of literary autobiographies.

We have never found a single one where past-tense verbs constituted more than 70 percent of the verbs used. Autobiographies are, to be sure, about the past; but what of the 30 percent or more of their sentences that are *not* in the past tense? I'm sure it will be apparent without all these statistics that autobiography is not *only* about the past, but is busily about the present as well. If it is to bring the protagonist up to the present, it must deal with the present as well as the past — and not just at the end of the account, as it were. That is one part of it. But there is another part that is more interesting. Most of the “present-tense” aspect of autobiography has to do with what students of narrative structure call “evaluation” — the task of placing those sequential events in terms of a meaningful context. Narrative, whether looked at from the more formalistic perspective of William Labov (1982) or the more literary, historical one of Barbara Herrnstein-Smith (1986), necessarily comprises two features: one of them is telling what happened to a cast of human beings with a view to the order in which things happened. That part is greatly aided by the devices of flashback, flashforward, and the rest. But a narrative must also answer the question “Why”, “Why is this worth telling, what is interesting about it?” Not everything that happened is worth telling about, and it is not always clear why what one tells merits telling. We are bored and offended by such accounts as “I got up in the morning, got out of bed, dressed and tied my shoes, shaved, had breakfast, went off to the office and saw a graduate student who had an idea for a thesis...”

The “why tell” function imposes something of great (and hidden) significance on narrative. Not only must a narrative be about a sequence of events over time, structured comprehensibly in terms of cultural canonicity, it must also contain something that endows it with *exceptionality*. We had better pause for a moment and explore what this criterion of exceptionality means for autobiography and, incidentally, why it creates such a spate of present-tense clauses in the writing of autobiography.

The two functions of autobiography

An autobiography serves a dual function. On the one hand, it is an act of “entrenchment”, to use Nelson Goodman's term. That is to say, we wish to present ourselves to others (and to ourselves) as typical or characteristic or “culture confirming” in some way. That is to say, our intentional states and

actions are comprehensible in the light of the “folk psychology” that is intrinsic in our culture. In the main, we laugh at what is canonically funny, sorrow for what is canonically sad. This is the set of “givens” in a life. But if it is all “givens”, then there is no individuality, no modern Self. We are simply mirrors of our culture. To assure individuality (and I am speaking of Western culture only), we focus upon what, in the light of some folk psychology, is exceptional (and, therefore, worthy of telling) in our lives.

Now, the only requirement imposed by having to *tell* a life story (even when only invited to do so by a psychologist) is that one tell something “interesting” — which is to say a story that is at once recognizably canonical and recognizably noncanonical. What makes for something “interesting” is invariably a “theory” or “story” that runs counter to expectancy or produces an outcome counter to expectancy. But expectancy, of course, is controlled by the implicit folk psychology that prevails in a culture. It is the case, then, that a story (to meet the criterion of tellability) must violate canonical expectancy, but do so in a way that is culturally comprehensible. That is to say, it must be a violation of the folk-psychologically canonical that is itself canonical — that is, the breach of convention must itself be conventional, like the cuckolded husband, the betrayed fair maiden, and so forth.

Now let me return to the issue of genre raised earlier. I want to offer the hypothesis that literary genres represent stylized forms of violations of the folk-psychological canon. And by this I do not intend to say that genres, as it were, are “copies” of what happens in life. Indeed, as already noted, literary inventions are inspirations to new modes of life, invitations to experience fresh ways of violating the banalities of folk psychology, and we honor the Laurence Sterne and Natalia Ginzburgs, the Virginia Woolfs and Anais Nins as much for their “human insights” as for their literary skills. So just as folk psychology embodies and entrenches the canonical ways of people responding to the world, literature comes to invent and exemplify forms of deviation — and by “literature” I mean as well the literary-intellectual world of great innovators in human “personality” psychology ranging from the exponents of the four humoral types, through Mesmer and the apostles of “suggestibility”, and on into modern times when new and “interesting” noncanonical stories have been invented by the likes of Pierre Janet, Freud, Jung, and more recently Laing and Lacan. And of course, with each new entrenchment of deviation from folk-psychological canon there is invention of terminology which further entrenches the new breakaway pattern — “ego defense”, “archetype”, “introvert”, and so on.

The object of narrative, then, is to demystify deviations. Narrative solves no

problems. It simply locates them in such a way as to make them comprehensible. It does so by invoking the play of psychological states and of actions that transpire when human beings interact with each other and relates these to what can usually be expected to happen. I think that Kenneth Burke has a good deal to say about this “play of psychological states” in narrative, and I think it would help to examine his ideas. In his *The Grammar of Motives*, he introduces the idea of “dramatism” (Burke 1945). Burke noted that dramatism was created by the interplay of five elements (he refers to them as the Pentad). These comprise an Actor who commits an Action toward a Goal with the use of some Instrument in a particular Scene. Dramatism is created, he argues, when elements of the Pentad are out of balance, lose their appropriate “ratio”. This creates Trouble, an emergent sixth element. He has much to say about what leads to the breakdown in the ratios between the elements of the dramattistic pentad. For example, the Actor and the Scene don’t fit. Nora, for example: what in the world is the rebellious Nora in *A Doll’s House* doing in this banal doctor’s household? Or Oedipus taking his mother Jocasta unknowingly to wife. The “appropriate ratios”, of course, are given by the canonical stances of folk psychology toward the human condition. Dramatism constitutes their patterned violation. In a classically oral culture, the great myths that circulate are the archetypal forms of violation, and these become increasingly “smoothed” and formalized — even frozen — over time, as we know from the classic studies of Russian folktales published by Vladimir Propp (1986). In more mobile literary cultures, of course, the range and variation in such tales and stories greatly increases, matching the greater complexity and widened opportunities that accompany literacy. Genres develop, new forms emerge, variety increase — at least at first. It may well be that with the emergence of mass cultures and the new massifying media, new constraints on this variation occur, but that is a topic that would take us beyond the scope of this essay (see Feldman, in this volume).

Turning points

There is one feature of Western autobiography that needs special mention. It relates to what I shall call the highlighting or “marking” of turning points. By “turning points” I mean those episodes in which, as if to underline the power of the agent’s intentional states, the narrator attributes a crucial change or stance in the protagonist’s story to a belief, a conviction, a thought. This I see as crucial to the effort to *individualize* a life, to make it clearly and patently something

more than a running off of automatic, folk-psychological canonicity. I will give an example in a moment, drawn from our “family” of autobiographies.

But before I do that, let me comment briefly on why I use the word “marking”. As Roman Jakobson (1988) put it a generation ago, language is a system not only for communicating, but also for organizing attention. Speaking (in contrast to remaining silent) is itself a way of marking, of drawing attention to that which one wishes to forefront. And once one speaks, there is within every language at every level a highly elaborated system for distinguishing the “marked” from the “unmarked” — what is to be taken for granted as given and what is to be highlighted as new, deviant, special, or interestworthy. So, for example, there are narrative devices for indicating what, as it were, is newsworthy — ways of marking, in Burke’s sense, the imbalances in ratio between the elements of the Pentad. I see the construction of narrative “turning points” as a device further to distinguish what is ordinary and expectable (i.e., folk psychological) from that which is idiosyncratic and quintessentially agentic.

Now an example. Let me present Carl, the eldest brother in the Goodhertz family, the *nom de plume* we use for our autobiographical family. The example concerns his introduction of one of the leitmotifs in his spontaneously spoken autobiography and occurred when he was a schoolboy. He tells us that he went out for the football team, and because he was heavy he made it. During his third game on this Catholic high-school team, the coach said to him, “That end, I want him out of the game. Get him out of the game.” He was shocked and put in a moral conflict. “I decided then and there this was not for me.” So he quit the football team right after the game. In the months following, he spent a lot of time in the library, “brooding”. He tells us that he became much concerned with moral integrity and how you maintain it, given the way the world is. The world is a tough, dirty place where your coach asks you to knock out the opposing end. You yourself must decide what is right in *your* convictions, never mind what anybody thinks.

Eventually, Carl finds a way of “patterning” his deviation from high-school culture — and “finds” is the right word. He finds the Berrigan brothers, becomes active in a neighborhood settlement house, and eventually becomes a Vietnam war protester — which gives his initial deviation a new legitimization, a new narrative structure.

Turning points need more study. They represent a way in which people free themselves in their self-consciousness from their history, their banal destiny, their conventionality. In doing so, they mark off the narrator’s consciousness from the protagonist’s and begin closing the gap between the two at the same

time. Turning points are steps toward narratorial consciousness. Not surprising that, in most autobiographies, they are located at points where the culture in fact gives more degrees of freedom — elbow room for turning points. In America, for example, high-school graduation is one such point. “I’ve always done what my parents wanted. At that point I started thinking about what I was, and I decided that...”. All such passages are marked by a mental verb. This signals an “inside” transformation, a change in intentional state. Had the autobiography been written before the break, you sense it would have been a different autobiography.

So in this sense, too, one recognizes that folk psychology has “written” into it not only that people are directed by their own intentional states, but that these change in patterned ways and at predictable times. And, as for example with adolescence, the literary culture concentrates its sense of invention on the exploration of consciousness and deviation during these predictable and privileged times. And in a mass society one has the impression that the varieties of adolescent crisis become products of a literary/image-making industry.

We see all of these puzzles very concretely raised in the autobiographies of the family we are studying (Bruner & Weisser 1981). Each is, in his or her own way, an expression of the culture. Their individual psychic geography reflects the cultural geography of New York in the late 1980s. But—and here I return to Professor Geertz’s comment about the family as a system for containing and counteracting centrifugal tendencies — the family also serves as a microcosm in which the conflicts of the broader enclave are represented and, within certain limits, contained. For the family, in the case of the Goodhertzes, represents an implicit commitment to a way of life — certain beliefs, desires, intentions that all of them took for granted as “givens”. It is as if they share a morphology of the world and of people. And this shared morphology forms the way not only of seeing others, but of seeing themselves, however different they may be. They distinguish, for example, between the “real world” and “home” — surely a widespread distinction in the culture, but nonetheless a highly personal one for the Goodhertzes. The values for the real world are “street smarts”, as they put it: how to deal with the hypocritical, the ambitious, the exploitative. The values of home are openness, sympathy, forgiveness, neighborhood. Each expresses this geography and morphology in their own way, for each is different, very different from the others.

The father is a man who managed to become a master sergeant in the peacetime army before he was twenty-five (having enlisted at eighteen, illegally underage at that time). He had a rough childhood, with an alcoholic father who

deserted the family, with him having to take over responsibilities too early. His response was to take responsibility, but always to be aware of what *seemed* to be the case in contrast to what the case might in fact be. He played his cards close to his chest, went into plumbing after discharge from the Army, became a trusted and dependable man in the community — but had few intimates. When he married he, like his wife who also had experienced a hard childhood, decided that they would protect their children from the tough times they had known as children. Mrs. Goodhertz was a woman of strong views, “a Catholic and a Democrat”, and the two of them have in fact made a home for their kids — indeed have lived in the same Brooklyn neighborhood now for thirty years, where they have become pillars of the community.

When Carl, the eldest son, becomes a Vietnam draft protester, we see the family culture at work. His father was “hard hat”, but he backed Carl when he became a draft-evader. So long as Carl came honestly by his opinion, that was fine. In the family, each could have their own version of the world if they came by it through honest conviction. But Carl’s stand on the war (like his stand on the football team) was also premised on a belief that his father believed in individual integrity. “We are a highly moral family”, he says in an interview. Believe it too. For in fact, they each define themselves in terms of those private family values of openness, sharing, and forgiveness. They boast that there is nothing they cannot discuss around the Sunday dinner table when they come together. And that is the tribunal where they try out their changing versions of their self-image and their autobiographies. Right now, for example, Mr. Goodhertz is thinking about retiring. He likes his work, and it gives him a needed sense of autonomy and self-reliance. Besides, he feels that he lacks intimacy in his life. It is interesting to see him shaping a new turning point in his life, from which the past will look different. But you sense that it is being designed with the others in mind, that maintaining a version of your life concordant with those of the others in the family is a paramount consideration. Self-making is powerfully affected not only by your own interpretations of yourself, but by the interpretations others offer of your version. One anomaly, of course, is that while Self is regarded (at least in Western ideology) as the most “private” aspect of our being, it turns out on close inspection to be highly negotiable, highly sensitive to bidding on the not so open market of one’s own reference group.

It becomes plain, as one observes this process of self-formation, that it is probably a mistake to conceive of Self as solo, as locked up inside one person’s subjectivity, as hermetically sealed off. Rather, Self seems also to be intersubjective or “distributed” in the same way that one’s “knowledge” is distributed

beyond one's head to include the friends and colleagues to whom one has access, the notes one has filed, the books one has on one's shelves. Yet somehow, there is resistance to such a view in most people. For in our Western culture, one opts for a view of commitment as individual. Yet it has not always and everywhere been so, and one is led to wonder whether there is something "essential" about our contemporary notion of selfhood or whether it will change as much as it has in the past, say, from the Middle Ages to the rise of mercantilism (for a fuller discussion of this point, see Bruner 1990).

Self-construction as cultural construction

Perhaps what remains most stable about the Self as an enduring concept over time, as Charles Taylor (1989) has recently reminded us, is a sense of commitment to a set of beliefs and values that we are unwilling (or unable) to submit to "radical" scrutiny. It is this commitment, of course, that provides the engine, as it were, for the rhetorical aspect of autobiography, a subject we have not considered in any detail thus far and cannot in the compass of a brief essay. But we have touched on it obliquely in noting the "evaluative" component in autobiographical discourse. For "what makes the telling justifiable" is also a commitment to a certain set of presuppositions about oneself, one's relation to others, one's view of the world and one's place in it. So, given that autobiography is also a form of "taking a stand", it is perforce rhetorical. And when one combines the rhetoric of self-justification with the requirements of a genre-linked narrative, one begins to come very close to what Goodman describes as "worldmaking" in which the constructed Self and its agentive powers become, as it were, the gravitational center of the world. And the force that relates the center to the rest of the world is a commitment that endures over time — a commitment that ensures a certain stability in self-conception, but also permits the autobiographer to maintain a sense of alliance with others — alliance and opposition as well. For as both Taylor and Henri Tajfel point out, defining the Self and its allies also defines those who are in the out-group, and as Tajfel (1978, Part 1) has so brilliantly demonstrated, there seems always to be a degradation of the out-group that has a special role, by contrast, in defining one's own qualities and the qualities of those with whom one is allied, one's in-group.

In this sense, autobiography (like the novel) involves not only the construction of self, but also a construction of one's culture — just as Geertz (1988) assures us that writing anthropology also involves a kind of autobiography. It is

interesting to contemplate the Romantic stereotype that insists that one can “find” one’s Self only by withdrawing from the world — as with the 1970s undergraduates who would ask for a leave of absence to go live in a village in Maine or Nepal or the Greek Islands in order to “find themselves”. I think this is a lingering vestige of the notion of an “essential” self that has a being independent of the culture in terms of which one navigates the world. It is a great puzzle, examining actual autobiographies and the process of their construction, how it is that such isolating concepts can survive the actual experience of self-accounting. To revert again to one of Goodman’s points about worldmaking, it is surely clear that the criteria of “rightness” for a constructed world have very little to do with the usual criteria for establishing “truth” either by correspondence or by congruence. Rather, rightness appears to be pragmatically controlled — it is what one can live with among those with whom one interacts in the setting where one must operate.

One final word about the development of the self-concept in different cultures under different conditions of life. It is a vast topic, and one not very well studied, though the literature on the subject is voluminous. A group of us, under Katherine Nelson’s leadership, have recently published a study of one child’s after-bedtime soliloquies — a good many of which are quasi-autobiographical. The soliloquies extend from Emmy’s eighteenth month to her third birthday (Nelson 1989). What is apparent from that work and from other recent studies is that self-construction begins very early and is a strikingly systematic process that is deeply enmeshed with the mastery of language itself — not just its syntax and lexicon, but its rhetoric and its rules for constructing narrative. Like all other aspects of worldmaking, self-making (or “life-making”) depends heavily upon the symbolic system in which it is conducted — its opportunities and constraints. I would like to end with the comment that Nelson Goodman’s constructivism arms one well to appreciate the complexities of self- and life-making. And I hope that in the course of these remarks I have indicated some of the ways in which his ideas can be put to work in this domain.

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CHAPTER 3

Narrative

Problems and promises of an alternative paradigm

Jens Brockmeier and Rom Harré

Over the last two decades narrative has become the subject of a great number of new investigations. Many of them share the view that at stake is not just a new empirical subject of research — the stories children tell, dinner party discussions in different social settings, recollections of illness and of travels abroad, the rhetorics of science, autobiographies and other self accounts — but a new theoretical approach, a new genre of philosophy of science. The increasing interest in the study of narrative suggests the emergence of another strand to the post-positivist paradigm and a further refinement of interpretive methodology in the human sciences. It seems to promise more than a new linguistic, semiotic, and cultural model. In fact, what has been called the discursive and narrative turn in psychology and other human sciences is to be seen as part of larger tectonic shifts in our cultural architecture of knowledge following the crisis of the modernist episteme. In most disciplines the positivist philosophy that led to serious misunderstandings of science has been sharply criticized, opening up new horizons for interpretive investigations which focus on social, discursive and cultural *forms of life*, as opposed to a futile search for universal laws of human behavior. In the wake of these changes, the forms and genres of narrative have especially attracted attention (e.g., Polkinghorne 1987; Bamberg 1997a; Hinchman & Hinchman 1997). Why narrative has become such an almost emblematic issue of the new style is the first question we want to deal with in this paper.

The problem of accounting for the dynamic patterns of human behavior has seemed to be nearer a solution through studies of narrative than even through such well-known approaches as the role-rule model, script theory, or social-cognitive explanations. We will look at some of the qualities that have made the study of narrative such a productive approach. In doing so, we shall

have to define, and that is to differentiate, the notion of narrative from other patternings of discourse, drawing on literary and linguistic studies, on socio- and psycholinguistics, in developing a psychological narratology. Our next concern will be to identify some theoretical difficulties and possible dangers of which, we believe, students of narrative should be aware. Finally we will outline an understanding of narrative that aims at taking into account its particular discursive embeddedness and, in this way, its open and fleeting character.

The point of departure of the new narrative interest in the human sciences seems to be the “discovery” in the 1980s that the story form, both oral or written, constitutes a fundamental linguistic, psychological, cultural, and philosophical framework for our attempts to come to terms with the nature and conditions of our existence (e.g., Mitchell 1981; Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Ricœur 1981, 1984, 1985; Sarbin 1986; Bruner 1986, 1990; Bauman 1986; Nelson 1989; Schafer 1989; Britton & Pellegrini 1990). It is the intimate merging of these frameworks of interpretation that serves to understand and create the meanings we find in our forms of life. As far as human affairs are concerned, it is above all through narrative that we make sense of the wider, more differentiated, and more complex texts and contexts of our experience. It is essentially this notion that has been both generalized and broadened as well as specified in a wide spectrum of inquiries that include studies on the ways we organize our memories, intentions, life histories and ideas of our “selves” or “personal identities” in narrative patterns.

The scope of the concept of narrative

As is the case with the concept of *discourse*, the use of the term *narrative* has become rather inflationary, even though it has appeared in the context of the human sciences only recently. This sudden attention is somewhat surprising given the long tradition of the study of narrative in literary theory and linguistics. In consequence, the conceptual and analytical force of the concept of narrative sometimes tends to become unclear. To begin with, we shall attempt to outline our view of the concept more precisely. We shall try to sketch a boundary, albeit fuzzy, that demarcates narrative from other discursive patterns. Language is used for all sorts of purposes. To control our analytical task, we shall focus on the use of language to persuade, the focus of Aristotle’s (1959) *Rhetoric*.

The linguistic organization of different kinds of discourse has been subject to many forms of investigation — ranging from those which focus on

phonological aspects to those which analyze the syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, logical, and aesthetic aspects of discourse. Many different ways of picking out units of language have been made use of: The meanings of words, expressions, sentences, speech acts, written texts, and conversational forms of discourse have all been analyzed; the logic of names, propositions, metaphors, and lexical networks has been investigated. However, none of the units implicit in any of these analyses serves to define a level of structure at which the persuasive powers of discourse can be seen to be grounded in a wholly satisfactory manner. Rather, as numerous studies have demonstrated, the explanation of these powers must also make reference to the narrative aspects of persuasive discourses. Narrative, we suspect, is the most powerful mode of persuasion.

Narrative species

What makes a discourse a story? At least as a necessary condition there must be *characters* and a *plot* that evolves over *time*. A great variety of discourse types satisfy these minimal conditions. The species of the genus “narrative” are amazingly manifold and many-colored: folktales, evolutionary explanations, fables, myths, fairy tales, justifications of action, memorial speeches, advertisements, excuses, and so on. The genres and forms of narrative texts appear to be countless. Yet, there are some features which they have in common, whether they are told in monologues or dialogues, literary or ordinary stories, oral or written texts. In its current, generalized sense, narrative is the name for an ensemble of linguistic, psychological, and social structures, transmitted cultural-historically, constrained by each individual’s level of mastery and by his or her mixture of communicative techniques and linguistic skills — our “prosthetic devices”, as Bruner (1991) called them — and, not least, by such personal characteristics as curiosity, passion and, sometimes, obsession. In communicating something about a life event — a predicament, an intention, a dream, an illness, a state of angst — it usually takes the form of narrative; that is, it is presented as a story told according to certain cultural conventions.

Although narratives may shape very individual and situation-specific versions of reality, they apply conventional linguistic forms such as genres, structures of plot or *sjuzet*, the interplay of different storylines, and rhetorical tropes. In doing so the story, its (telling and listening) interlocutors, and the situation in which it is told are linked to an underlying cultural-historical fabric. Put differently, our local repertoire of narrative forms is interwoven with a broader cultural set of fundamental discursive orders that determine who tells

which story, when and where, why and to whom. Is there a pan-cultural narrative mode defining a generic human form of life? This does not seem a far-fetched hypothesis, but the issue needs to be settled by wider comparative studies. What is true is that every culture of which we know has been a story-telling culture.

The generic categories of narrative and discourse

At this point, we must specify the two main notions we use in this account: narrative and discourse. The most general category of linguistic productions is discourse. Human beings communicate by a number of means, including the verbal. Typically, verbal communication occurs coterminously with and not independently of other material and symbolic activities, and it is in this sense that we call linguistic production (as result as well as process) *discourse*. Speaking, writing, listening, and so on are always, so Wittgenstein (1953) told us, inextricable aspects of language games, concrete practices shot through with the uses of words.

A taxonomy of discursive forms

We conceive of narrative as a subtype of discourse but as the highest level type or classificatory concept, in a taxonomy of lower level narrative forms. Under that concept, we locate various subtypes of narrative, some of which usually are found under the more common literary category of *genre*. But there also are discourses that embrace a number of different subcategories or genres simultaneously. A good example is the language of environmentalism that has played a central role in the “greening” of all kinds of public and private life that we have been witnessing over the last two decades (Harré, Brockmeier, & Mühlhäusler 1999). The discourse subtypes in which “Greenspeak” is articulated range from all kinds of natural to scientific, moral, and literary narratives. A full scale study of their linguistic and cultural basis would include communicative activities such as conversation and other symbolic forms of face-to-face interaction (like the telling of old and new folk tales along green storylines in local contexts), cognitive activities such as argumentation and reasoning, expressive activities such as singing and praying, and the production and reception of electronically mediated texts (in a linguistic and semiotic sense). Not all are narratives.

Systematically speaking, subcategories of narrative include myth, folk and fairy tale, natural and fictive stories, and certain historical, legal, political, religious, philosophical, and scientific texts. Each category is to be further differentiated since, for example, not all legal texts are narratives — some are definitions and analyses of legal concepts, which would be quite unnatural to bind to storytelling as a Procrustean bed. Fictive narrative, for instance, includes literary stories (fiction) that embrace forms of prose, like the novel. However, there are a wide range of mixed forms because narratives are also presented in (or as) poetry, drama, traditional and literary epics, travel literature, essays, music, film, ballet, and *mutatis mutandis* in the visual arts and forms of popular culture such as advertisements and fashion. Again, each of these species include subspecies. On the level of the novel, for example, there are genres such as romance, adventure novel, detective story, travel saga and the *Bildungsroman*, all of which are structured around a time-evolving plot.

The Bildungsroman

It is interesting to see how the *Bildungsroman* has become an important genre in the narratives of environmentalism. It serves, for instance, to outline possible ecological scenarios of development that a protagonist (humankind, Western culture, civilization, technological progress, the children of the third world, etc.) is expected to go through. In our inquiry into Greenspeak we also analyzed as subtypes of narrative discursive species such as scientific writing, which at first sight seemingly reports and exemplifies various forms of descriptive logical reasoning. However, a close study of much scientific writing on environmental matters discloses narrative structures more like that of the *Bildungsroman* than a logically impeccable exposition of hypothetico-deductive thought.

Other modes of scientific writing and speaking picked out at the same level of generality of genre as narrative might be making a list, expressing a formally valid deduction, and describing an experimental design. Under “list” as a high-level-type concept we might put as species, lists organized by the size of the entities listed, or by their positions on the supermarket shelves, or (more importantly for the purposes of our study of environmental discourse) lists of species classified by their level of endangeredness. Such a list might not only be a part of a larger narrative structure but also imply or evoke a narration itself, such as the dramatic story of environmental extinctions brought about by the activities of human beings.

There are many other ways of setting up a taxonomy of types of narrative discourse, some at home in literary studies, others in socio- and psycholinguistics and in history. In the wake of the narrative or textual turn in history (e.g., Berkhofer 1997), there are, for example, various suggestions to distinguish types, forms, or genres of historical narrative (or narrative of history). White (1987) and Cronon (1992), for instance, distinguish between “chronicles” and “narrative”, between flat lists of events and historical discourses realizing certain storylines. Distinguishing narratives from lists, chronicles, enumerations, and deductions is just one way of classifying discourses that proved to be useful in our examination of the persuasive powers (and of the problems) of the various forms of environmental discourse.

Difficulties of definition

Despite the seemingly well-ordered classification we have outlined so far, there are at least five reasons why it is not so easy to draw a precise boundary around the meaning of narrative. First, the forms and styles of narrative are, as we have seen, most various and many-colored. Its cultural phenomenology is amazingly manifold and open. Second, there are elements or structures of narrative in most other discourse types, such as scientific, legal, historical, and religious or political texts.

Hybrids

There are specific ways in which narratives are presented. Eco (1994), in focussing on narratological-semiotic aspects, called this form or mode of presentation “discourse”, in addition to the traditional categories of “fabula” and “sjuzet”. Such differentiations help to make clear that the content of a narration does not exist as such but is related in various ways to the structure, form, and purpose of its written or spoken presentation. This leads to interesting hybrids.

To demonstrate the manifold mutual relations between form and content in such hybrids, let us look at a passage from Milton’s (1983) *Lycidas*. It shows nicely that poetic language has some special ways to shape and to create narrative structures, even in a visual way.

In Milton’s *Lycidas*, the numerological center of the poem (by line-count) is marked by the central long line 102. As Alastair Fowler (1970) pointed out, it

is not a coincidence that the middle line of the whole poem also refers to the highest point in the topography of the story landscape. On the analogy of many poems of this time, and in view of a long-standing iconographical tradition, *Lycidas* has a sovereign or triumphal image at this point. This is Lycidas' "sacred head": "Built in th' eclipse, and rigg'd with curses dark." Consequently, the organization of the poem in the second half is even in its spatial order a mirror image of its organization in the first. The first line of the second half continues with Lycidas' "sacred head" that, however, instead of further mounting to its zenith is now brought to its nadir by death working through the mortal bark ("That sunk so low that sacred head of thine.").

In various other forms the poem and other works of the same period display symmetrical patterns around about their midpoints. In this way, they add a suggestive, visual, and spatial shape to their poetic visions, an "architectural façade", as Fowler (1970, p. 179) put it. This mingling of the "genres" of narrative, poetry, visual imagination, and spatial representation is particularly interesting for still another reason. It illustrates the historical, and that is variable, character of what makes up a narrative structure. In modern narrative poetry the repetition of pattern and other formal and symmetrical structures that depict the visual, but static, outline of the content have largely given place to the more dynamic pattern of "the story". It is the sequential, action-oriented and diachronic structure of the story that seems to be more suitable to shape the themes and plots of development, of change, and of progress that become predominant in the nineteenth and twentieth century. In other words, it is not only narrative that mediates, expresses, and shapes culture but also culture that defines narrative. This makes it even more difficult to define narration as such, in isolation from the discursive contexts in which it is put by various cultural conventions.

The variety of layouts that poetry has adopted over the centuries suggest that the traditional assumption that genres are eternally stable natural patterns to which discourse and in particular narrative must conform must be called in question. There is an analogy between linguistic, in particular, literary genres and biological patterns of the "mind". The idea of eternal genres — which can be traced back to Aristotle — was queried in the nineteenth century at about the time that the permanence and stability of organic species was under attack. It would be interesting to explore the connection between Darwin's natural history, historical geology, and the advent of historical philology and comparative literary studies.

Whose is the authorial voice?

A third difficulty is linked to the question of defining the authorship of narratives. Stories, we have emphasized, do not just happen, they are told. However, it is not always clear who and where the teller is. Sometimes the narrator is just one person, dominating the audience as well as being determined by it and the situation in which the narrative takes place. But sometimes the tale is created jointly or cooperatively, as pointed out by Middleton and Edwards (1990) in the study of collective remembering, Pontecorvo and Fasulo (1999) in their research on dinner table conversations in family, Edwards (1999) in emotion discourse, and Nelson (1996) and Fivush (1994) in the dialogical origin of autobiographical stories in childhood. For Bakhtin (1981, 1986), every story and every word is “multivoiced”; its meaning is determined by its countless previous contexts of use. Bakhtin called this the “dialogical principle” of discourse, emphasizing its inherent interindividuality: Every word, expression, utterance, or narrative bear the traces of all subjects, possible and real, who ever used or will use this word, expression, utterance, or narrative.

As these and similar studies have demonstrated, neither can narrations be regarded as an entirely personal or individual invention, as the subjectivist would claim, nor do they simply represent the objective description of the things as they happened, as the positivist wants us to think. Stories are told from “positions”, that is, they “happen” in local moral orders in which the rights and duties of persons as speakers influence the location of the prime authorial voice. They must be heard as articulations of particular narratives from particular points of view and in particular voices. The significance of this perspectivalism is yet to be fully appreciated (Harré & Van Langenhove 1998).

But how are voices being marked? How can they be identified? These are difficult questions because the very authority with which narrative presents its vision of reality is often achieved by obscuring large parts of that reality — for example, as Cronon (1992) showed, by dismissing, suppressing, or ignoring alternative or dissident voices. For Wertsch (1998), this is the power of narrative as a “cultural tool”. Narrative has a tendency to fuse diverse elements such as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results, and other factors into a structured but inherently biased “whole”. This tendency is especially evident in historical accounts, as Wertsch has shown in the analysis of narratives in American textbooks about the origin of the United States. The extent to which important public documents can ignore alternative voices through the adoption of a single and linear storyline has been brought out by

Hughes (1995) in a study of the storylines adopted by school and university texts for World History. These texts exclusively adopt a “development” and “triumphal ascent” narrative format to exclusion of other narrative forms such as myths, the narratives of oral cultures. A case in point are the Navajo myths of origin. Their main plots are based on themes of “ecological process” in which the human-animal boundary is transcended. According to this view, animals and humans form a single coherent social and moral order, an order that takes the form of particular stories. Now, “reformulated” along the teleological storylines of Western narratives of “progress” and “development of civilisation” the Navajo myth of course lose all that make them narratologically and culturally special.

The ubiquity of storylines as organizing principles of discourse

There is a fourth reason why it often is not easy to give a clear-cut definition of narrative. This refers to still another aspect of its ubiquitousness. As we have grown into the storytelling repertoire of our language and our culture since early childhood and use it in the same familiar and spontaneous way as language in general, it has become “transparent”. Like all kinds of ordinary discourse it is universally present in everything we say, do, think, and imagine. Even our dreams are, to a large extent, organized as narratives. In consequence, its taken-for-granted existence can easily be seen as a natural existence, as a natural and given mode of thought and action.

Persistent fallacies in narrative analysis

Narrative as metalinguistic illusion: the ontological fallacy

In his book *The Language Connection*, Roy Harris (1996) argues that much of the metalinguistic framework within which the study of language has been pursued since antiquity has laid a trap. The attempts of philosophers and linguists to examine entities such as words and sentences, as conceived by the linguist, or propositions and meanings, as conceived by the philosopher, are from the outset wild goose chases. Word, sentence, proposition, and meaning are imposed categories. They do not have anything other than a shadowy theoretical existence. From the viewpoint of discourse (and here that means “language in use”), there is no such thing as an isolated sentence or a proposition. However, in the process of being investigated, these metalinguistic shadows have taken on

a stable “real” existence. Their categories, as it were, have materialized into real beings. Harris calls this ontology a “metalinguistic illusion”.

It seems to us that there is an understanding of narrative discourse that implies the same danger, namely, to go through a similar process of transubstantiation, changing from a metalinguistic category into a seemingly real entity. In this way, the form, genre, or discourse type of narrative — which is, strictly speaking, nothing but a metalinguistic category — may be reified and turned into a kind of ontological category.

For certain purposes we isolate a narration by picking out a plot and framing it in the particular composition, the *sjuzet*, of a story. But the identification of the plot and the story composition as identifiers may simply be reflections of one another. The same stretch of discourse might be broken up in many other ways in some of which the story may have no place. To believe that there is really a story “out there”, waiting to be uncovered, prior to the narrative process and absent from its analytical re-construction, we shall call the *ontological fallacy*.

Narrative as description: The representation fallacy

Closely linked to the ontological fallacy is the mistake of supposing that there is one and only one human reality to which all narratives must in the end conform. This belief perhaps arises from drawing too close a parallel between knowledge of the material world and of the social world. The latter is indeed multiple and oscillating, but each version picks out an aspect of the one and only physical universe. According to a wide-spread view, especially in traditional psychology, but also in sociology, literary theory, and other human sciences, there is something out there in the world which is taken to be the reality of human beings. Our knowledge of this reality, and through this reality itself, is represented, among other means, by language. On this view, linguistic representations (be it of “reality” or of our knowledge or cognition of it) often take on the form of narrative, particularly in complex human affairs. We shall call the assumption of a unique and independent human reality that is to be represented in a (more or less) true narrative description the *representation fallacy*.

We must, however, bear in mind that there can be a number of different stories to be told about such complex human affairs as, for instance, a life or one’s identity. As widely discussed in autobiographical research, a life normally embraces several life stories which, moreover, do change over the life course. It is a fallacy to assume that such variety of (auto)biographical narratives differ in

that some are “true” and some are “not (or less) true”. The underlying idea of this fallacy is that there is a kind of gradation of truth values from the one and true story based on documented facts to the distorted and false story, often based on lies and self-deception. Reality, thus, is considered to be some kind of objective, quasi-documentary criterion against which the truth of narrative representation is to be judged. Yet if there were such a “real” life that someone has led, how do we know about this pregiven reality? We should not forget that all that takes on a life is also part of that life. To live is to give meaning to one’s life; indeed, the process of such meaning construction may be viewed as the very center of human life.

Narrative as discursive reality

Patently the two last problems which we have mentioned are closely linked to each other. The first one appears in the tendency to reify the metalinguistic category of narrative; this is the ontological fallacy. The second one is to treat narration as representation or, perhaps, as translation. The representation or translation fallacy and the ontology fallacy can be seen as two sides of the same coin in that both presuppose the existence of a hidden level of prediscursive meaning structures. The narrative variation of this well-know presupposition — Wittgenstein (1953) once described it in its Augustinian version — is that narration is a particular way to mirror these meaning structures.

Suppose instead that we take the very idea of reality in this context as characterizing a particular genre of discourse. That will require us to reformulate our problem in the form of mundane questions such as “What is the narrative process (and its situational context) through which (and in which) this reality is laid out?” and “What are the narrative strategies and techniques that are used to evoke this idea of reality?” Thus, the inquiry does not aim at detecting modes of representation of something that is “out there” in the world, as the naive realist would make us believe; and it does not strive to uncover any hidden or repressed prediscursive or prenarrative state of affairs, a sort of primal ontology — such would be the claim of several narrative approaches in psychoanalysis (Brockmeier 1997).

Following both Wittgenstein’s (1953) and Vygotsky’s (1987) warnings against the view that language could be understood as a kind of transformation, or even a translation, of prelinguistic meanings into words and sentences, narratives should not be conceived as presenting an external version of some

particular mental entities floating in a kind of presemiotic state. To present something as a narrative does not mean to “externalize” some kind of “internal” reality and to give a linguistic shape to it. Rather, narratives are forms inherent in our ways of getting knowledge that structure experience about the world and ourselves. To put it another way, the discursive order in which we weave the world of our experiences emerges only as *modus operandi* of the narrative process itself. That is, we are primarily dealing not with a mode of representing but with a specific mode of constructing and constituting reality, as Bruner pointed out (1991). To study this mode, we must look carefully at the ways in which people try to make sense of their experiences. And they do so, among others, by narrating them. How, then, do they in this way give shape to their intentions, hopes, and fears? How do they come to terms with tensions, contradictions, conflicts, and predicaments? The question, thus, is not how do they use narrative as a means to a reportorial end, but what are the concrete situations and conditions under which they tell stories and in so doing implicitly define what narrative is.

Descriptions or instructions?

In many cases what we take to be a description of some category of beings turns out, on close study of how the relevant expressions are used, to be best treated as a condensed set of rules or instructions for bringing what appears to be an independent being into existence. For instance, a tennis manual may be written as if it is describing what tennis players do apart from the narrative, actual tennis shots and the like; but its function in the tennis form of life is to instruct someone in correct play and in that way to bring players (and what it is to be a player) into existence. Perhaps narrative concepts and narratological categories work in the same way.

If we look at how the words *narrative*, *narration*, and *to narrate* (plus *story*, *myth*, *tale*, etc.) are actually used and if we study the actual practices of narrating, then these concepts begin to look less descriptive and more prescriptive. In our context, the narrative and narratological vocabulary in general often serves as a condensed prescription or guide to how one is to proceed in a variety of practical tasks, such as comparing, relating, grouping together, contrasting, classifying, and so on. These tasks aim at organizing experiences, ideas, and intentions in a discursive order.

Narrative, as we already have emphasized, is all too often used as if it were a word for an ontological type. It should rather be conceived of as an expression

of a set of instructions and norms for carrying out a variety of practices of communication, ordering and making sense of experiences, becoming knowing, giving excuses and justifications, and so forth. Although appearing as a firm and well-defined linguistic and cognitive entity, it should be treated as a condensed set of rules, encapsulating what is coherent and plausible within a given culture.

In this view, then, narrative is the name for a special repertoire of instructions and norms of what is to be done and not to be done in life and how an individual case is to be integrated into a generalized and culturally established canon. Thus, to classify a sequence of speech acts as a narrative is to assign them to a certain range of jobs. “What do narratives describe?” is one question. “What does the telling of a narrative accomplish?” is quite another. Both questions are inextricably linked, as we can see, for example, in analyses of autobiographies and other self-narratives. The impulse to tell one’s life is hardly ever a disinterested urge to record the facts of the case.

Narrative conventions and human action: the problem of efficacy

We have suggested that narrative conventions are immanent in storytelling. The alternative would be to imagine them to be preexisting templates to which stories, to be recognized as such in a culture, must conform. We could imagine a psychology that followed the lines of the alternative picture, in which life is thought of rather like a creative writing course, in which one accumulates a repertoire of literary models before venturing on composition oneself, for example, character development. However, so far as we can see, the promulgation of storytelling skill is not like that at all. Youngsters are not given separate instructions for how to tell a story. Rather they are surrounded from infancy with stories, for which they seem to have an unlimited appetite, not only for the tales themselves but also for their indefinite repetition.

If stories guide life, what guides stories? So, there are two problems to be tackled. Or are they really one? Is storytelling a life episode no different from any other when questions of genesis need to be dealt with? We need to reflect on whether telling a life and living a life are essentially the same kind of thing (Freeman 1993). Perhaps we will come to understand “life” and “life story” as inextricably interwoven in one continuous fabric of meaning and sense (Brockmeier 1999).

This suggests that two closely related theories of how order is created in social life by something like plot constraints will not help very much with the problem of understanding the efficacy of stories. These are script theory

(Schank & Abelson 1975) and role-rule theory (Harré & Secord 1972). Both theories presume a kind of abstraction of templates from experience that are then efficacious in guiding action, much as etiquette books, instructions, and so on are overt guides to producing correct action sequences, be they ceremonies or the actions needed to assemble a piece of furniture. In both cases, there is overt application of a model case, in which action is guided by explicit attention to an instructional discourse. In cases in which people just get on with life in an orderly way, these theories presume that there exists a covert instruction manual. However, neither theory offers any kind of account of how conformity with that manual is achieved. It cannot be by conscious monitoring of one's actions in the light of the instructions because, by hypothesis, there is neither monitoring nor attention to rule or script.

A third theory might be offered on the basis of a refinement of the commonsense notion of an ingrained habit. We do not take special instruction in storytelling and we do not just make them up as we go along, but we are habituated to a wide repertoire of storylines. As already said, we grow into a cultural canon of narrative models. This process of narrative and discursive education begins, as several researchers (e.g., Miller 1994; Engel 1995; Bamberg 1997b) pointed out, when children begin to listen to stories — a process that starts even before children start to talk. From the very beginning they learn how to put their case and make a point (Dunn 1988). If a storyteller has not got the conventions quite right, the listeners will complain, stop listening, jeer, and correct the teller. Getting it right gets their attention. But mere repetition will lead to boredom, at least once the audience has grown up, so the storyteller has to master the delicate art of combining the traditional with the new, the usual with the unexpected, the canonical with its break.

In short, the problem of efficacy is no different in the narrative approach than in social psychology generally. What the relation is between telling and living a life is much the same problem as that between cultural conventions and social order generally.

Some special virtues of the narrative approach to social understanding

Fleeting structures

To outline what seems to us to be one of the main points for studying narrative we want to highlight two special qualities of storytelling. First, narrative is a particularly open and flexible structure that allows us to examine precisely these

fundamental aspects of human experience, its openness and flexibility, traditionally neglected by the human sciences. In our own work we have come to see that environmental discourse, for example, is not only permeated with narrative structures, we also found that these structures and their constituents and elements such as genre, plot, storyline, point of view, and voice are anything but firm and stable forms. They rather appear as amazingly open and adaptable structures that change their organization and features with their discursive context and its underlying social and (as specifically in literature) aesthetic function. The narrative development model of the Bildungsroman, for instance, can be found in Greenspeak texts published by environmental and industrial institutions, by government bodies, and social or natural scientists.

This is a further reason we have come to see the forms of narrative as much more embedded in what Wittgenstein called “grammar”. They are fleeting constellations of forms of life which are best understood within an conception of structure as fluid patterns of action and of positioning. The forms of narrative do not exist as templates to be made concrete but are constrained to take the forms they do by the exigencies of the situations in which they occur. Rather than conceiving of narrations as cognitive, linguistic, metalinguistic, or ontological entities, we suggest understanding them as *modus operandi* of specific discursive practices. Put another way, the term narrative names a variety of forms inherent in our getting knowledge, structuring action, and ordering experience. To study narrative we thus have to examine these discursive practices, their cultural texts and context.

According to this view, it is an essential characteristic of narrative to be a highly sensitive guide to the variable and fleeting nature of human reality because it is, in part, constitutive of it. This makes it such an important subject of inquiry for the human sciences in general and for psychological and anthropological investigations in particular. The study of narrative invites us to rethink the whole issue of the Heraclitian nature of human experience because it works as an open and malleable frame that enables us to come to terms with an ever-changing, ever reconstructed reality. This includes the option to give order and coherence to the experience of a fundamentally unstable human condition — and to change this order and coherence as our experience (or their meaning) change.

Narrative as model

This leads to the second specific quality of the singling out of narrative in the

study of discourse to which we want to draw attention. Instead of being an ontological entity or a representational mode, narrative, we argue, works like an especially flexible model. A model, in most general terms, is an analogue. It links the unknown to the know. It is used in order to explain or to interpret a set of phenomena by referring to a set of “rules” (or schemata, structures, scripts, frames, similes, metaphors, allegories) that in one or another way encapsulate generalized knowledge. We have remarked that the genres and forms of narrative knowledge are highly dependent on the cultural context in which they are used. It is the cultural canon that makes a specific analogue appear plausible and intelligible. At the same time, narratives operate as extremely changeable forms of mediation between the individual (and their specific reality) and the generalized canon of culture. Viewed this way, narratives are both models of the world and models of the self. It is through our stories that we construct ourselves as part of our world.

For most themes and problems raised in the new style of narrative investigation, the world of literary texts and the language of fiction and poetry will certainly remain a productive point of reference. However, the reason for this is not based on, for example, a particular passion of psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists for literature or the arts. Rather, it is the fact that human scientists should recognize that a great deal of our knowledge both about narrative discourse and the interpretive mind is based upon a long tradition of research carried out by linguistic and literary theorists, literary historians, and semioticians and philosophers of culture. A recent example is the extraordinary influence Bakhtin’s works on novelistic discourse (in which he developed his ideas of dialogism, polyphony, and multivoicedness of the mind) have had on a wide range of studies on the linguistic and cultural fabric of the mind (Brockmeier in press).

There is a further, perhaps deeper reason. This seems to be found in one exceptional quality of literature that makes it an inexhaustible field of study for philosophical, psychological, and sociological anthropology. Literature, as all art, can be (and has always been) regarded as a laboratory in which possible human realities can be imagined and tested. The laboratory idea is linked to the view of narrative as a model of the world. To illustrate this particularly experimental quality of fictional worlds we would like to refer to an idea that Eco (1994) has discussed in his Harvard lectures. Eco argued that every fictional world is based parasitically on the actual or real world, which the fictional world takes as a background. When we enter a fictional world evoked by a story and imagine ourselves wandering through the streets of a city or the hills of a

country in which the action of the narrative is located, we behave in this world as if it were the real one; we do so even if we know that it is only a narrative model of it. When Gregor Samsa, one of Kafka's famous creatures, "awoke one morning from uneasy dreams" and "found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect", this certainly puts us into an extremely strange situation. Nevertheless, Kafka's (1993) story *Metamorphosis* is a striking example of realism, not of surrealism. The protagonist — and the reader with him — views his unbelievable transformation, and reflects on it, as if it were an event that occurs according to absolutely ordinary laws. The description of it shows no sign of being unreal or absurd. It just gives a sober and realistic account of how everyone in a normal world would behave to find out what has happened.

Eco showed that the readers of or listeners to a fictional story have to know a lot of things about the real world in order to take it as the correct background of the fictional one. They stay with one foot in the actual world and with the other one in the narrative universe of discourse. This, now, is exactly the way models work. "On the one hand, insofar as it tells us the story of only a few characters, usually in a well-defined time and place, a fictional universe can be seen as a small world infinitely more limited than the actual one. On the other hand, insofar as it adds some individuals, properties, and events to the whole of the actual universe (which serves as a background), it can be considered greater than the world of our experience. From this point of view, a fictional universe doesn't end with the story itself but extends indefinitely" (Eco 1994, p.85).

Eco aimed to explain what, we believe, is responsible for the laboratory quality of narrative fiction. As he pointed out, fictional worlds are parasites of the actual one, the world of our everyday affairs, "but they are in effect 'small worlds' which bracket most of our competence of the actual world and allow us to concentrate on a finite, enclosed world, very similar to ours but ontologically poorer" (p.85). However, because we cannot wander outside its boundaries, we are led to concentrate all our attention on this model world, exploring all its possible and impossible variations in depth.

Actual and possible worlds

We wish to add a last point, looking at this experimental character of narrative still in another light. Literature, we might say, is a *sonde* of exploration of both actual and possible worlds. At the same time, it allows us to step back and study, for example, the way we explore unfamiliar, strange, and threatening phenomena in general. Perhaps we can even go as far as to say that literary and

poetic language is itself an incarnation of the plasticity of the human being. Wolfgang Iser (1993) argued from the point of view of literary anthropology that fiction works as a mirror of the human ability permanently to undermine restrictions. It makes visible what it means that the mind, at least sometimes, can overstep its own limits, that it can “read” meanings as possibilities of action and options of agency.

Literature breaks through the horizon that habit, routine, ignorance, and tiredness (and often enough, the scientific discourse) have inscribed in our everyday life. It is this human option that Italo Calvino (1988) has called *leggerezza*: the lightness that narrative imagination can breathe into the *pesantezza*, the heaviness of reality.

One of the essential functions of narrative as art is, thus, to subjunctivize the world, as Bruner (1990) formulated it: to open us up to the hypothetical, to the range of actual and possible perspectives that constitute the real life of the interpretive mind (Brockmeier 1996). However, to end, we would like to emphasize that the view of narrative we have presented is not just directed to the literary worlds of imagination and fantasy as opposed to the world of ordinary reality — which is the commonsense view. On the contrary, we have argued that the exploratory and experimental options of narrative are inextricably fused with our fleeting reality itself: with the fluid material and symbolic realities of our actions, minds, and identities. It seems that it is, not least, the narrative function that endows the human condition with its particular openness and plasticity. Therefore, one motive — perhaps even a leitmotif — of the study of narrative realities should be to investigate this opening-up quality of the discursive mind and to uncover the multifaceted forms of cultural discourse in which it takes place.

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CHAPTER 4

Metaphysics and narrative

Singularities and multiplicities of self

Rom Harré

Introduction

We can and do identify and individuate human organisms by reference to bodily criteria, such as height, weight, and physiognomy. We use such criteria even for mummified Egyptians, by studying their bones for unique patterns, perhaps of a disease, and also use such criteria for identifying mysterious corpses by dental records. But what about *persons*?

If we take the possession of a sense of self as a rough characterization of what it takes to supplement membership of the species *homo sapiens sapiens* to define “being a person” we are confronted with some hard questions.

How does this kind of being come into existence? How is it sustained or diminished in existence? What are its principles of identity and individuation? They cannot be wholly bodily since just being able to tell one Neolithic skeleton from another does not enable us to tell one Neolithic person from another. Clearly, as philosophers have long argued, though much is in dispute as to the details, being this or that person is not identical with being this or that body.

The thesis of discursive psychology apropos these hard questions is this:

The sense of self has its origin in certain narrative practices in which an infant is treated as a nascent person. It is sustained or undercut by their abandonment.

However narratives of self are complicated. The rules by which the cluster of concepts around personhood and “the self” are managed need to be carefully teased apart into several interwoven strands. For example, more is comprehended under the polysemic concept of “self” than one’s sense of personal identity.

My investigation will begin with a brief examination of the range of concepts that are carried by the current usage of the words “person” and “self”. I do not pretend that this is an exhaustive catalogue, but it should be enough to get us started.

The standard model

Introduction

There are several expressions in use for the basic metaphysical framework with which we construct discourses about human life. Using English as our reference language there are “person” and “self” playing a major role in many fateful narratives. Of the two, “person” seems the most stable and univocal in everyday use, picking out human beings in so far as they are cognitively active and morally protected. “Self”, on the other hand, has a wide variety of diverse uses. In this paper, I shall be dealing with three of the commonest. English speakers of our time seem to me to operate with a standard model, in which “person” serves as the word for the basic particulars of the human world, each of which has or seems to have attributes and components referred to by the multivocal word “self”. I shall express the standard model in a little formula:

$$P \{S1, S2, S3\}$$

Ps are the basic particulars and the Ss, though seemingly entity-like, are, I shall argue, ephemeral attributes of the flow of P’s activities, in particular those in which P is materially and socially related to other beings.

Selves in the Standard Model

The word “self” (and one of its high falutin synonyms, “ego”) appears in person-centered discourses in at least three psychologically diverse contexts: perception, reflection, and social interaction.

1. Self 1, in the context of perception, is used for the singularity of an embodied point of view, manifested in the structure of perceptual fields, each of which is centered on the location in space and time of the embodied perceiver. In perceiving, P, the person, stands in some relation to its material environment, including the parts of its own body. However, the focal point of perception and proprioception seems to be within the body.

What is it that is there? Perhaps that which really perceives, one of the functions of the Cartesian ego. According to my account, Self 1 is one pole in a bipolar array of material things, but is a geographical abstraction, rather like the North Pole in relation to the continents. Only persons perceive. In telling stories of our encounters with the material environment Self 1 plays the major role.

2. Self 2, in the context of reflection on oneself as a person, including one's autobiographical reflections, is used for the totality of attributes of P, including P's beliefs about those attributes. The latter includes P's self-concept, which may or may not accurately reflect P's actual attributes at some life moment. Self 2 is a complicated mesh of very different attributes, some occurrent, such as images, feelings, and private dialogues, but most are dispositional, like skills, capacities, and powers.
3. Self 3, in the context of social interaction, is used to refer to the way that certain aspects of a person's actual or self-attributed Self 2 are manifested to others in the course of some life episode. This aspect of personhood is prominent in autobiographical narratives.

There are other uses for the word "self"; for instance, it is sometimes used as a synonym for "person". But for the purposes of setting up a clear and simple framework to begin the task of unraveling the tangled skein of the metaphysics of personhood, I shall restrict my uses of the word to those I have identified as Self 1, Self 2 and Self 3.

Qualifications of the standard model

1. *Diversity and multiplicity*

By *diversity* I mean taking different forms in different cultural settings; by *multiplicity* I mean having more than one realization for any given person.

- a. Self 1 is generally presented as a unique, context-free location, always related to where the body is in space and strictly contemporary. So there is little room for diversity. However there are cultural settings (e.g., Carlos Castaneda type mysticism) in which the one person may lay claim to more than one perceptual standpoint. But it is significant that in their narratives the body is left behind in out-of-the-body experiences. The complementary rule, "one person per body", is generally enforced, not least, by treating claims for multiple

occupancy as pathological, for instance in diagnosing such claims as the mark of Multiple Personality Disorder. We do not say Bill is the only person that body sustains, while Mary, Joan, and Elizabeth are all also sustained by that one. The latter situation is crying out for a cure.

b. Self 2 is generally singular, as an actually unique totality of attributes, even excluding singular embodiment. I know of no tribe that claims to have more than one “self” in that sense, at any moment. However there is multiplicity, in that Self 2 is continuously changing, not least because, though skills and powers may become stable, knowledge is always being augmented, for instance, by memory of life events. Only in pathological cases does knowledge decline. This is a conceptual observation since personal pathologies are defined in part by loss of powers and failures of memory.

Autobiography is an important part of the “narration” of Self 2, and that is highly context dependent. Each person has a repertoire of autobiographies appropriate for different cultural settings, and most people are skilled at constructing new autobiographies for novel occasions. This opens up the disparity between what one believes about oneself (self-concept) and what is true about oneself, including those beliefs. They change, and so Self 2 is inherently unstable.

c. Self 3, the way people present themselves to others, is generally multiple. There have been many studies of the lability of an individual’s displayed personality from occasion to occasion, context to context. To the extent that how one appear to others, what sort of person one seems to be, is under one’s own control, and to that extent contrived, psychologists talk of “impression management”.

2. Type or particular?

If each human individual is unique we would expect particularity to be dominant over generality in the content of Selves 1, 2, and 3. Clearly Self 1 must be wholly particular as pertaining to a singularity in space and time. However Self 2 must consist of recognizable attributes, falling under types, though the degree in some cases, and the total ensemble in all cases is unique. But in the case of Self 3, the uniqueness of bodily appearance is woven into presentations that draw on a dramaturgical repertoire of types. Unclassifiable public expressions of self risk accusations of eccentricity at best, of madness at worst.

3. Norms

As I have so far set out the analysis of the standard model, $P\{S1, S2, S3\}$, the structure of the three “self” concepts may look like a summary of empirical observations as to how the human world actually is. But in each case we have needed to remark on the role of local norms, conventions of propriety, boundaries of sanity, and so on, that play a role in fixing the content and the dynamics of selfhood as this is manifested in reports of hunting expeditions, complaints to doctors, and autobiographical exchanges in the setting up of a new relationship.

I propose to work with the general thesis that, *ceteris paribus*, singularity (uniqueness) of persons (except on so far as their bodies are materially distinct) is not a brute fact about human life, but the result of locally enforced norms. For example, why are the likes of Miss Beauchamp and Eve White, people displaying so markedly distinct personalities as to be thought of as more than one person in each body, taken to be in need of a cure? The norms of our world require that there be one person per body, neither more nor less. Consistency in displays of personality, trans-situational coherence in telling autobiographies, and so on, are not matters of fact about the way human beings conduct their lives, but the shadows of local norms. Anthropology plays a vitally important role reminding us of the possibility of diversity in the sense that what we tend to regard as necessarily singular, other tribes may happily treat as multiple.

Ontology of “selves”

Reference to oneself seems to be unproblematic, since nothing but the person speaking or acting seems to be in play. But the point of view from which one perceives the world is readily reified into an inner being that perceives, located at the point of origin of the structured array of things, including the perceiver’s own body. This is at least one of the conceptions incorporated in the catch-all Cartesian ego. Personal properties, as “the self” also tend also to be thought of as an entity, the “who am I?” of some pop psychology. Finally myself as social being, Self 3, begins to take on an entitative air. I can simply show this with a few references to writers famous and not so famous.

For Kohut (1977), for example, “the self” is not an “agency of the mind”, it is a “structure of the mind”. Anderson and Schoenig (1996) have claimed that “identity inward looking” provides a consideration of the existence of “a unity, a coherence that extends across time and situation”. In this view, this unity is

“the essence of the individual” that serves as the core of all particular manifestations. Again, according to Anderson and Schoenig (1996), “outward looking identity” is that constellation of characteristics and performances that “manifests the self [that is the Self 2] in meaningful action”.

Both Self 1 and Self 2 are also implicated in Geertz’s idea of personhood. For Geertz (1973, p. 9), the self is a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe [Self 2], a dynamic center of awareness [Self 1], emotion, judgement, and action, organized into a distinctive whole [Self 3] and set contrastively both against other wholes and against a social and natural background.

How does this come about? I have long argued (e.g., Mühlhäusler & Harré 1990; Harré 1998) that one source of the tendency to reify selves comes from a misunderstanding of the grammar of the word most apparently referring to the relevant psychological being, namely “I”. For example, “I see and hear things from where I am”; or “getting in touch with myself reveals the ‘real me’”. “I” has been interpreted as an ambiguous name, but attention to detail shows that it does not play any nominative role at all. It is an indexical, that is, it indexes an utterance with some fact about the speaker and the utterance, such as that the content of the utterance should be taken to include the speaker’s spatial location.

Selves of none of the three “sorts” are entities, though we make use of the word in various entitative ways. Perhaps selves are properties, properties of persons? But that cannot be right either, since Self 1 is a property of an array of material things. However Self 2 does seem to be a cluster of properties of different kinds, including dispositions and powers. When we produce streams of action in exercising these powers, these flows have properties many of which we pick out as psychological phenomena, for instance decisions, beliefs, and memories. It is easy to slip back into attributing them to the person who is actively engaged in their production, as if that production consisted in no more than bringing into public light what had previously been private and hidden perhaps even from the actor him or herself.

In ascribing psychological attributes to a person we may be invoking nothing more than a *façon de parler*, driven by the need to assign responsibility for actions among the people involved in an episode. A closer look may disclose that many seeming personal attributes are not properties of the person at all. Memories, for example, are not possessed by someone but produced by that person, for whatever the occasion demands. Common ways of speaking can lead us astray. We do say that a person has a memory, but we also say that a person remembers. The former suggests possession while the latter suggests

action. The difference may seem innocent, but carries a heavy metaphysical loading. In the noun form memories appear as entities, while in the verb form remembering appears as an action. The same can be said about having an opinion, in contrast to expressing an opinion or opining, and to decisions in contrast to deciding, and so on.

Neither Self 1 nor Self 3 are entities. They are attributes of the flow of a person's interactions with the material environment in perception, including that person's own body as part of the *umwelt*, and with the social environment in social interactions. Perceiving is a common thread in both, since one's social interactors must see and hear how one looks and what one has to say, even, sometimes, showing how one feels.

Further comments on Self 2 require the vital and fundamental distinction between powers and capacities, the dispositions they make possible, and the occurrent states and events that their exercise brings into existence. The three fold distinction rests on two more fundamental dichotomies. There is that between what happens and what is possible, thus distinguishing the content of powers and dispositions from actual occurrences. Both the former concepts require conditional expressions, with the force of introducing conditional qualifications, since powers can exist unexercised and dispositions unrealized. Thus we need the distinction between observables and unobservables to distinguish powers from dispositions. A disposition, say "timidity", can be expressed in the form "if P is uncertain then P will be afraid". Both uncertainty and fear are observable states of a person, not least to that very person. So dispositions are one form that complex observables take. Others involve such linkages as "and", "or", and "not both". However, we can ask what it is about a person that explains their timid disposition, their skill, or even their potential as tennis players. Such explanations invoke powers, capacities, skills, and the like. These terms refer to unobservables, never displayed as such, though they are manifested in performances, from which one distills assertions about dispositions. One displays one's skill in solving a chess problem, but what is observable is the problem and the getting of the solution, not the skill that was exercised in doing it. A large part of Self 2, what a person is, must consist of powers and capacities. One's beliefs about one's powers, liabilities, capacities, and skills must also be included, though they may be mistaken.

Thanks to the tendency to use nouns for the product of mental activities, as if there were a permanent population of memories, traits, beliefs, and opinions in the mind of a person, there is also a tendency to think that the Self 2 consists of just such entities. But these are produced in the joint activities of people, and

strictly speaking are time-indexed features of the flow of activity that is reported in autobiography: “At time T1 I expressed the opinion that X”, or “At time T2 I remembered that Y.” What I possesses permanently are the powers and capacities to produce these phenomena, about which can rightly be said that they have such and such dispositions in consequence. Profoundly important ontological consequences flow from these rather simple observations. For example, we do not *have* self-esteem but produce it in the course of daily activities and in answers to questionnaires from psychologists. It is a property of narratives, not of persons as such.

Are these attributes of such diverse logical kinds properties of P, the person? Here we come to another important insight of the discursive approach to psychology: namely, that all such attributes are relational. Though we ascribe a power (skill, ability, etc.) to P, the specification of that power must involve that upon which it acts and the effects its exercise might have. The properties of a person’s flow of action are also relational, since that action involves other material things or other people or both. The latter point needs some elaboration and qualification in that we must distinguish between those actions that involve actual others from those that invoke only imagined or notional others. For example soliloquies are directed overtly to others but take the form of sequences of conversational acts, a form derived from real conversations in which soliloquist once played a part. The private/public distinction does not map neatly on to the individual/collective distinction.

Personal powers and their groundings

The discussion so far has centered on the way that many seemingly robust mental entities and properties turn out, on close examination, to be either properties of streams of discursive activity, usually joint, or fictions, conjured up by the grammatical forms that those streams take in this or that language. But this leaves discursive psychology grounded in narrative and other symbol using *skills*. What if we were pressed to go further, and ask how the skills were grounded.

This introduces another general point about discourse and people. Up to this point we have been attending only to discourses produced by people for this or that quotidian purpose. But what about those discourses that are about people as active beings creating a meaningful symbolic world? For instance *this* discourse. It seems to becoming clear that two radically disjoint discursive

frames or grammars are required to do justice to whole gamut of the human form of life. In one such frame, the person or P-frame, there are concepts like “person”, “act”, “responsibility”, “intention”, and so on. In the other frame, the molecular or M-frame, there are concepts like “neurotransmitter”, “limbic system”, “broken tibia”, “oxygen”, and so on. That these frames or grammars are disjoint can be established only by the painstaking work of transposing *words* from one frame to another, and seeing if their semantic interconnections are changed. For example “human body” in the M-frame is a structured collection of organs, while in the P-frame it is a corpse. Or “person” in the P-frame is multiply connected to a variety of moral concepts, while in the M-frame it picks out only a biological machine, an organism.

In this section I examine some of the ways in which the dual grammars of discourses about human beings and their powers and capacities are interconnected. I will give a brief account of the tool/task metaphor as one way of synthesizing the two grammars into a higher order discursive frame.

How can a person possess a skill when it is not being exercised? How can one ascribe a disposition to someone when it is not being displayed? The answer to both questions is quite general for people and animals:

Powers and dispositions are grounded in relatively permanent states of the being to which they are ascribed. We may not always know what the relevant state is.

In the physical sciences the pattern of groundings is multilevel; it is a sequence of levels that manifest the principle that properties of structures and masses are grounded in the states of constituents (usually microentities and their relations). Sometimes in physics we find a macrogrounding in that an entity has a certain power or disposition by virtue of being related to some larger entity. Thus, according to Mach’s Principle the inertia of a material thing is a product of its relation to the rest of the universe. Thus inertia is grounded in the cosmos at large, not in the structure of the bodies that display it. Troubles arise for this scheme when we continue the investigation of the regress, and reach levels which we think might be fundamental. A fundamental level cannot be grounded in one yet more fundamental. So how are the powers and dispositions of fundamental entities to be accounted for? Perhaps we will have to concede that they cannot be accounted for, just described.

However, the same principle of levels does not hold for psychological powers and skills. It is persons who have these, and persons are fundamental in the ontology of psychology. It has been a cardinal sin of cognitive “science” to

assume that psychological powers must be grounded in more basic psychological levels, such as cognitive mechanisms, or permanent cognitive states, as if there must be unobservable memory-states invoked to account for someone's capacity to remember. This error can infect AI as well as the less disciplined modes of explanation found in psychodynamics. The idea that there are unobserved cognitive states and processes behind observed and observable flows of cognitive activity, that is, the exercise of one's cognitive powers, adds a mythic dimension to psychology which violates Ockham's Razor as radically as did the postulation of the Cartesian ego, the mind-stuff precursor.

The conditionality is not a feature of the causal power, but only of the conditions under which it is manifested. Thus even at "ground level", so to say, the power attribution can be expressed as

"A, the powerful particular, will bring about E, if such and such conditions obtain."

And that is its nature. This is an occurrent property. The only conditional thing about the ascription has to do with when and in what circumstances it will manifest that property. To think that the property is a cluster of possibilities is to miss the point of the ascription of a causal power and to misplace the locus of explanations.

I can see no reason to assume anything other than the principle that a person has no occurrent psychological complexity in the level sense, though of course a person may have a variety of different skills and capacities. But I can see no reason for supposing that any of these skills are grounded in hidden psychological states. Of course, a person creates a web of semi-permanent and ephemeral psychological states in the course of interacting with others; but these are products not sources. A person's powers are not like those of chemical reagents, to be explained by deeper levels of microstructure of other, more fundamental powerful entities. They are more like the ungrounded powers of fundamental particles or fundamental fields. As a singularity, a person has no psychological complexity in this sense.

How then are personal powers grounded? Take the acquiring of a manual skill, the power to make an accurate drawing, for example. This has to be learned, and we know very well that in that learning relatively permanent changes take place in the brain and nervous system of the learner. Provided these are not destroyed by some accident or in aging, the person retains the power. It is this important feature of psychology as a science that has led, I believe, to the persistent but mistaken project of reducing psychological

concepts to those of the physical sciences, specifically those of neuroscience. To see in general why this will not do we need to take account of two further aspects of the way that the psychological descriptions of an activity are related to the bodily states and processes of those performing them.

There have been any number of images proposed to illuminate the grounding relation between psychological powers and capacities and states of the body as a material system. The most recent, and in many ways, the most illuminating is that of the task and the tool. In the symbolic universe of human life there are tasks to be carried out, skilled activities needed to perform them, according to locally demanded standards. To carry out these jobs, be they material or cognitive, we need the appropriate tools. The basic tools are to be found within our own bodies, in the relevant organs. To pick up a cup we need hands, to count the number of cup fills we have drunk we need brains, not to mention, perceptual systems and other ancillary requirements. Within the task framework we can see that some bodily organs are tools more or less dedicated, precisely formed for the task. But they may be general, having a variety of uses. Hence they can be used for diverse jobs, whereas Broccke's area, for example, is more or less dedicated to linguistic tasks.

A striking feature of the tool/task framework is that it is dominated by normative criteria, some of which, since they involve the protection of the status and integrity of persons, we could call moral. Taken into the task/tool framework we can ask whether a brain is functioning well, but that question must be posed relative to the task in hand. Grandad's brain condition that appears in the doings of everyday life as Alzheimer's condition, is only a deterioration or defect in relation to its use as tool in remembering and recovering words. Otherwise it is just one more state of the brain. Going the other way, embedding a human being in the neurophysiological framework deletes their personhood, since in the biological framework criteria of correct functioning have no moral content. Indeed, a sociobiological framework shaped by Darwinian ideas means that human beings are not morally protected at all. It is worth noting that killing human beings for food is usually a practice that is embedded in the tool/task framework, so that there are person-preserving or honoring criteria in use. The Maori ate the bodies only of those who were recognized to be of great social importance or who had distinguished themselves in battle. The nourishment derived was more for their *mana*, their spiritual sustenance, than for their protein. The same seems to have been true for Aztec cannibalism. We come close here to one of the versions of Kant's categorical imperative, enjoining the treatment of people always as ends and never only as means.

Taxonomic priority thesis

As a direct consequence of the considerations advanced above there is a problem about the criteria of identity for individuals as elements of the domain of each discursive style. Persons are the basic particulars of the domain of the P-grammar, but what fixes the identity and individuality of basic particulars in the domain of the M-grammar? Could they be picked out, for the purposes of the setting out of narratives about human beings, wholly by reference to biological criteria? We shall see that such a project would be impossible. In looking closely at how a domain of basic particulars for the domain of the M-grammar is constituted, we shall find another link that ties the two disparate grammars into a kind of unity that is yet not reductive.

How does a neuropsychologist identify a part of the nervous system that is relevant to a study of language comprehension, for example? It cannot be by examining the nervous system alone. In practice there are two techniques. Brain injuries are often coupled with a loss or decline in some mental or motor skill. It is then argued that that part of the nervous system when undamaged must have been playing a role in the skilled performance. The argument is far from water-tight, but it has a certain rough utility. How does it work? Clearly there must be independent criteria for recognizing a case of the skilled performance and for when it is less skillful than it ought to be. To identify which part of the brain is involved in speaking, one must be able to identify instances of speaking, independently of the state of the brain. It follows that the criteria which are used to identify a part of the brain as the “reading module”, must incorporate the criteria by which reading is picked out as a skilled performance.

Recently positive identification of regions of the brain that are active when some cognitive or motor process is happening can be picked out by MRI or PET scans through the capacity for these techniques to pick out enhanced and diminished blood flow in a region. By the principle that increased brain activity require a richer blood supply active locations can be identified. By the further principle that brain activity is a sign of cognitive activity, the then current cognitive activity can be used to identify the relevant part of the brain. This is a complex chain of reasoning, depending on several principles whose grounds we might seek.

I shall call this whole cluster of principles and inferences the Taxonomic Priority Thesis (TPT). Despite the fact that many philosophers of psychology have favored the Top-Down approach, the detailed application of TPT has not,

so far as I know, been studied, except by a handful of authors in the early 1970s, for instance, U. J. Jensen (1972).

Since there are no mental states as such, only attributes of the flow of personal and interpersonal action, the taxonomies in question are ways of classifying processes. The question is one of correlation. While mainstream philosophers of psychology have discussed the question of whether mental activity is correlated with physiological states and processes as type or as token, the effect of TPT on this issue has not been studied. Of course we find that there is always some brain process going on whenever there is mental activity, but sometimes there is brain activity when there is no mental correlate. Suppose that we begin to build a classification system for brain activities and brain architecture using TPT. We will be developing a system of type-correlations. Research, using either the positive or the negative method, discloses, we suppose, cases in which the psychological criteria pick out more than one type of brain activity. The recent discovery that men and women read with different parts of their brains is a case in point. We must then construct a disjunctive taxonomy, if we wish to keep the tie between brain activity as the tool and reading, for instance, as the task. But neurophysiology is a natural science, and we would expect there to be a standard response to this result: namely, the invention of a hypothesis to the effect that there is an as yet unobservable common aspect to the superficially distinct neural processes. Thus type correlations are preserved by the creation of a new neurophysiological type. Taken this way, TPT discloses a necessary correlation between types in each ontology. As far as I can see, AI serves as an enrichment of TPT only in so far as AI hypotheses of cognitive processes are interpreted as formal expressions of the structure of cognitive processes in the symbolic realm.

However let us suppose that research discloses a third or fourth brain process type, correlated in some cases with the common mental process. How far could the above response remain scientifically viable? As far as the technique of hypothesizing unobservables continues to be scientifically plausible in the context. So far as I can see, there is no a priori limit to its indefinite extension, though it may lead to a complex hierarchy of unobservables. This is not unknown in chemistry and physics.

However, if the simple TPT breaks down with proliferating of psychological types, serving as criteria for neurophysiological types in such a way that more than one psychological type picks out (and so is correlated taxonomically with the same physiological type), can the same strategy be employed? Surely it will, by proposing hypotheses about unobservable differences between the occasions

on which the same physiological type is picked out by criteria derived from different psychological types. In accordance with the usual pattern of research in the natural sciences, a programme would be instituted to try to identify the hidden variables. (Logically the situation would be not unlike that we find in quantum mechanics when different trajectories are taken by seemingly identical and identically prepared particles in seemingly identical conditions.)

The continued proliferation of exceptions to TPT and the continued failure to find the hidden physiological variables that would resolve the problem might lead to an ontologically radical solution, the revival of Cartesian dualism. I believe this route could be suggested by proliferation of psychological types correlated with the same neural type, if TPT were to be abandoned. This would be a heavy price indeed, since the whole neurophysiological research programme rests on TPT. That is, the ontology of symbolic operations is matched to the tools with which people perform them.

What does TPT accomplish? Certainly not reductionism, even if it may look that way. Perhaps it does allow the tool being used for the task to be identified.

Summary

Psychology is evidently a hybrid science of a unique kind, structured in a unique way. Its metaphysical foundations consist of two distinct but non-independent frameworks. In the *symbolic* framework human beings appear as persons, the basic particulars within that framework, jointly creating patterns of action that exhibit psychological properties, such as memory, belief, and autobiographical constructions. In the *molecular* framework human beings appear as organisms. The two frameworks are tightly linked not only by the priority of the symbolic in fixing the classificatory schemes for use in the molecular, but more importantly, since it explains the taxonomic priorities, by the task/tool linkage.

To return to the issue of the nature of persons: without TPT and the task/tool conceptual framework the materiality of persons, the embodiment on which a sense of personal identity (Self 1) ultimately depends, would collapse. Persons as the common axis with which the symbolic and the material worlds are linked, would be beings of a quite different kind.

People do talk and write and tell stories about people, others and themselves. There are many genres of people stories. At first sight, there seem to be two sets of discursive conventions or grammars for telling people stories that

by-pass each other. Aggressive attempts at a take over of the job of telling such stories have been mounted both by the enthusiasts for the M-grammar (for example, by stories of eliminative materialism); these attempts have been matched by equally aggressive take-over bids from enthusiasts for the P-grammar (for example, by post-modernist stories). I have tried to show that we cannot dispense with either. Both are needed to encompass the human form of life. One grammar is dominant in the operating theater, while the other is dominant in the conversations of the Samaritans. Yet, there are various ways in which these disparate narrative genres are linked and integrated into a higher order synthesis, without the elimination of either.

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CHAPTER 5

Narrative integrity

Autobiographical identity and the meaning of the “good life”

Mark Freeman and Jens Brockmeier

How sour sweet music is
When time is broke, and no proportion kept!
So is it in the music of men's lives.

Shakespeare, Richard II (act 5, scene 5, 42–49)

We begin this essay with three claims that we hope will become plausible in what follows. The first is that one's identity, insofar as it is tied to the interpretive appraisal of one's personal past as it takes place in autobiographical narrative, is inseparable from normative ideas of what a life is, or is supposed to be, if it is lived well. We shall call these ideas conceptions of the “good life”, using an Aristotelian notion in broad outline. With this in mind, part of what we wish to do is call attention to the fact that the narrative construction of identity not only has a psychological, social, and aesthetic dimension but an *ethical* one. That is to say, we wish to offer the idea that conceptions of the good life are woven into the narrative fabric of human identity. Or, to put the matter somewhat differently, we could also say that, whatever the specific form of the autobiographical process in which we seek to come to terms with our pasts — written or oral, cohesive or fragmentary, etc. — it will inevitably be conditioned by some notion of the good life. The sound of what Shakespeare called the “music” of our lives, we suspect, therefore depends not least on our ability to relate our lives to that order of existence in which we decide how they are best conducted.

We shall try to support this claim by first highlighting some general qualities of autobiographical memory and identity construction and then examining various genres of autobiographies, genres which are as culturally and historically variable as the idea of the good life in Greek Antiquity, Christianity, Modernity, and Postmodernity. The postmodernist perspective on autobiographical

identity, in particular, raises a number of intricate questions due to its frequently-expressed aim of renouncing entirely, and indeed happily, the idea and ideal of a binding ethical rationale to one's life. It therefore will put this first and most basic claim to an interesting test.

Our second claim is that the degree to which there exists consensus about what constitutes good lives in any given social surround will in turn affect the "music of men's and women's lives". Put in more theoretical terms, it will affect the degree of *narrative integrity* that inheres in the stories people tell about their lives and, ultimately, in their identities. By narrative integrity, we refer not only to harmony of proportion or beauty of form as principles of narrative composition but to the coherence and depth of one's ethical commitments, as evidenced by the shape of one's life. That is to say, we do not simply want to advance a narratological concept of coherence, predicated exclusively on quality of form; narrative integrity, as conceptualized here, encompasses both aesthetics and ethics and is thus to be considered a dialectical structure of meaning. We may think of Paul Ricœur's (1991) idea of "narrative identity" as a comparable dialectical structure; and indeed, it will aid us in outlining our reflections on the relation between identity and narrative integrity.

To be more specific about this second claim, we suggest that in those epochs or cultures in which there exist strong, agreed-upon standards pertaining to the good life, there would, hypothetically, be a high degree of narrative integrity, whether explicit or implicit, in the resultant narratives. Autobiographical reconstructions of the past would therefore be comparatively unambiguous, in the sense of having strong canonical constraints and a comparatively limited range of possible meanings. In those epochs or cultures, on the other hand, in which standards pertaining to the good life are not so clear or are in the midst of being contested or redefined, as in much of the modern West, there would, again hypothetically, be a relatively low degree of narrative integrity, with autobiographical memory in turn emerging as decidedly more ambiguous and multivoiced. To avoid any misunderstanding, it should be noted that in speaking of a "low degree" of narrative integrity, we have no intention whatsoever of offering a moral judgment about the lives in question, as if there were absolute standards against which to measure them as "lesser" or "greater" in some way. What we want to argue instead is that constructions of autobiographical identity always aim at some form of narrative integrity; they cannot, as it were, do without it — however variable the "tightness of the weave" of their narrative fabric may be. We shall further develop this idea shortly.

Our third claim follows from the previous two. It is that autobiographical

narratives — autobiographical texts, whether spoken or written — are useful vehicles for exploring not only the ethical dimension of identity construction but also the ethical fabric of the social worlds in which they emerge. As such, the study of autobiographies allows us to better understand the aforementioned dialectics between ideas of the good life and the specific historical and cultural realities in which these ideas originate. Within this historical and cultural framework, we will focus especially on aspects of *Geistesgeschichte*, the history of ideas, for it is clear that what constitutes the narrative integrity of an individual life is always embedded in a web of ethical beliefs and commitments articulated in the philosophical, religious, political, and moral views of the age in question.

Historicity

Some historical context might be helpful in fleshing out these claims. As various scholars have emphasized, the idea that a human being has a distinct and specific individual identity, an unmistakable personal history and psychology — Michel Foucault (1973) has described this idea as the modern “episteme of Man” — is limited in historical time and cultural space. In a famous (and well-disputed) remark at the end of *The Order of Things* (1973), Foucault anticipated the historical “death of Man”, by which he meant the end of the Western conception of an autonomous and substantial individual subject. Likewise, it has been argued that the linguistic and psychological genre of autobiography is a quite limited phenomenon. Georges Gusdorf (1980), for example, in his seminal article on the “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography”, observes that autobiography “has not always existed nor does it exist everywhere. (...) It asserts itself only in recent centuries and only on a small part of the map of the world. (...) Throughout most of human history”, Gusdorf goes on to explain, “the individual does not oppose himself [or herself] to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community” (pp. 28–29). Moreover, this individual of which Gusdorf speaks tends to be embedded in the mythical consciousness of a dominantly oral culture, understanding his or her life through the lens of recurrent and eternal forms rather than historically. The notion of historical consciousness is important in this context because it implies the idea of an irreversible order of events, including those events of which one’s own life is made. While mythical thought is primarily a phenomenon of cultures without written communication

and archives, historical thought, like the discipline of history itself, is associated with the coming into being of writing. The written records of history make it possible to think not only of time but also of life itself in terms of chronological sequence: That which happens between the birth and the death of a person becomes seen as a linear flow of events, stretching along the “arrow of time”. What might be called “life time” thus becomes a segment, albeit a very particular one, of world time (Blumenberg 1986). Closely related to the emergence of historical consciousness, therefore, is the emergence of the idea that a *person* has a history too, and that this life history is a part of a larger historical process. In other words, we ourselves are living entries *into* history (Freeman 1998). Let us speak of this emerging conception of human life as a chronological process in terms of *historicity*. Autobiography, in this sense, can be seen as an historical genre, and autobiographical identity, in turn, as a sociopsychological gestalt embedded within the irreversible movement of history.

What this means becomes evident if we consider, by contrast, ancient Greece. In spite of often being described as the origin of Western culture, Greek antiquity did not know the idea of an individual who needs to develop an articulated version of his or her life. Ancient Greek literature, as rich and diverse it was, lacks the distinct genre of autobiography, the focus on the individual self as the meaning center of one’s life. Instead of telling narratives of events, thoughts, and intentions which were specifically personal and private, the main concern of the individual was to integrate him- or herself in what was regarded as the natural community of Greek culture. Only as homogeneously fused with this community and its synthesis in the system of myths could the Greek individual think of his or her existence. Rather than emphasizing the “standing out” of a singular mind or personality, the Greek sense of self was deeply embedded in a cultural whole, in a socially and naturally given context of being (Vernant 1995). Interestingly enough, this is all the more true for the Greek vision of the great individual, the *heros*, whose life course was almost entirely mapped out by the determining power of destiny. Consequently, we find neither a distinct autobiographical genre nor a particular discursive place or event in which a Greek would have thought it appropriate to report his or her personal memories or tell a life story — except for a few extraordinary situations of “self-disclosure” such as in first-person narratives addressed to strangers (within a single literary genre, the Greek erotic romance) and in court, when being accused of a crime (Most 1989).

Indeed, not only in ancient Greek thought but throughout most of human history, individual autobiography — and, perhaps, autobiographical memory

— are in a distinct sense unthinkable, as is the idea of an independent, self-defined identity as we have come to understand it, for instance, in Hamlet's and Faust's quest for self-knowledge. This quest, as reflected and actively shaped in the sixteenth to eighteenth century in European philosophy and literature, must be seen against the backdrop of another new matrix that emerged with the modern world: the claims of the self versus the claims of society and its normative canon (Watt 1996). An essential condition for the possibility of autobiography and autobiographical self-reflection within this cultural-historical matrix thus has to do with the transformation from an essentially mythic framework of time into the domain of history. Once the idea of historical time has taken shape, the time of a life becomes an historical gestalt, a meaningful context of events with diachronic depth.

The intellectual historian Karl Weintraub's work is especially useful here. In an article entitled "Autobiography and historical consciousness" (1975), Weintraub, not unlike Gusdorf, argues that "the autobiographic genre took on its full dimension and richness when Western Man acquired a thoroughly historical understanding of his existence" (p. 822) — that is, when people began to see the tracing and recounting of their lives as an appropriate and necessary means for attaining a measure of self-understanding. There comes to exist the recognition that events are unrepeatable (even if historical patterns and orders repeat), that the present is different from the past (even if it is a continuation of the past), and that time itself is characterized by constant change (even if it seems to be continuous). In consequence, there are different "semantics of time": globally, historically, locally, and individually (Brockmeier 1995). We must not forget that our accounts of time are always embedded in particular cultural or historical semantics — that is, the historical framework of linguistic meanings in which our thought and imagination are inextricably entangled (Koselleck 1985).

To make a long story short, there emerges at a certain juncture in early European history, in line with the erosion of the mythical thought and a more institutionalized way of life, the "historic personage", which is to say, a being — a self in time — who finds in his or her own unique history a means for understanding and coming to terms with existence (Taylor 1989). It is precisely at this juncture that we begin to see autobiographical memory serving as a vehicle for tracing the trajectory of a life and, via narrative, giving it meaning. Historicity, autobiographical memory, and narrative identity therefore emerge as an interlocking discursive configuration (Freeman 1993). The idea of *inwardness* serves well to capture its essentials.

Accountability

A further aspect of the emergence of autobiography and autobiographical reflection has to do with the idea of *accountability*. As already noted, accounting for one's actions in court was one of the few occasions in Greek culture in which an individual was expected and encouraged to tell a first-person narrative about relevant life events. But it is Christianity, around the time Augustine wrote his *Confessions* (1980; originally 397) that is usually thought to mark the beginning of autobiographical reflection as we have come to know it. Christianity brings with it the notion that each person must answer, in the face of God, for his or her own life, the act of confession itself serving to magnify and deepen the process of individual self-examination (Gurewich 1995). Autobiography, in turn, from its most influential Augustinian origins to its modern form, requires that one take stock of one's past, seizing it as something to be weighed, assessed, and evaluated in the light of a normative model of life. Autobiographical self-construction thus requires self-distancing; it is a "second reading" of experience (see Gusdorf 1980), guided by the demand that one confront oneself "honestly" and own up to the trouble spots of one's history. As such, it is the way we make sense of our lived lives in order to face the possible lives we envision.

Modern writers like Proust have shown in intricate detail what it means to live again through significant moments of one's past. In these moments of remembrance — occurring in the present — the reality of "past presents" is evoked with a richness and depth that was impossible to grasp and to evaluate when they were experienced "originally". Various authors (e.g., Rorty 1979) refer to Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1919) as a suggestive example of how narrative not only describes but "creates" individual life. As Widdershoven (1993) has pointed out, Proust touches upon the very essence of the relation between experience and story when he describes a visit to the theater, where Berma performs *Phèdre*. The narrator tells us how he tries to retain each utterance, expression, and gesture of Berma, in order to be able later to recall the experience fully. But his concentrated efforts to capture and memorize the present cause him to watch and listen to hardly anything. Only when the applause of the public begins is a feeling of admiration aroused; and it is much later, when he reads a report of the performance in the newspaper, that he becomes truly convinced of its qualities. Proust's narrator describes how in this moment the story in the paper "fuses" with his own experience — or with what he thinks, in hindsight, his experience must have been — so that his admiration and delight grows. Realizing, however, that these feelings may seem dishonest

because the “original” experience was not nearly as positive as his judgment after reading the critics, the narrator comes to recognize that there is no way to escape from this entanglement: Our experience is always influenced by that of others, and our stories are always intertwined with other stories. Our remembrance of things past has little value as long as it is not “connected to”, Widdershoven writes — or, as Proust says, “fused with” — narrative. Widdershoven goes on to state that this is not only true of relatively unimportant experiences, such as going to the theater, but of experiences that are assumed to shape our narrative identity: “We only become aware of the significance of these experiences by telling stories about them and fusing them with other stories” (1993, p. 7).

Patently, what Proust captured extends significantly beyond the literary realm. It is a common phenomenon, and it is particularly fundamental for the autobiographical process. “In the immediate moment”, Gusdorf (1980) writes, “the agitation of things ordinarily surrounds me too much for me to be able to see it in its entirety. Memory gives me a certain remove and allows me to take into consideration all the ins and outs of the matter, its context in time and space” (p. 38). Autobiographical memory and interpretive appraisal, of course, go hand in hand. Like Gusdorf, many authors who have explored autobiographical memory have observed that no autobiographer is engaged in a wholly objective and disinterested pursuit. Whatever the specific interest and focus, the outcome of the autobiographical process is a work of personal selection and justification, whereby one also has the opportunity to “win back” what may have been lost during the course of the passing years. In this sense, Gusdorf concludes, “the task of autobiography is first of all a task of personal salvation”. It is one of “reassembling the scattered elements of a destiny that seems ... to have been worth the trouble of living” (p. 39). The final goal of this process is therefore not some sort of true representation of a life lived. Indeed, there cannot be such a re-presentation. As Jerome Bruner (1993) has pointed out, the widespread idea that there is such a thing as a uniquely true, correct, or even faithful autobiography is misleading. It does not capture the essence of the autobiographical process simply because the purpose of this process is not to state any logical or propositional truth. If a life story is about truth at all, then it is about narrative truth, Bruner argues.

Narrative truth, however, is not the last word. Although it is a concept that may help us to overcome some limitations of the traditional metaphysical notion of truth, it also raises a number of new questions. What, for example, is the very nature of the *narrative* character of the truth of a life? And what is the *truth* character of a life story? We suggest that at least one meaning of narrative

truth, in the context of our discussion, can be adequately qualified by the criterion of coherence or, more appropriately still, *Stimmigkeit*. Narrative truth, from this point of view, represents one aspect of the more fundamental ethical rationale tied to the notion of narrative integrity. Bruner (1996) argues convincingly that narrative truth is the combined result of specific ways of meaning-making that are highly flexible with respect to verifiability, truth conditions, or logical justifications. To examine the narrative fabric of autobiographical memories, we are thus to use more adequate criteria of coherence, such as verisimilitude, lifelikeness, narrative plausibility, and — narrative integrity. As we see, in encompassing the dual features of narrative coherence and discursive plausibility, the notion of narrative integrity moves beyond the narratological perspective. Its focus is on the inherent unity of living and narrating a life.

It should be emphasized that autobiographies, unlike other forms of self-inscription (journals, diaries, letters, and so on) are always written in the present, looking backward — and forward — with certain more or less distinct audiences in mind. The narrator of an autobiography, therefore, always knows the outcome of his or her story. We see this in operation in the simple but extremely important fact that autobiographical narratives often confer meanings on events that they did not and indeed could not possess at the time of their occurrence. Weintraub (1975), by way of articulating further defining features of autobiographical interpretation, points out what happens once the autobiographer has gained that vantage point which offers the retrospective view on life or some portion of it: Unavoidably, he or she “imposes on the past the order of the present. The fact once in the making can now be seen together with the fact in its result. By this superimposition of the completed fact, the fact in the making acquires a meaning it did not possess before. The meaning of the past is intelligible and meaningful in terms of the present understanding; it is thus with all historical understanding” (p. 826). Weintraub’s idea of the “superimposition of the completed fact” is addressed by Gusdorf (1980) as the “postulating of a meaning” that “dictates the choice of the facts to be retained and of the details to bring out or to dismiss according to the demands of the preconceived intelligibility” (p. 42).

What Weintraub means by the “order of the present” and Gusdorf means by “preconceived intelligibility” is not unrelated to our notion of narrative integrity. At issue, in each case, is an order of construction that is rooted in the here and now of the autobiographical process. And this order not only reflects the inherent temporal organization of the narrative process; it also suggests that the “postulating” of the meanings of a life takes place and makes sense only in

the present, that is, the present in which this life is lived and in which its past becomes an object of (re)construction. Put differently, postulating the meaning of the past is a psychological and moral function of the here and now, of a present constellation in which an autobiographer seeks to gain acceptance not only for his or her past but for his or her present and future life (Brockmeier, 1997). Hence, again, the significance of the idea of accountability, of providing an explanatory justification — or even *apologia* — for one's life. Hence, in addition, the ethical dimension of this process, its dependence on a normative orientation that provides the underlying criteria of accountability integral to the fashioning of identity.

What we have offered thus far, then, is the idea that autobiographical identity, as it is developed through the autobiographical process, emerges in line with specific social, historical, and discursive conditions regarding the importance of the individual as well as the importance of accounting for the life one has led in line with an overarching cultural system of ethical and moral values. The narrative integrity of the self emerges within this interplay. That is to say, the ethical dimension is part and parcel of the process by which the narrated history of the self becomes constituted as an object of interpretive interest and appraisal. *How* the self is appraised is contingent upon prevailing conceptions of the good life. Let us explore this issue in some detail.

Autobiographical understanding and the “evolution” of self

The structures of present understanding that inhere in any given social and cultural environment have a significant impact upon the specific nature of both historical understanding and the process of autobiographical remembering. We see this clearly in the case of developmental frameworks that seek to account systematically for the shape of the personal past. Following Weintraub (1975) in broad outline once again, we see, for instance, that the more that “natural” or “evolutionary” processes are considered the most appropriate developmental frameworks, the more that life itself becomes characterized by the notion of organic unfolding. It is as if there is something present from the beginning, that gradually reveals itself as if by a necessary, predetermined program, fate, or destiny, an inherent teleological logic. As Weintraub puts it: “A specified potentiality becomes an actuality” (1975, p. 830).

The teleological idea of development as the emergence of actuality from potentiality — an idea that, once again, can be traced back to Aristotle — has

played a major role in Western intellectual history, including the history of autobiographical thought. If human development is understood as an essentially natural process of realizing a pre-specified end, then any given life history may be understood in terms of the degree to which this ideal end, this *telos*, is in actuality attained: the value of a life thus becomes a matter of “more” or “less”. But there is another, more serious consequence of the teleological view, having to do with what might be called “the elimination of the irregular”. The entry of accidents and the like into the life in question — random events, twists and turns — will be seen, from this perspective, largely as secondary matters, mere deviations from an inherent, pre-set logic.

What does it mean if this idea becomes the underlying rationale for the attainment of narrative integrity? It might be helpful to tackle this question by briefly exploring two life histories. Both are in more than one respect highly exemplary. We have already mentioned one, Augustine’s account of his autobiographical memory as found in his *Confessions* (1980). An archetype of this genre, it is based on the conviction that life’s destiny — and the recognition of this destiny — is determined, from beginning to end, by God’s providence. The other example refers to a modern — or shall we say, modernist — picture of a twentieth century scholar: the autobiographical accounts of Swiss psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget. These accounts seem to be driven by the conviction of an unfolding rationality that underlies the evolution of life and thought, and, in a sense, even the process of autobiographical reflection itself. Weintraub (1975) has noted that the lives of philosophers and other scholars are often written in a manner exhibiting a “formal uniformity in the basic pattern of life to be expected from a quintessential conception of the nature of life unfolding itself with the compelling power of rational coherence” (p.830). Although separated by some one and a half thousand years of intellectual history, Augustine and Piaget can each be considered good cases to demonstrate the idea that the nature of a life unfolds itself with the “compelling power of rational coherence”, be it the coherence of providence or of modern scientific thought.

It has often been argued that Augustine’s *Confessions* represent a classic model, if not *the* classic model, of teleological self-understanding. Again, it was only in the modern era that the *Confessions* came to be regarded not only as the story of a saint’s life but as “the paradigm for all representations of the self in a retrospective literary structure” (Freccero 1986, p.17). Augustine’s account suggests an autobiographical identity that is determined by an all-encompassing and all-determining power. This power is omnipresent even if it is not recognized as such, as was the case at the beginning of Augustine’s life. In the

Confessions we can see in action a quite different logic at work as well as a quite different endpoint. “I was blind to the whirlpool of debasement in which I had been plunged away from the sight of your eyes”, Augustine (1980, p.39) proclaims to God. “I was tossed and spilled, floundering in the broiling sea . . . and you said no word. . . . You were silent then, and I went on my way, farther and farther from you, proud in my distress and restless in fatigue, sowing more and more seeds whose only crop was grief” (p.34). All of this, of course, Augustine can see clearly in retrospect, after his conversion. His memories are thus suffused with shame and humility but also with profound gratitude; for what he eventually realized was that, even amidst silence, God’s providence had been responsible for preventing his following those potential life paths that would have culminated in dead-ends. The main point here, in any case, is that through remembering, through looking back and seeing anew the trajectory of his life, Augustine claims to have realized the logic therein, the “inner necessity” whereby a rather wayward, dissolute young man, resisting any and all cues about how he might set his life in order, had nevertheless managed to move in the right direction.

What we have in Augustine’s account, then, is a classic example of a story of unfolding and, on the plane of memory, a classic example of a quite specific mode of historical understanding, in which the various events and accidents that come his way are given what Weintraub has referred to as a “catalytic” significance: these events and accidents become important not so much in themselves but in the fact that they push him in the direction in which he needs to move — that is, the direction dictated by the logic at work, which is itself dictated by that vision of ideal human development operative in his social world. Augustine’s narrative therefore serves as testimony to a discrete conception of the good life, one that is tied to the realization of God’s divine presence in all things great and small. It also serves an exemplary and prescriptive function, providing a kind of how-to guide for other lost souls seeking salvation.

Perhaps more significant for our present purpose, however, is the inner integrity of Augustine’s narrative and the tightness of his memory’s “weave”, as we put it earlier. Of course, for fairly obvious reasons, when one is a would-be saint, looking backward over his or her life, there will likely be a high degree of conviction and certainty about the meaning of the past. After all, this is a text written not only as *confession*, as *memoir*, and as self-justification or *apology* — the three distinct intentions that, according to Hart (1969–1970), characterize autobiographical works — but also to convince readers that this way, Augustine’s way, is the best way. With God being understood as the prime mover,

there is not much room for doubt about why things happened the way they did — at least not in the Augustinian version of what a human life is supposed to be. Augustine, we should keep in mind, is one of the first systematic thinkers devoted to the task of examining the *condition humaine* in the light of Christianity. Later theologians — Protestants, in particular — tried to moderate the deterministic implications of the vision of world and self developed by the Fathers of the Church. The main point, in any case, is that what we might call the *moral space* of self-interpretation, and thus the space of autobiographical memory itself, remains very much circumscribed here, in line with a social, historical, and ethical milieu in which there is a high degree of consensus about the good life.

As already suggested, the idea of life as an unfolding program, as the emergence of actuality from potentiality, is in no way limited to the realization of God's providence. Turning now to Piaget's autobiographies, we find much the same principle at work, although here the belief in the universal power of God has been substituted by the belief in the universal validity of natural laws and, correspondingly, of science. Once again, life develops according to a given program; thought, and indeed mind itself, in turn, unfold as logical self-constructions marked by increasing rational coherence. In the course of his long life, Piaget wrote several autobiographies. They vary to a remarkable degree; in each, he is presenting himself in different ways, in different scenes, from different points of view. In a sense, each narrative presents a different life. In his comparison of these various lives and life stories, Jacques Voneche (this volume) points out that Piaget's autobiographies, as distinct as they are, serve one function first and foremost: that of *Selbstdarstellung*, of self-presentation to others. Not surprisingly, therefore, the presentations vary according to the target audience for which the plot of his life is organized and re-organized. For example, in Piaget's early autobiography, *Recherche*, written at the age of 20, we read a *Bildungsroman* of a post-Bergsonian metaphysician that depicts the emergence of a personality at the moment of a serious youth crisis, a crisis of identity. In his entry for the *History of Psychology in Autobiography*, we follow the straightforward account of the life of a scientist. And in the autobiography that Piaget included in his book *Wisdom and Illusions of Philosophy*, he tells the story of a disillusioned philosopher turned scientific psychologist because of the insufficiencies of philosophy and the vanity of philosophers.

Piaget, Voneche writes, changes hats according to the function of his narrative. Accordingly, the way other actors are positioned — colleagues, competitors, students, adversaries — changes; secondary figures in one life

become protagonists in another. For Vonèche, the narrative logic of these autobiographies appears as a function of the interactions among “actor”, “scene”, and “plot” in their relations to the audience. Like Augustine, Piaget wants to convince his readers; he wants to persuade them of his theory and of the coherence of this life as lived in the light of his theory. The overarching message of both theory and life is Piaget’s idea of epistemology, his explanation of the mind in which development is the key explanatory factor. While Piaget set out to demonstrate that the pivotal epistemological importance of this factor derives from its fundamental function in biological development and evolution — a discovery that he claimed to have made as a very young man — we learn from Vonèche’s analysis that Piaget’s idea of development is first of all rooted in his view of his own development in adolescence and youth. The underlying matrix of Piaget’s theory of development is thus his theory of autobiography, his working conception of his own life. This theory, if we follow Vonèche, is itself driven, however, by a still stronger force: Piaget’s lifelong angst about becoming insane, the fear of a man of bold imagination and wild ideas becoming autistic and mad, who therefore had to keep his speculative fantasies under control through a powerful intellectual construction.

The idea of life as unfolding, as we have examined it first in Augustine’s autobiographical narrative and now in its Piagetian form, appears in another light. In presenting a conception of the development of human intelligence through the narration of his or her own intellectual and moral development, the theorist can lay claim to the very special status of having created a conceptual framework that encompasses the demands both of theory and of life. There is, of course, yet another dimension of this conceptual framework that adds to its allure: Life and its putative authenticity become integrated into what Vonèche, with Pierre Bourdieu, calls the “rhetoric of scientificity”. When the meaning of the good life is formulated in accordance with discrete models of the ideal self along with a discrete logic of actualizing it — be it by the inherent power of providence or that of rationality — autobiographical memory will generally be seen as a relatively unambiguous and trustworthy source of information about the past. Especially in works like Augustine’s, in which the proverbial scales fall from one’s eyes, memory will often emerge with new and radiant clarity through a pivotal turning point, offering some kind of “unique” or “deeper” insight. As Bruner (this volume) observes, life-changing turning points of this sort are tropical elements that have their place in most life stories. And, as we can see in Piaget’s various autobiographies, they change with the different audiences being addressed and, correspondingly, with the different plots along

which these lives are given shape and meaning. But there is also something unique about the main turning point in Augustine's *Confessions*, namely, that here, for the first time in history, the function of memory itself becomes seen as vitally important in the fashioning of identity. In the famous chapter on memory in the *Confessions*, Augustine heaps praise upon memory, acknowledging in a very sophisticated way its many complexities, but marveling at it all the while. Among memory's many marvels, there is perhaps one that looms largest: Anything and everything that we might remember, from the simplest ideas to the deepest ethical precepts by which we lead our lives, have been in existence prior to their instantiation in us. The task is to find them.

Modern and postmodern perspectives

The examples of Augustine and Piaget, although fundamentally different in many respects, represent strong versions of narrative integrity. At the other end of the spectrum, there are autobiographical works in which accidental events and the like, rather than being seen as catalytic or incidental, are seen as integral, determinative moments — at an extreme, in fact, as the very stuff of which lives are made. Here, then, we are considering a more thoroughly historical, rather than teleological, mode of understanding and depicting lives. One can call it a more *dialectical* view of the past, with memory being tied to the ways in which one has been interactively engaged with the world, including the ways one has changed as a function of unpredictable goings-on external to the self. It is precisely in this more consciously historical or historicized mode of understanding, it has been suggested, that we find in action the full scope of autobiographical reflection and writing (Weintraub, 1975). For rather than there existing what in the end amount to variations on set schemes, various modes of realizing or not realizing already-specified endpoints, there exists a much wider range of autobiographical possibilities, ways of emplotting the movement of the personal past and hence the formation of identity. It should be noted that conceptions of the self play an important role in this context (Markus & Nurius 1986; Kerby 1991; Bruner 1997; Olney 1998). Moreover, many scholars have claimed that there is a close interrelationship between a culture's conception of the self or the person and its conception of time and history (e.g., Kippenberg et al. 1990; Mühlhäusler & Harré 1990; Geertz 1973). With this in mind, we can see the further correlation between the spectrum of extant models of individual development and the spectrum of autobiographical

options offered by a given culture — with those options predicated upon the metaphor of unfolding as a general rule being more circumscribed, more fixed and delimited, than those predicated upon a more dialectical perspective.

What seems to have happened from Greek antiquity on up through the present — to risk a rather crude and speculative historical sketch — is that earlier conceptions of self and history, based on such ideal, agreed-upon visions of the good life, as embodied in the historical figures of the citizen of the Greek *polis*, the *pater familias*, the committed monk, the courageous warrior, and so on, gradually gave way to more open, plural, and heterogeneous visions. At an extreme, these visions and versions of human life seem, in fact, to part entirely from a reliance on the emulation of models. It thus appears that while in distant times past there tended to exist more circumscribed ideal models of self and more circumscribed ideal life narratives, these models have given way, in the modern and postmodern era especially, to virtually “model-free” selves, as it were, along with a vast proliferation of possible life narratives, with none being deemed more ideal than any other. Against this background, one might suspect that the project of identity construction tends to be, for better or worse, rather less of a concern. Indeed, there seem to be a considerable number of arguments in favor of this view. A part of the vocabulary of postmodernity has been used to give theoretical coherence to it, referring, for example, to the “end of grand narratives” — the story of the formation of individual or personal identity often being considered one of the first to go. Gergen’s notion of the “saturated self” (1991) is surely relevant in this context. So too are the many movements against the idea of identity (or, perhaps more appropriately, toward “anti-identity”) in the fields of postmodern and poststructuralist sociology, philosophy, cultural theory, and, especially, literary theory. Alongside anti-identity, one might presume, is anti-integrity.

Important though these movements have been in offering correctives to overly monolithic, unitary conceptions of identity as well as overly totalizing conceptions of the good life, we suggest that the challenge of attaining some measure of narrative integrity, as embodied in the process of autobiographical self-construction, still remains. Even postmodernist visions of the self, with their ostensible abandonment of fixed character ideals and monolithic conceptions of identity, frequently posit quite definite ethical ends and images of the good life. One even could go so far as to say that the postmodern style — in fiction, film, architecture and other visual arts, as well as in “traditional” autobiographical narrative — is in itself arguing for a new image, indeed a new version, of the good life. Paradoxically, this version is, in part, precisely a result

of the effort to renounce entirely the idea of a determining and normative model, a “master narrative” — an effort that is nicely illustrated in many works of contemporary fiction (see, e.g., Francese 1997). Yet in renouncing and dissolving traditional trajectories of the individual mind and identity, this effort itself makes visible, we believe, a quite specific conception of narrative integrity: an open and decentered, multiple self whose many possible voices nevertheless remain highly individuated and self-defined, whose narrated life embodies the adamant refusal of binding and substantialized character ideals.

One can explore many postmodern autobiographies and find in them much more elastic, ambiguous, and uncertain understandings of self, memory, and history than have existed in times past. Again, the blurred boundaries between closure and openness, reality and fiction, actual and possible meanings, subjective and objective time, are central to postmodern narrating — although we should not forget that most of the narrative techniques underlying these views were already developed by literary modernism (Brockmeier 1998). But now, one could come to suspect that such techniques of autobiographical narrating are used, in a focused way, not only to reject and repudiate the traditional idea of a substantial — or at least self-centered — personal identity in time and space, but also to revoke an ethical rationale based on this idea. Whatever the conception of a good life that emerges here, it will be significantly different from the well-known earlier versions. Indeed, the very changes that take place within the limited span of one’s life are often sufficient in themselves to de-stabilize and cast into question features of one’s past that might have once seemed immutable.

A good example of this sort of transformation (though not on that account postmodernist in its orientation) may be found in Jill Ker Conway’s book, *The Road from Coorain* (1989). Owing to a variety of circumstances, including being rejected for a job for which she was eminently qualified because she was a woman, Conway, who had been raised in rural Australia, received solid schooling, and generally seemed well-poised to make her mark on her homeland, was shaken awake so radically as completely to transform her view of the past. “I could not credit that merit could not win me a place in an endeavor I wanted to undertake, that decisions about my eligibility were made on the mere fact of my being female instead of on my talents... . It was prejudice, blind prejudice.” There came to emerge additional evidence of prejudice and injustice as well, in the form of ancient relics, symbols of past oppressions, buried right underneath her family home. Consequently, “I could never remember the image of my parents resting in the evening, sitting on the front veranda step at Coorain, quite the same again” (p. 191).

Indeed, she began to see double: on the one hand, “a golden image from childhood” and, on the other, the oppression of those whose lives had been terribly compromised so that her own family could be comfortable and secure, the trampled relics of the past being buried perhaps beneath that very veranda step. Her past would never be the same again. Nor would she. To risk condensing a very subtle, nuanced, and moving book into an over-simplified plot, what eventually happens is this: Conway, in virtue of the job rejection as well as a number of other circumstances and events we need not pursue here, eventually comes to find herself on the horns of a painful dilemma. She can either do the proper, “daughterly” thing and remain in Australia where she would have to tend to her ailing, and very difficult, mother; or, she could follow her heart and talent, emancipate herself from what was becoming a more and more confining world, and continue her studies in history, perhaps far away from her homeland.

Despite opting for the latter, somewhat more “modern” path, there is in the end a great deal of guilt, sorrow, and confusion. “The journey I was about to take”, Conway writes, “didn’t fit so neatly into any literary categories I knew.” In her own eyes, she had come upon hard times and sought a way out “because I didn’t fit in, never had, and wasn’t likely to”. Alongside the story of the hero was one about a lost soul, a woman who, having found herself ill at ease in her own country, “was going to another [one], to begin all over again”. The ending of her story, therefore, is hardly triumphant: “I searched my mind for narratives that dealt with such thorough and all-encompassing defeats”, she admits guiltily, “but could come up with none” (p. 236). As Conway looks back on her past and tries to come to terms with her life, her relationships, her country, and, finally, her decision to move on, she finds that there is no way to encapsulate neatly the movement of her history. She was neither saint nor sinner but something in-between, something for which there existed no set models and no ready-made narratives.

Although, as already mentioned, Conway’s life narrative does not fall under the literary category of postmodernist writing, both her life and her story clearly reflect certain elements of the postmodern condition. Conway’s book demonstrates that there is a fundamentally changed interplay between the “agent” and the “scene”, between a subject and the new cultural conditions and circumstances under which she has to live and give meaning to her life; and this interplay calls for new “constructive” abilities and skills tied to the formation of identity. What we therefore see via Conway’s autobiography is a new, more open and flexible conception of the self as well as a new challenge to the telling of its story. These features find their way into more explicitly postmodern

autobiographies as well, in the form of new types of conflicts, dilemmas, or predicaments, of *aporias* that cannot be emplotted within the traditional genres of tragedy, *Bildungsroman*, adventure story, triumphalist narrative, and so on. The implication is an interesting one: As we move into the heart of the post-modern condition, the challenge of achieving some measure of narrative integrity, far from being obviated, may in fact become intensified. Moreover, the very attempt to move away from the self may in fact lead toward it. How, in the face of such a multiplicitous array of possible selves, is one to find directions about how best to live? And how, in the face of so voluminous a library of possible narratives, is one to determine how best to tell one's story? At times, the "path inward" may appear to be the only one to take.

Autobiographical identity and the narrative fabric of life

Part of the reason for the de-stabilization of Conway's past, as told through her autobiography, is personal; her own unique circumstances and challenges had provoked her to rewrite her history as well as her sense of who and what she was. But these unique circumstances and challenges, far from being *only* personal, are thoroughly enmeshed within what we earlier referred to as the ethical fabric of the social world — in the present case, of the world in which she lives. Part of the reason her mother had deteriorated so, for instance, was that there were so few available outlets for creativity among aging women: "Society encouraged a woman to think her life finished after her husband's death and encouraged a woman's emotional dependence on her children", Conway (1989, p. 211) writes. Part of the reason she came to see those veranda steps in less nostalgic, idyllic fashion than she had earlier was that she had learned about the ways in which her own cultural heritage had flourished at the expense of others'. As for the difficulty Conway had in figuring out what sort of story to tell given her situation, there is little doubt but that this is largely a function of the fact that the world she had been living in was in the midst of changing, of questioning many of its longstanding traditions and visions of what it meant to lead a good life.

The very precariousness of Conway's story along with the memories that comprise it, therefore, serves to signify and express that sort of ethical transvaluation and upheaval which has come to characterize much of our life in Western societies after the erosion of more traditional life forms. "As one casts out to sea in the contemporary world", Gergen (1991) has commented, "moorings are

slowly left behind” and “it becomes increasingly difficult to recall precisely to what core essence one must remain true” (p. 150). The use of the word “recall” here is, presumably, metaphorical. But there is also, arguably, a more literal sense in which recall has been rendered problematic. Consider in this context a work considered by many to be one of the best examples of postmodernist literature: Michael Ondaatje’s novel *The English Patient* (1992). No doubt, this is a narrative — or perhaps better, a bundle of narratives — that offer suggestive exemplars of what we may call “open memory texts”. In his book, Ondaatje tells a number of stories about the intermingling of four different lives that are presented, in various forms of flashback, through multiple memory streams. At a certain point in history — in the final moments of the Second World War — we witness a meeting in a deserted Villa in Italy, a conversation of lives and life narratives. The many lines of this conversation center around the “English patient”, a seriously injured combatant, burnt beyond recognition, who is treated by a Canadian nurse. A number of different stories emerge out of the fragments of conversation among these persons from different nations, cultures, and histories, who are “never sure what will occur, whose fraction of past will emerge” (p. 270). Gradually, as the protagonists of the present become entangled with each other, events of their individual pasts become distinguishable — but only to blend again. While the unknown, dying patient spends these days between states of dream, morphine-induced delirium, and melancholic clarity, he is haunted by memories that mingle pictures of war and love, passion and death, history and mirage. As if this were not enough, all this is interwoven with meandering meditations about the nature of remembering, times in which both historical and individual memory are continuously being rewritten. More and more, all putatively stable and reliable borderlines blur.

It turns out that the unknown patient spent some years as a geologist and cartographer in the African desert. Against his will, he became involved in war events and, finally, had been in an airplane crash in the desert. The desert also is the book’s central metaphor of history and memory and, particularly, of the way historical and individual memory are fused. Like memory, the desert is a space that makes it easy to lose a sense of demarcation. The surfaces of dry sand erase all orders of time and space imposed by modern civilization. But the desert is not only dry sand. Shifting from one layer of time to another, from one geological layer to another, the protagonist finds himself among water people. Evocative signs of life show up, traces of civilizations that existed when the desert was covered by the sea: symbols of the broken layer structure of time, historical and individual. Past events, it seems, become part of present life,

malleable and active forces in the fashioning of experience. Their influence on our action, thought, and imagination is no less forceful than that of events in the here and now. There is no given hierarchy among the layers of memory in our mind because the notion of time, the classical candidate to offer a sequential order of events, itself appears as the outcome of a construction. Every individual in this novel constantly creates his or her new order, made out of the narratives by which we try to pull together elements from various personal and historical layers of time.

In trying to understand the secretive monologues of the burnt man, without face, name, or identity, we may be inclined to think that his fragmented stories, drawn from disparate time layers of his own life and of the world that has been meaningful to him, are designed to demonstrate a particular “autobiographical theory”, organized in a self-referential way that can perhaps be likened to Piaget’s circle of life and theoretical conceptualization. Moreover, we become aware that memory, in this view — insofar as it is constituted in and through language, such that there comes to exist a multiplicity of competing narratives of the personal past — comes to embody a conflict of interpretations. It becomes an ambiguous and at times even an indecipherable text, lacking that sort of naturally-given integrity which has often been associated with it. What at the end of the day emerges from this borderlessness is, however, no absence of order, meaning and sense, but a new vision of integrity. There emerges a world, like memory and the desert, that exists without the artificial separations of linear time, without the frontiers of political space, a world that is freed from war and from that which — according to the voices of this conversation — caused it: the traditional Western codes of value, as embodied in the system of nation-states with their endless disputes about borders and mutual delimitation. Such a picture of openness and boundlessness seems to be the underlying vision that comes with Ondaatje’s narrative. It is a strong vision of the good life.

It may be worth noting that Michael Ondaatje is of Tamil, Singhalese, and Dutch descent. Educated in England, he emigrated to Canada. He is thus a man of multiple cultural realities. With this in mind, it may be tempting to link together this multiplicity to the “narrative utopia” he has fashioned in his work and to see in both emblems of a world devoid of those sorts of integrative principles often associated with the idea of narrative. No doubt, the vision that we recognize in the fragmented life stories of *The English Patient* — who, after all, turns out to be the Hungarian Count Ladislaus de Almásy — breaks not only with traditional notions of nation and national identity, but also with the

corresponding codes of narrative coherence, temporal linearity, and personal identity. However, it does *not* break with the notion of narrative integrity. The novel ends with a cartography of the narrative “I” (or of *one* narrative “I”), a poetry-like evocation of the dying protagonist who, once again, conjures up his dream of the boundless and communal life of the nomads “who walked in the monotone of the desert and saw brightness and faith and colour” (p. 261). And he goes on to talk, now from the vantage point of his imminent own death, about his life and his last concerns. “We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography — to be marked by nature, not just label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps” (p. 261).

It is this kind of moral and ethical commitment that we believe stands behind the notion of narrative integrity and completes the compelling poetic and aesthetic integrity of Ondaatje’s prose. What we see here more generally is that the notion of narrative integrity, rather than being limited to specific genres of autobiographical narration and their associated forms of identity construction, may in fact be part and parcel of the very project of giving sensible meaning to experience. This is, of course, much easier to observe in those cases, such as Augustine’s or Piaget’s, in which there exist robust “constraints” — from God all the way to scientific rationality — on the project at hand. But it is no less observable in those cases, such as Conway’s or Ondaatje’s, in which the constraints are less binding.

As a kind of corollary to these ideas, let us offer one additional idea that may be worth thinking about in the present context. In a sizable portion of contemporary inquiry into the self, particularly in certain strands of social constructionist literature on autobiographical memory, narrative, and culture, there exist a number of interrelated suppositions. These include the idea that life histories are much more discontinuous, heterogeneous, random, and fragmented than we have often imagined them to be; the idea that autobiographical narratives along with the selves who write them are, in the end, fictive constructions; and the more general idea, particularly prominent in post-modernist and poststructuralist accounts of self, that life itself, rather than possessing any discernible meaning and shape, simply goes on, this way and that.

As such, any meaning or shape that might emerge in autobiographical memory would, from this perspective, be considered suspect, an imposition of form upon that which is, fundamentally, formless (see Freeman 1997). Again, there is a certain sense in which this picture of the self, autobiographical narrative, and memory may serve as an important corrective to earlier conceptions. It has helped to “de-essentialize” all three, to show that they are less fixed than they are often assumed to be and that they are not to be assimilated to the world of substantial “things”. Moreover, this picture has helped bring greater attention to the constructive nature of memory as well as the profound way in which memory is socially situated and conditioned. But the notion that life itself is without any discernible meaning and shape and that memory in turn serves as an imposition upon the flux of experience is, we should recognize, a distinctly modern point of view, testifying in its own right to the sort of social and ethical milieu we have come to inhabit: one that often *is* without discernible meaning and shape, one that often renders highly problematic the telling of the self’s story, one that is devoid of those sorts of ordering principles without which there can be no narrative integrity. With this in mind, it may be valuable to see in certain social constructionist perspectives on self, narrative, and memory phenomena that are themselves emblematic of the fabric of modernity.

By way of framing these issues in a somewhat more positive manner, we wish to suggest that however meaningless or shapeless “life itself” may appear to be — whether owing to one’s philosophical commitments or to the ethical fabric of one’s social milieu — it is nonetheless thoroughly enmeshed within the narrative order and thoroughly bound to the requirements of what we have here called narrative integrity. One might also think of this issue in terms of the “point” of a life, its reason for being. As Marcel (1950) has suggested, “I cannot speak of my life without asking what point it has, or even whether it points in any direction at all; and even if I decide that it is in fact a pointless business, that it points nowhere, still the very fact that I have raised the question presupposes the assumption that life, in some cases at least, might have a point” (p. 212). As a general rule, therefore, Marcel implies, however pointless or aimless a given life may appear to be, however emptied of form and meaning, there is no escaping either the narrative order or the requirements of narrative integrity.

One can, perhaps, come up with exceptions to this rule. Certain brands of schizophrenia, for instance, seem effectively to obliterate the narrative order, suspending the afflicted in a kind of atemporal netherworld, utterly devoid of storied form (Sass 1992). Experiences of extreme boredom or tedium also seem to do so (Carr 1986). But what these sorts of exceptions testify to, more than

anything, is precisely the continuity between “life itself” and narrative. And yet, is not this very notion of the continuity between life itself and narrative problematic in its own right? Does it not rely, fundamentally, on the assumption that life and narrative are two independent phenomena, isolated from one another, awaiting the mind to fuse them together? And does this not imply, in turn, that the narrativization of experience entails imposing form on that which seems essentially formless? Drawing on what we have said thus far, we wish to offer a different, and indeed more radical, way of framing the issues at hand. And that is the idea that life is always already enmeshed within the fabric of narrative. The implications of this formulation are twofold. First, we argue that there is no way to speak of what a life means, what a life *is*, apart from narrative. The second idea is that living and telling a life are not as different as has traditionally been assumed. So it is that we may wish to speak of autobiographical identity in terms of *the narrative fabric of life*.

In closing, let us return to the very first claim that we set forth at the beginning of this essay. This claim, you may recall, was that the idea of narrative integrity, rather than being limited in scope to quality of form or proportion — which is to say, to the aesthetic dimension — encompassed both the aesthetic and the ethical at once. In light of what was just suggested in regard to the narrative fabric of life, it is clear that the idea of narrative integrity also encompasses both living and telling. In important respects, its function is in fact to bind them together, to show that, in the end, there is no life apart from the stories told about it and that there are no stories apart from the ethical realm. Narrative integrity may therefore be understood as the conceptual space where autobiographical identity and the meaning of the good life meet.

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PART II

Worlds of Identity

Life Stories in Cultural Context

CHAPTER 6

“The people will come to you”

Blackfeet narrative as a resource for contemporary living

Donal Carbaugh

Living in a new community can present puzzles like those we encounter when walking a new path. While moving along it, we can see perhaps familiar plants and trees such as a dogwood bush and a white pine. With the familiar in view, we can move about the place, finding our way by attending to what we already know, being comforted by the new place's familiar features. Also, when traveling a new path, we inevitably confront something different, perhaps it is even a prominent fixture we contact repeatedly. Try as we might to understand this novelty, we are not quite able to recognize nor apprehend what it is nor its place in the local scheme of things. If we pursue our drive to understand, we might eventually learn about that situated and distinctive fixture: “I see, that's sweet grass! And that, rabbit willow!” Each, we eventually realize, plays an important, formative role in this new place, helping make this place what it is. Coming to know this enhances our senses of this communal place. Moreover, the fixture can transfix, and expand our ideas of what communal places are, and can possibly be.

As with the objects of new communities and places, so with their stories and people. So much so, in fact, we might doubt we've heard things correctly. A story may shock us: How could someone actually “sit on a cloud” and watch “the mountains”? How could THAT possibly be? Over time, we may come to doubt less what we've heard. Just as we learn to recognize sweet grass and rabbit willow and their contribution to places, so too we can better understand life's heavenly mysteries by attending carefully to other people's particular tales. Each, we may find, plays its role in making people who they are — in making places what they are. Learning how this is so may extend our senses of stories,

of places, of personal and cultural identities, of what each is, and of who we, together, might possibly be.

Periodically, since 1978, I have been taught by, discussed and lived with an “Indian” people in northern Montana of the United States.¹ This essay focuses on a small set of oral texts which members of this contemporary Native American community produced while in my company. While the texts, at first, were difficult for me to comprehend, they were also deep with significance to those who spoke them. The texts, some of which are full-fledged stories, were being constructed by speakers as a means of expressing important claims to me about themselves, their lives, and their ways of living in place. Two such statements are the following.

In the summer of 1996, when living on the Blackfeet Reservation, I was riding with Two Bears on a dirt road in his large Dodge van.² We were driving deep into — what one sign announced was — Blackfeet Country. We were high upon the great northern plains of Montana with the Rocky Mountains towering in the background — “the backbone of the world” as the Blackfeet sometimes referred to it. Our discussion turned to the sources of wisdom, inspiration, and power in our lives. Two Bears was mentioning to me, as his elders had mentioned to him, an important way of gaining insight in his life: “If you don’t understand something, or have some troubles, you can get some tobacco and go to a quiet place. If you wait for awhile, it will come to you.” We sat in silence for awhile as the van bounced along the dusty road. In a few minutes, Two Bears decided to say more about this: “Usually our people go to a high place like Chief Mountain, or Sweet Grass Hills, or just up in the mountains. Usually the first thing you do is go to a sweat lodge. Then, as you fast, you might burn some sweet grass, blow an eagle whistle, pray. And the way I do it is I sit down and focus on something like a tree in the distance. Then you can watch for the spirits between you and that tree. When the spirits do come, they can raise cane, especially the first two nights. We are a superstitious people and your imagination can get carried away and chase you back. But if you make it through two nights, you’re usually okay. By the fourth night, if the spirits show up, they teach you things like four new songs that no one has heard before. And you learn those songs. Then you can come down and maybe have some broth and share your vision and songs. This is a real source of healing and power.”

A few years earlier, in the summer of 1989, Rising Wolf and I were discussing the stresses and strains of everyday living. He used “the flypaper” metaphor to explain this process: “The way I interpret it [everyday spiritual living] to other Native American people, is like the strip of flypaper hangin’ from the wall,

the ceiling, and when it gets so filled with flies. That’s the way — in the spiritual world, that’s the way we look. Every time we step into the store, we step into a building, we step into anything. (...) It’s total confusion that will stick to you. That energy will poke you every once in a while, and you do the oddest things. You forget — the spaciest thing, the easiest thing, you space it out. When you start gettin’ into that, it’s such total confusion, then you’re probably lookin’ like that flypaper that’s full of flies.” What does one do after getting covered with all of those flies? One goes to a special place and listens: “Like one time I woke up in the middle of sweet grass. It was so beautiful! Well, I sat there and I realized it was sweet grass and I just (pause) started grabbin’ it by handfuls and I thought, well, I’ll wait. Let me see what else is here. And I just started checkin’ around. And the spirits did show up. I just laid on that sweet grass and hung onto it and just started prayin’ and tell them to ‘take pity on me. Nowadays,’ I say, ‘I’m a little confused, so you gotta watch my mind. It might wonder off and think about something else. But my heart’s with you.’ And I hang on and hope nothing but the good happens, because there has to be a balance.” Rising Wolf wanted me to know that this particular process with “the spirits” can purify one’s spiritual self, keeping it clean from the corruption of everyday affairs. As a result, he said, you get “stronger ... in understanding what’s around you.”

If the oral texts that I have reproduced here are somewhat difficult to comprehend, on first hearing them, it is not because those who made them are misguided or confused. Nor is it because, as one author some time ago unfortunately would have it, the Blackfeet have “the mind and feelings of a child and the stature of a man”. The problem here is one of communication and culture, a barrier to expressing meanings that are deep in existential significance and value. The problem arises from the evident fact that many Blackfeet people inhabit and create a cultural world of objects and events that is largely unfamiliar to most of us. What kind of world is this? Or, more specifically, what kind of cultural context must be presumed by these Blackfeet for the above statements to be acceptable as sensible claims about the world?³

Even more specifically, what do we need to know to interpret Two Bears’ claim that “troubles” may lead one to a “quiet” or “high place”? And further, while there, that “you can watch for spirits” and “they can raise cane” but also that “they teach you things” with these teachings being “a source of healing and power”? And how can we understand Rising Wolf’s claim that we attract “flies” of “confusion” as we conduct our daily affairs? How is it that he “woke up in the middle of sweet grass”, “began checkin’ around” and “the spirits did show up”? What should we make of his linking this event to his “hope [that] nothing

but the good happens” and his efforts to maintain the right “balance”? Are expressions and events like these being structured in metaphorical terms, or are they somehow, given Blackfeet premises of existence and value, to be taken literally? In cases like these, what are the distinctive meanings associated with these cultural forms of expression? What cultural logic pervades these and similar sayings, and makes them make sense?

I respond to these and other questions by exploring how some Blackfeet speak about, and address, life’s challenges through creating discourse about particular practices in places. My discussion focuses on features of these oral texts, one narrative in particular, my purpose being to discover in these texts and that narrative something of how Blackfeet construct their world and live within it. When some Blackfeet discuss life’s difficulties — or, as happens more often, when they tell stories about meeting and overcoming life’s obstacles — they create active moral and cultural texts that integrate physical objects, social events, spiritual presence, and natural place. These rather routine sayings negotiate issues and understandings that are deeply intelligible to them, thus making credible claims about who they are (and are not), what they do, where they live, and how they relate to the world, spirits, and people around them. In short, through particular words and phrasings, integral features of a people’s view of the world are being shaped to meet life’s current circumstances. Through these words and phrasings, personal circumstances are being interpreted and linked to a meaningful cultural universe.

This universe of meanings provides the cultural world, and worlds in which the texts presented earlier acquire their deeper sense and significance. Thus, if we want to understand some of the claims active in those statements, we must explore parts of that context. If we make these parts explicit, that is, if we can relate these texts and that narrative to other events and scenes of Blackfeet life, then we can more readily comprehend some of the basic premises of belief and existence that are active in those texts. Cultural premises like these comprise an informal yet robust Blackfeet model about, and for being, acting, feeling, and living in place, the model itself being both a process and product of cultural expression. The oral statements under consideration here, then, integrate through a Blackfeet model a spiritual and natural world in order to address specific contingencies of everyday life. While this dynamic play between cultural context and everyday contingencies may be near universal, the particular means for expressing this, and the cultural meanings associated with them are uniquely Blackfeet. Through their workings, we shall see, if I am at all successful, how the contemporary world is being lived in a potent, and traditional, Blackfeet way.

If it appears, then, at the onset, that the focal texts and narrative are lacking in depth or complexity, we will find eventually that both are active to a considerable degree. And should the objective of hearing cultural life in brief snippets of talk appear too narrow, we will find that more general issues are involved. Among these is the reluctance of some scholars to grapple with cultural worlds and intercultural dynamics in communicative forms, including narrative form.⁴ Also understudied is the integration of spiritual and natural concerns in communication and cultural studies, as well as human uses of traditional, memorial texts in order to meet the complex exigencies of everyday living.⁵

The discussion that follows will focus on one particular narrative text. I have chosen this text because it brings together in one oral performance the various Blackfeet features and premises that have been introduced above by Two Bears and Rising Wolf, and that are active in my larger corpus. In other words, this one narrative is a felicitous and forceful performance, striking familiar features and forms, all of which are dense with cultural significance. As befits treatments of narratives, and following a strong tradition within narrative studies, I explore in turn the narrative as a performance event, as a text produced by a speaker upon a particular occasion. This introduces several concerns contextual, cultural, and intercultural to the analysis. Then I examine some of the ritualized events being discussed or alluded to in the narrative, events active in Blackfeet traditions and contemporary lives. Finally, I treat the narrative as a deeply complex cultural form which itself uses mythic and dramatic features to honor the relevance of a sacred past to life in a troublesome present.

The narrative as performance event

In the summer of 1989 I was teaching a course in Communication and Culture at the University of Montana. I had seized the opportunity partly to enjoy the Rocky Mountain west with my family in the town where I had met my wife, and partly to further my understanding of Blackfeet communication and culture. Upon learning of my interest in Blackfeet matters, a student in my class suggested I meet Mr. Rising Wolf, a full-blooded Blackfeet who was raised in traditional ways. I thought meeting him was an excellent idea so my student, herself an Indian, agreed to arrange for a meeting between us.

During our discussions, Rising Wolf told me much about Blackfeet life mainly by contrasting its “traditional culture” with “the more contemporary way”. According to him, the more contemporary world had to do with making

a living, earning money, and being on time with a clock-scheduled existence; the more traditional had to do with natural cycles, the land, and living with “the spirits in nature”. Tuning into nature’s rhythms, cycles, and spirits, he claimed, was an integral part of one’s life as an Indian. He spoke in depth about these matters, in a language I now hear as deep with meanings. Conveying the density in the matters can be difficult, however. Especially when the way of living is less familiar to one’s interlocutor, or non-Indians generally. At one point, talking about non-Indians he had worked cooperatively with, and feeling as if he knew something of their world and they little to nothing of his, he paused and said: “White people don’t understand the Native American”. And further, part of what they don’t understand, he said, is the way spiritual life is an intimate part of everyday life and everyday things, not just “something to be set aside for Sunday mornings in the name of Religion”. Making this point, Rising Wolf emphasized the spiritual dimension of all life, and the importance of being attuned to the spiritual dimensions of all objects, people, and events. To elaborate the point, he made these remarks:

Rising Wolf’s Story: “The people will come to you”⁶

- 1) The land that you walk on is your church
- 2) In the spiritual ceremonies, they bring you there
- 3) All of the sudden, you’re not in the modern day life
- 4) You look at yourself and maybe (3 second gap in tape)
- 5) This one ceremony
- 6) it had been about six years
- 7) and I was traveling and I wanted to go home
- 8) and these old men asked me
- 9) “What would you like to do?
- 10) Would you like to pray, or anything?”
- 11) I said
- 12) “I’d like to see my home, my home land
- 13) It’s been a long time”
- 14) And all I did was I leaned over and then I sat up
- 15) and when I sat up I was in the clouds
- 16) and everybody around me was gone

- 17) These two people who were pretty tall skinny people
18) they were spiritual
19) they were Indians
20) they were just tall Indians
21) but it was in a spiritual world
22) they grabbed me by each arm
23) and we must have took — this was back east — but
24) we must have took about five or six steps
25) just like we walked right over to the edge of this rug
26) right to the edge and looked down
- 27) And down below I could see Browning
28) I could see the mountains
29) I could see East Glacier
30) I could see Babb
31) I could see all these different landmarks, up there
32) And I sat down and just looked
33) Just like you were sitting on one of these clouds outside
34) and just looked and watched everything
35) You could see little cars cruising down the streets, y’know
36) You could see my grandma’s house
37) and looked at the mountains
38) until I felt comfortable
39) and that was good
40) and thought I shouldn’t take too much time
41) ’cause I didn’t really know exactly how I got there
42) or how or where I was at
43) except I knew
44) I decided, y’know
45) I was on a cloud
- 46) Anyway, they came up, they brought me back
47) and the next thing I sat up and I was in the tepee there, y’know
- 48) And in the same way when travelling
49) when the spiritual people take you
50) You can go to different places
51) And in your dreams you can travel really a lot
52) You can go to a lot of different places
53) and see a lot of different people

- 54) And then at the same time, go to the ceremony, and have this
55) If you didn't understand something in the dream
56) you go to the elderly
57) And they'll put on the ceremony
58) And they'll have those people in that dream come to you
59) if it was real
60) If not, then they would say it was your imagination
61) But if it was real
62) then the people will come to you
63) and they'll talk to that old man as an interpreter
64) and they'll answer your questions

Upon hearing this story for the first time, I confess to being bewildered. I naively asked Rising Wolf, "So, your experience in the cloud was real?" He replied, "Uh-huh". Not being sure what this implied, I tried to clarify its exact meaning, "It's not an illusion or something in your mind, but literally, you were there". "Yes". "You literally saw what you described to me?" "Yes. Yes. And you could smell and feel". He went on, patiently, generously, in great depth, to help me understand the reality of it all.

The narrative itself

Rising Wolf's narrative meets the classic, six formal properties of narrative proposed by Labov (1972, 1982) and summarized by Riessman (1993, pp. 18–19) and Langellier (1989). It includes an abstract (lines 48–53, and similarly lines 54–64), an orientation (lines 3, 5–16), complicating action (e.g., homesickness, complex movements between places where spirits are more and less active), evaluation of action (lines 58–64), resolution (lines 38–39), and coda (line 47). In the following analyses, I will integrate these but will emphasize the Blackfeet substance of the story with special attention to its premises about communication, and its attendant shifts in scenes, events, and acts (see Burke 1945).

Following the remarks made by Rising Wolf (on lines 7, 48, and 51), the narrative can be heard as a complex travel tale in four motifs. The narrative traces movements along a spatial dimension from East to West, along a cultural dimension from a "white man's" to a Blackfeet orientation, along a temporal dimension from newer "modern day" to more "traditional" features of existence, and along a spiritual dimension from its muting to its amplification.⁷

These movements can be heard as organized into three main parts. Using Rising Wolf’s language, part one (lines 1–45) could be titled “they bring you there”, on a voyage, from the East where “white man’s” modern day life amplifies material possessions, to the West where traditional Blackfeet life amplifies spiritual living. Part two (lines 46–47) could be titled “they brought me back” in which the traveler returns to the original scene as mysteriously as he left it. The third part (lines 48–64) summarizes the point of the narrative and its movements, in Rising Wolf’s words, “when the spiritual people take you... they’ll answer your questions”. If these are the main parts, how are they put together? And what does all of this say about Blackfeet narratives and identity?

Part one: “They bring you there”

In line 1, Rising Wolf establishes a cultural scene in which “land” is something sacred. As he says, it is “your church”. As Percy Bullchild (1985, p.268), a Blackfeet elder puts it: “Nature as a whole was all sacred to our Natives. Our way was all reverence for the universe.” Rising Wolf’s equation of “land” and “church” is a way of establishing the basic belief that spirits and nature are not separate, independent worlds, but dimensions of one, interconnected world, a sacred place worthy of our deepest respect, and — like clergy or altars — to be consulted for wisdom and strength.⁸

One way Rising Wolf can observe the spirit-nature link is through “spiritual ceremonies” which he mentions on line 2. When involved in these ceremonies, like vision quests, sweat lodge rituals, and the like, Rising Wolf is involved in a special kind of communication in which “they bring you there”, into a real spiritual world where one can gain special insights. Rising Wolf gives us an important preview here of how “the powers of mystery” — as Percy Bullchild (1985, p.337) puts it — work through spiritual ceremonies. In these events, spiritual powers can work over participants in mysterious and expedient ways. Thus, “all of the sudden” Rising Wolf finds he is “not in the modern day life” anymore. He is taken somewhere else. As he says later, “I didn’t really know exactly how I got there” (line 41). He has been moved quickly and powerfully in an unknowing way to another place, or onto another plane of existence. This Blackfeet ceremonial communication thus sets a scene in which spiritual agency can dramatically transform and transfer agents through its powers of mystery. Just how does this happen?

Rising Wolf informs us how “this one ceremony” worked (on lines 5–16). He had been traveling away from home for “about six years”. As sometimes

happens on long journeys, he was feeling troubled, out-of-sorts, and homesick. He “wanted to go home”. At this point of the story, Rising Wolf introduces two characters, the “old men” who inquire about his wishes (lines 9–10), and conduct proper ceremonial activities on his behalf. With the aid of “these old men”, Rising Wolf suddenly and mysteriously finds himself “in the clouds and everybody around [him] was gone”.

Being “in the clouds” marks a complex shift in scene. “In the clouds”, we eventually discover, is a spiritual place, a traditional place from which Rising Wolf’s capacities for living can be enhanced, where traditional sources of wisdom can be tapped to meet the difficulties in his current life. In the process, the “old men” characters — through a kind of figure-ground shift between a material and spiritual motif — become (on lines 17–26) “two people”, “pretty tall skinny people”, “spiritual... Indians” who help Rising Wolf within “a spiritual world”. They escort him “right to the edge”, to a good place, which provides a better perspective from which to gain insight concerning his current woes (lines 25–26). The scene in the story has thus shifted from the “modern day life” mentioned earlier (on line 3) to a more traditional one, from a material present with “these old men” to a more spiritual presence “in the clouds”, from a Whiteman’s place “back east” to a Blackfeet “home” in the West.

The reference to “pretty tall skinny people” was quite puzzling to me upon first hearing it (as on lines 17, 20). In a recent discussion of American Indian oral traditions, in a chapter titled “creatures of their own size”, Vine Deloria (1995, pp. 156–157; also see 191–192) comments upon a character in some stories called, “the tall ones”. Many white commentators have, according to Deloria, misinterpreted this phrase as “giants” thus invoking related images of fairy tales, trolls, and tirades. In its proper Indian sense, Deloria claims the phrase can refer literally and variously to a taller tribe of Indians that once inhabited North America, to a period in history when Indians were indeed tall, or perhaps by implication to tall and strong ancestors who can serve as spiritual guides. “Tall skinny people” may, then, here refer to ancestors of considerable physical and spiritual stature that are traditional sources of aid.

With the help of the “old men” and “tall Indians”, Rising Wolf has been transported “right to the edge and looked down”, a place that helps him come to terms with his homesickness. It is significant at this point of the story, after receiving help into a spiritual place, Rising Wolf is on his own. If “old men” can help you gain access to a spiritual world, what you do and learn while there is up to you. In this ceremony, while perched on the cloud, Rising Wolf exalts, “I could see” and what he saw were familiar “landmarks”, including “Browning”,

the cultural center of the Blackfeet Reservation, and two other towns on the reservation, East Glacier and Babb. He could see his “grandma’s house” and “cars cruising down the streets”. Above all, he “could see the mountains”. He sat looking down upon his homeland, re-connected to its sacred places, important people, able to see and feel at home again. All of this “felt comfortable and that was good”.

Rising Wolf’s being now elevated, and exercising proper modesty, he does not demand too much of a “good” thing, and does not want to “take too much time” on the cloud. He reminds his listener of the powerful mystery of the spirit world saying, “I didn’t really know exactly how I got there”. To a traditional Blackfeet listener, one is reminded here of the various ways spirits can work. As Two Bears mentioned earlier, “when the spirits do come, they can raise cane”, or “they can teach you things”. “A spirit can be so rough or so timid, whichever way it wants to treat you before it bestows his power on you”, as Percy Bullchild (1985, p.337) puts it. Because of the mystery and uncertainty involved, one moves, or is moved in and out of the spiritual world with caution and reverence. Perhaps one has little if any say in the matter, but if one does, like Rising Wolf; one exercises a proper vigilance in the matter.

Part two: “They came up, they brought me back”

If arrival in the spiritual world is rather sudden and mysterious, as Rising Wolf suggests (lines 14–16), so too is its departure. He tells us, “they brought me back and the next thing I sat up and I was in the teepee there” (lines 46–47). To whom, or to what does “they” refer, here? Who brought Rising Wolf back? And what might this suggest about the movement between spaces, cultures, times, and spirits?

By this point in the story, the use of “they” is quite dense with meaning. In one sense, “they” is referring to the “old men”, to the physical side of spiritual being. In this sense, these are the people, typically elders, who respond to requests for aid, stage appropriate ceremonies, and serve as wise, active participants in those ceremonies. In another sense, “they” refers to “tall, spiritual Indians”, to the spiritual side of physical being. These people help guide spiritual existence, and channel actions and consciousness in productive ways that help the seeker. As a spiritual aid or channel, “they” can help you gain entry into and exit from a spiritual world. “They”, thus refers to a complex character who is **at once** an embodied spirit and a spiritual body. As this character acts through the body and spirit, so the seeker renews the integral connections

between the material and spiritual, land and church, as each sustains the other, so both exist together.

There is another, related sense to “they” which is not so immediately active in line 46, at least with reference to a particular character, but is a condition for the meaningfulness of that line, and Rising Wolf’s story itself. In this sense, “they” is referring — as it is being used for example on line 2 — not just to a character, but to “spiritual ceremonies” as cultural events, themselves. In this sense, the ceremonies provide a significant communicative form through which troubles are addressed, personal capacities bolstered, spiritual existence enhanced. In such events, supplicants contact greater truths and traditional sources of wisdom and power, exactly those that are at risk in Rising Wolf’s contemporary world. Moving into ceremonial events, if done properly, one can restore a proper “balance”, as he put it earlier, in one’s spiritual and physical being. Since these events work in powerful and mysterious ways, care and modesty is to be exercised. One should be thankful that the spiritual world has renewed one’s sense of living again, and take one’s leave before overstaying one’s welcome. Also due to the potency of the event, its status as “real” is to be safeguarded by those best in the position to know. And thus we return again to the “old men”, yes, “the elders”. It is “they” who help again.

Part three: “When the spiritual people take you, they’ll answer your questions”

Rising Wolf summarizes his tale and its resolution (lines 48–53). Through “spiritual ceremonies”, like the one he just described, “spiritual people” can take you “to a lot of different places and see a lot of different people”. He wants his listener to know that the same event and process can apply to various personal circumstances, to various troubles, carrying any individual to see whatever “places” and “people” might be of help.

He also wants his listener to know that these events are certifiably real. And if you doubt that, “the elderly” can “put on the ceremony”, having “those [spiritual] people” come and help you ascertain “if it was real”. In this sense, fake, false, and “imagined” experiences can be separated from the real ones. Two Bears has emphasized the point repeatedly, privately and publicly, when discussing Blackfoot beliefs and values, “our people are realists”. Rising Wolf has emphasized the reality of his recounted experience already. Through his linguistic images, he has portrayed an emphatically actual experience as when he “sat up... in the clouds”, was “grabbed... by each arm” by spiritual Indians,

and as he carefully detailed the scene he observed while “in the clouds”. Held in the grip of those experiences, Rising Wolf says, he “felt comfortable and that was good”. And he is assured that if he has any doubts about them, and if need be, he can ask the “old man” to become “an interpreter”, “the people will come”, and once again, “they’ll answer your questions”. And so he leads us in a deep circular fashion back (to line 2 and beyond) again, “in the spiritual ceremonies, they bring you there”.

**The narrative and the events being narrated:
A story about ritualized communication**

The “spiritual ceremonies” to which Rising Wolf refers (in line 2), and recounts, are specific communicative events of more and less elaborate types. The more elaborate may involve sweat lodge ceremonies and vision quests. The less elaborate may involve “smudging” and “just listening”, both relatively informal meditative acts.

The general purpose of the ceremonies is purification and renewal, purification being the discarding of everyday pestilence, renewal being the revival of proper spiritual living. Purification and renewal serve to align the material and spiritual dimensions of life, at times addressing the troubles in one’s life, helping one cope with life’s circumstances, and making one stronger in the process.

When a person feels the need of guidance or help, a ceremony can be initiated, often with the help of elders, although this is not necessary. As these ceremonies are discussed and narrated in traditional Blackfeet lore (e.g., Bullchild 1985; Grinnell 1962), they are of a generic, ritualized form (see Carbaugh 1983; Philipsen 1987). Participants may begin by traveling, sometimes alone, to a special place. Once there, they are replenished through food and/or drink and may be purified in the sweat lodge. Interested parties may then seek spiritual guidance, vision, and wisdom from the spiritual world. This might involve several acts including fasting, smoking a pipe, burning incense, praying, singing holy songs, or simple contemplative reflection. These acts may be done briefly, or might extend over a period of up to four days. Seekers then may replenish and purify themselves, again. Finally, participants return home (see Harrod 1992, pp. 22–37).

Rising Wolf of course knows deeply of these ceremonies and this kind of ritualized sequence. He refers directly to them (on lines 2, 54, and 57), and describes in detail one particular example. Within the cultural context of this

ritualized form, we can understand better the general form of activity involved here. We can understand further how the ceremonies celebrate sacred beliefs of spirits and mysteries in nature's places, and the values of modesty, tradition, and piety in everyday life.

Mythic features and form: Memory in narrative

I would like to go back to the time before time. In this mythological time we have this different character story we call myth. And the myth is sometimes from the very powerful visionary experience, very definitely from the extraordinary experience, and the myth helps it form the spirit, helps it form the spirit of the courage necessary to go on. And also the myth helps to build respect between the human world and the natural world
(Jack Gladstone, Blackfeet singer and storyteller).

Mythic forms often do for communities what dreams do for an individual. They provide a "great symbolic narrative" in which life's circumstances can be articulated and made sensible (see Philipsen 1987). Utilizing a mythos, then, can place life into a form that works not only for oneself, but also for one's compatriots, family and neighbors. Rising Wolf's narrative provides a fascinating juncture of Blackfeet mythic form and features. We will see the way the plot unfolds, the main acts that are getting done, the resolution of the drama, and the vantage point from which much of the narration is done all can be understood as features of a great Blackfeet mythos. The specific mythic resources that are at work here in Rising Wolf's story derive from ancient tales of Old Man, Scarface, and The Tail-Feathers Woman or The Fixed Star.

Myths of Napi or Old Man and Scarface: Travel tales, dreaming, and getting help

For Blackfeet people who are familiar with their oral literature, stories of Napi, or Old Man, provide prominent mythic resources for rendering life's experiences. "Napi stories have been passed down from generation to generation in the Blackfeet Nation up until today. Each family has their own interpretation of the various Napi stories, but in the final analysis each story has a common moral in the ending. One story might teach a lesson or prove a point; whereas, another story may tell of how a certain part of nature came to be" (Rides at the Door, 1979, p. 7).

Napi stories are best told in sequence. The first Napi story recorded in one collection is called “Dreams”. In its entirety, it goes like this (recorded by Darnell Davis *Rides at the Door*, 1979, p. 9):

Long ago the Blackfeet people lived by Napi teachings. Napi showed the people many, many things. Napi also gave the Indians the will to live by creating animals, plants and all living creatures for their use. He gave the people a proper way to live, but he also showed them the wrong ways.

One gift that Napi gave the Blackfeet was the power of dreams. He taught the people how to use their dreams in a good way. Men would go to the mountains to find their dreams. They would sleep on buffalo skull pillows and dream. When they returned to camp, they would follow the advice they saw in their dreams.

The Indians respected their dreams and were not afraid. They knew dreams would help all the people.

Napi taught the people all things in those days. Today we tell the stories of Napi, as we heard them from our elders.

Rising Wolf’s personal story of his “one ceremony” involves key elements of this, the first Napi myth. This mythic tale valorizes the act of “dreaming” as a culturally potent act, as a way of forming a link between the natural and human world, and of getting the courage to go on — as Jack Gladstone says. It is an active way of being in a place, a way of gathering wisdom, a way of connecting with the spiritual features of a place. A state of dreaming and sleeping can thus empower one with new insight and energy. This act falls within the traditional plot that one can “go away”, perhaps to “the mountains”, to “dream” or seek visions, and this “will help you”. Motives for dreaming are simply that one wants “help”, and can pray, dreaming being a culturally sanctioned way of answering one’s prayers. The point is made that answers are not of one’s own making, but are sometimes mysteriously offered when sought, from any number of places or creatures, and help give one the courage to go on.

The most elaborate development of this plot line in Blackfeet oral literature is the Scarface myth. In it, a young, disfigured man must travel to meet Creator Sun, so to become healed and thus suitable as a beautiful young woman’s husband (see e.g., Bullchild 1985, pp. 325–390; Schultz & Donaldson 1930, pp. 71–76; Wissler & Duvall 1995, pp. 61–66). His travels take him across great mountains, including several sites for vision quests, where Scarface learns how best to confront the considerable challenges of his trip. Eventually, the young man reaches a huge body of water he first imagines he cannot cross. He nearly gives up. Eventually, though, he is helped by huge swans who take him to the

world of Creator Sun who erases his disfiguring scar. A new man, he returns home to marry his virtuous and patient bride. If Napi's tale sends people to spirits and places to find spiritual wisdom, then Scarface's tale reminds them that traveling can generate new personal capacities and insights, among them a creation of new life upon one's return home.

The story Rising Wolf creates for his listener, then, is artfully crafted with these specific mythic features and form. The main action in the story, "in the spiritual world", is culturally potent because, as he says, "in your dreams you can travel really a lot" (line 51). The main plot moves from his wanting to travel home, to his time "in the clouds", a spiritual return home, this being a great source of comfort and goodness to him. By narrating his personal experiences through these mythic features, Rising Wolf has told us a personal tale. He has done so, however, through a mythic form that activates not just individual acts of volition but cultural acts of spiritual guidance, and not just personal plans but cultural plots that present and solve problems in traditional Blackfeet ways. As a result, Rising Wolf's life is lived and told not just according to his own personal dictates and circumstances, but moreover as following the moral guidance of that grand mythic master, Napi, and his wise words to the very "first people", when in need, "get spirit power".

The Tail-Feathers Woman or The Fixed Star Myth: A proper vantage point from which to tell

Traveling and longing for home is of course a deeply ingrained plot in many people's oral and written literatures. In fact, in some Blackfeet tales, if we didn't know better, we might suspect, as an early compiler of traditional lodge tales wrote, some "might have been taken bodily from the Odyssey" (Grinnell 1962, pp. xvii). The legend of Scarface mentioned earlier is one such tale, giving a deep form to traveling, spiritual risk, and the moral teachings of a voyage from and return to one's home-land and place. The myth of The Tail-Feathers Woman is another.⁹

When Tail Feathers Woman was a young woman, one night, she looked up at the stars, and upon seeing Morning Star said, "I'd like him to be my husband." Some time later, sure enough, Morning Star appeared to Tail Feathers Woman and took her as his bride. As the son of Creator Sun and Night Light, Morning Star took Tail-Feathers Woman to his home, the land of the Above Ones. Being warmly welcomed, Tail-Feathers Woman became an active member of Morning Star's family and village. While out digging turnips for the village

one day, the young woman noticed a huge, perfect-shaped turnip. This was the turnip Night Light had mentioned to her, and forbidden her to dig. Each day the young woman went to dig turnips, she would see this turnip and uncertain why it was forbidden, would be tempted by it. This happened again and again, temptation increasing every day. Finally, one day, the young woman could resist temptation no more, yielded, and dug up the huge, perfect turnip. Rolling the turnip aside

the woman looked into the hole in which it had grown; there was no bottom to it; she could see through it; could see, far below, the earth from which she had come; its plains and mountains and lakes and streams, yes, and the lodges of her people, in a big bottom of a river. She sat down at the edge of the hole, looked down through it a long time, looked down at the camp of her people and became very sad (Schultz & Donaldson 1930, pp. 79–80).

Knowing she would be unhappy if she did not return to her people, Creator Sun convinced Morning Star that Tail Feathers Woman must now be sent back home, or forever be sad. Relenting, Morning Star and his wife returned to her home, with Creator Sun’s blessings, and with his instructions to honor him so she and her people would have long life and happiness.

This myth is relevant to Rising Wolf’s personal story in several ways. The basic theme is a travel tale of movement between the Above and Earthly worlds. The initial motive for the movement is romantic longing, the latter one, homesickness. But further, there is the important parallelism between Rising Wolf’s narration and this myth. Like Tail Feathers Woman, he was traveling and wanted to go home (line 7), found himself in the clouds looking down (lines 14–16, 26, 32–33, 45), saw specific features of his homeland (lines 27–31, 34–37), and was comforted by what he saw (lines 38–39). Further, what he saw was identical to what Tail Feathers Woman saw, the features of the earth, the mountains, and lodges of family members.

Perhaps most striking however as a parallel structure is the point-of-view being offered for part of the narration, from up in the cloud looking down. Indeed, the description of this in the myth, reproduced above, nearly replicates that offered by Rising Wolf. Insight is gained, as one is perched on a cloud, looking down upon one’s homeland and people. The possible insights — of comfort and intercultural drama — that this viewing offers is also similar. In both, one’s longings for home are temporarily met, but also one is faced with the unrelenting recognition of being caught forever in between worlds.

The narrative as social drama: Between worlds, cultural resistance, and preservation¹⁰

If the mythic features and form active in *Rising Wolf's* narrative provide links to the past through traditional actions and morals, then the dramatic features provide historical links to contemporary events and worlds. No where is this more evident than when he mentions that the ceremonies “bring you there”, so “you’re not in the modern day life”. We find out, eventually, that “there” is “in the clouds”, and “in a spiritual world”. By implication, “here” is in one specific sense “in the teepee there”, and generally, “back east”.

The cultural meanings in the symbolic categories that *Rising Wolf* uses are considerably rich. As we have seen, with the help of “old men” and “old man”, he makes a literal movement from non-spiritual to spiritual dimensions of existence. Threads woven into his travel tale are symbolic motifs, moving him spatially from “back east” to his western “homeland”. The imagery here is also deep and rich, from the European establishment and aristocratic settlements of the eastern seaboard to the Native and natural wonderland of the western reservation. A temporal motif also suggests ways of living the “modern day life” with “traditional” resources. Wedding the spiritual, spatial, and temporal motifs, creates a rather veiled, but deeply forceful contrast between “the Whiteman’s world” and “the Blackfeet world”, between the corruption of the present, and an idyllic past. Shifting, then, from the symbolic categories of a “modern day life” to “a spiritual world” thus conveys dense cultural meanings spiritually, spatially, and temporally. Through these terms is marked movements between, and an uneasy co-existence of, spiritual and non-spiritual existence, a reservation and a non-reservation homeland, traditional and contemporary styles of living.

The historical sense of this contact with “the Whiteman”, when told by a Blackfeet, typically ushers forth in the form of a tragedy.¹¹ These tales often contrast a “pre-contact” utopia with a “post-contact” corruption, with the latter violation reverberating into crises of this day. As one example, consider the following paragraph, penned by Percy Bullchild (1985, p.390). It is the final paragraph of his long and detailed collection of Blackfeet oral literature.

The Native of the land had no expenses to pay. We didn’t have to buy food; we didn’t buy clothing, nor all the things that go with daily living. We didn’t know anything of rent, we had our portable homes, our tipis. We traveled slow because we had to walk to wherever we were going, only our faithful dogs to carry some of our burdens, but all things were fine until our white friends

brought to us their ways of destruction, their disease, their rotten food which we aren't quite used to yet, their killings, their thievery, robbery, and their cunning. This put an end to our once beautiful serene life, and today we are struggling to survive that onslaught of the whiteman, as they have never given up fully trying to conquer the continents. The Native can only pray to our Creator Sun for deliverance from this wicked onslaught and robbery of our lands and now the waters.

When Rising Wolf contrasts “the modern day life” with another more spiritual and “traditional”, as he does on line 3, he brings this difficult-to-tell plot close to the surface. His narrative rather elliptically invokes the tragic, historical tale of some past events when “whiteman” violated the “Blackfeet”, with resulting crises ensuing to this day. As Percy Bullchild reminds us, the tale is a historical one, yes, but the dynamics of that history continue into the issues of today, especially concerning “lands” and “waters”, bringing to mind current corporate requests for mining rights, petroleum wells, and various treaty violations. Such proposals violate Rising Wolf's, Two Bear's and the Blackfeet “church”.

The historical features of the narrative also introduce something more. How to move between cultural worlds provides a moral tale for contemporary living, and a dramatic tale about living in two different cultural worlds, resisting the temptations of the Whiteman's while preserving the wisdom of the Blackfeet. The deeper drama involved — of contemporary resistance and preservation — consists in addressing several semantic inversions that are active in this discourse. For example, what is deemed spiritually “real” in traditional Blackfeet lore (e.g., being in the clouds) is often deemed unreal in “Whiteman's” lore. What is spiritually alive in traditional Blackfeet beliefs (e.g., the land, rocks, and mountains) is typically viewed as dead matter to Whiteman. While the natural and spiritual world is presumably interconnected to many Blackfeet, these are separated by Whiteman. A main form of education and inspiration to traditional Blackfeet (i.e., watching and listening to spirits in nature's places) is not a typical form of education to Whiteman. Each cultural premise and form of communication of traditional Blackfeet life has been inverted and negated or deflected by typical “Whiteman's ways”. Weaving these dramatic inversions into the narrative, Rising Wolf is reminding the Blackfeet not to confuse “modern day living” with the traditional Blackfeet ways over which “the elders” are guardians. Through his narrative, and through the cultural acts and events it valorizes and celebrates, Blackfeet can garner courage and wisdom, affirm the legitimacy — and deep morality — of being a Blackfeet, and of living that way in this contemporary world.

By way of concluding: Narratives as cultural discourses

I have tried to show here how a narrative text has been crafted through a Blackfeet cultural discourse. In one sense, then, I have treated that text, and other texts, as a communication practice which itself invokes kinds of cultural events such as ceremonies, and particular meanings such as symbolic categories and semantic inversions, all of which presume and create a particular Blackfeet discourse. In this sense, cultural discourse is active in the communication practices that are circulated among a people, a set of texts in contexts, each being a situated performance related to ongoing cultural events and conversations, each rendered meaningful through culturally salient terms, motifs and motives. In the process, attention is drawn to a local discursive arena, its ways of shaping and telling stories, its history of action and acting. This is the work of a local, cultural discourse.

In another sense, the view of this particular, cultural discourse derives from a more abstract cultural discourse theory.¹² In other words, a general perspective for inquiry is active in and necessary for constructing the above account. This perspective provides a general way of inquiring into cultural discourses of narrative and identity. Proceeding on the assumptions that every narrative is an expressive text, and every text is a part of a cultural system of communication practices, inquiry must proceed in each case to discover what a narrative text is, what it expresses, and how it creatively invokes this larger system of practices. Coming to know narratives in this way is to traverse a complex path. Several questions arise. About *situations* and *forms of expression*: What are the contexts of telling and what special form do narratives take here? About *meanings* and communication *events*: What potent symbolic imagery is active, in and about what larger sequence is this being expressed? About communicative *acts*, *instruments*, and *values*: What action is getting done and what sources of messages are being monitored and valorized? About *cultural meaning systems*: What deeper meanings are getting expressed, what cultural philosophy is being presumed about what a person is (and should be), what actions can (and should) get done, how one can (and should) feel, indeed how one can (and should) dwell in places? Positioned to inquire this way is to be engaged particularly with others, through cultural discourse theory, a general way of hearing specific narrative forms in particular cultural expressions, a way of hearing in situations, forms, in events, deep meanings, and in actions, cultural philosophies of communication. In each case, the narrative form will follow its own path, and so must we.

The guiding general tactic here — with regard to Rising Wolf’s narrative text — was first to ground the analysis in the pragmatic context of its performance. This showed the relationship between this narrative and the event in which the text was produced, thus sensitizing us to the specific communicative scene of its use. Next, I explored the specific elements being used to put the narrative together. These revealed several features of the text itself; a complex travel motif in spiritual, spatial, temporal, and cultural movements, a set of structuring devices including place names, a character to action relationship, a grammar of “reality”, and a ceremonious event of “mystery”. How these elements related to other similar practices and events led to an examination of a set of rituals of which the text is about, including its particular cultural sequence and uses. Finally, I further interpreted the deep mythic and dramatic resources evident in the form of the text itself, these being related to enduring themes about living a Blackfeet life, and ways of telling that particular story. General paths are available through narratives, yes, and also we must be able to sense sweet grass and rabbit willow along the way, especially if seen from “on the cloud”.

In the resulting analyses, I hope to have shown how this narrative, and these oral texts, constructs Blackfeet conceptions of themselves, their actions, circumstances, and history. What this implies is that considerations of narrative require cultural and communicative analysis. To hear stories, in the first place, is to be situated with a teller in a particular way. To understand the stories being told to us is to know something of the local world the story is about, and which it reconstructs. One of the purposes of our inquiries, then, is to try “to construct”, as Keith Basso (1990, p. 136) puts it, “principled interpretations of culturally constituted worlds and to try to understand what living in them is like”. It is to know further whether one should, and if so, how one can and should tell a story. If we want to grasp some of the meanings people claim about themselves, their world, its objects and people, then we stand to benefit from treating narrative texts as cultural and communicative resources. We thus hear in them deeply organized symbolic statements being crafted to address the contingencies of everyday living, meeting life’s challenges in revealing ways and thus engendering the courage to go on.

“Things like that will happen”

When speaking about “spirits showing up”, Rising Wolf said, “if you think of nature every day, and pray to it every day, things like that will happen.” In his

statement is a working cultural knowledge, a set of cultural premises about the world and being a virtuous person. This involves premises of belief, about “land” and “nature” being a “church” with spirits living in nature through its objects and animals, and premises of value with moral guidance being gained from tuning into this, from attending to this realm of life. The resulting ways of the world can be very mysterious, but they are no less powerful and enduring because of this. Rising Wolf mentioned further that the more one takes time to connect with one’s environment, “the stronger you get in understanding what’s around you.” He knows this can be done in various cultural forms, through prayer, listening, and spiritual ceremonies. These provide some Blackfeet ways of communicating through which one can better one’s understanding, living a “balanced” way in this modern world, with material AND spiritual dimensions in view. And if finding one’s way involves “spirits raising cane” as Two Bears put it, or wisdom from “in the clouds” as Rising Wolf said, so be “the powers of mystery” that we all seek to understand. After all, “if it was real, then the people will come to you... and they’ll answer your questions.”

Notes

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1. My use of the term, “Indian”, reflects the usage of my consultants who refer to themselves this way. This usage of course is a subject of great conversation with several amused discussions claiming that we “Indians” are also “Native Americans”, “American Indians”, and “Indigenous”. The identity term “Blackfeet” is similarly one of many alternatives (e.g., Blackfoot, South Piegan, Amskapi Pikuni, Nitzitapi, Nixokoawa), each use active in different contexts with different shades of meaning.
2. When referring to people in public events, such as those publicized in newspapers and magazines, I do not use pseudonyms. When referring to people I observed or conversed with

in everyday settings, like Two Bears here and Rising Wolf below, I use pseudonyms, to honor the commitments I made.

3. The problem being addressed here echoes the one posed by Keith Basso (1996, p.39) concerning Western Apache oral texts, their invocation of stories and places. My debt to Basso’s earlier work runs deep.
4. I have in mind here some of the work in conversation analysis that, in principle, explores conversational structures across cultures, rather than culturally distinctive structures, forms, and sequences of conversation (e.g., Schegloff 1986). Some conversational analytic work has, however, conducted cross-cultural comparisons (e.g., Hopper & Doany 1989). Clearly, research in conversation analysis, and ethnographic studies of communication like the one which follows here, are distinct from each other, but also can be complementary, each providing insights that are beneficial to the other (see for example, Moerman 1988).
5. For the former see for example the recent works by Sequiera (1994) and by H. L. Goodall (1996). For the latter, see for examples Katriel (1997) and Peshkin (1997).
6. In an effort to capture some of the oral quality and narrative conventions used by Rising Wolf, I present an unedited text. I have however arranged his telling into lines and verses (see Hymes 1981, esp. pp. 184–199, 309–341), pauses serving to break lines, subordinate themes serving to group lines into the resulting seven parts (see below), with some features of parallelism serving to indent lines (e.g., “I could see...” on lines 28–31). For a related treatment see Gee (1991).
7. The analyses that follow treat the narrative itself as a complex form, exploring the dimensions of movement in three main parts: The first part consists of five stanzas (The land... is your church, they bring you there, I wanted to go home, In a spiritual world, I-you could see). The middle part, of one stanza (They brought me back), and the final part of two stanzas (When the spiritual people take you, They’ll answer your questions).
8. Some Indian writers and speakers have discussed the relationship between the spiritual and material as the heart of intercultural troubles between Indians and Europeans. The well-known Ogala Lakota activist, Russell Means (1992, p.56), has put it this way: “*Being* is a spiritual proposition. *Gaining* is a material act. Traditionally, American Indians have always attempted to *be* the best people they could. Part of that spiritual process was and is to give away wealth, to discard wealth in order *not* to gain. Material gain is an indicator of false status among traditional people, while it is ‘proof that the system works’ to Europeans.” He suggests further, “the European materialist tradition of despiritualizing the universe is very similar to the mental process which goes into dehumanizing another person.”
9. For the following analyses I am drawing upon the versions of this myth recorded in Schultz & Donaldson, 1930, pp.76–82, and in Wissler & Duvall, 1995, pp.58–61.
10. The concept of social drama I use here is indebted to the works of Victor Turner (1980). The concept explicates a cultural form in four phases, violation of a code, subsequent crises, attempts at redress, and either social reintegration or schism (cf. Philipsen 1987).
11. I am introducing an historical tale here that, in my field experiences, is typically alluded to very indirectly by Blackfeet, if mentioned at all. So, I introduce it here because I think it is also indirectly active in this telling, primarily at line 3, with Rising Wolf’s mention of “the

modern day life". The historical tale also provides a condition for Rising Wolf's and Bullchild's tellings, for the events being narrated, indirectly and directly, in the tragedy, create, in part, the very exigence for the existence of these stories.

12. Several discussions of the general perspective guiding this inquiry are available (see for example, Carbaugh 1996, 1999; Philipsen 1987).

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CHAPTER 7

Narratives of national identity as group narratives

Patterns of interpretive cognition

Carol Fleisher Feldman

This paper began with a puzzle. What was going on with American national decision-making and ways of talking about it? Something seemed wrong with the national pattern of narration, a recurrent way of telling stories that seemed to subsume all sorts of particular events to a common abstraction that consumed rather than illuminating them. What was the common narrative pattern, where had it come from, why was it so pervasive, why so consuming, and what general principles of psychology, if any, did it implicate? This series of questions has led me on a long odyssey far from my familiar turf — most notably into American history, and into studies of popular culture, especially the Western movie. I have been greatly aided by scholars who have brilliantly illuminated each of these several areas — Turner (1962) on the American Frontier, Wright (1975) and Cawelti (1984) on the Western, and especially Slotkin (1993), who put them together before me. But my own special preoccupation throughout has been with the cognition of these matters, and that is what this paper is about.

I will analyze only American narratives of national identity, but I imagine that, at least in this Century, national narratives elsewhere have generally been similar in certain respects. Provisionally, I propose that all national narratives are typical of group-defining stories in that (a) they are highly patterned, (b) that they also affect the form of personal autobiography, and, (c) that they go underground as cognition where they serve as mental equipment for the interpretation of events.

In what follows, I will try to show that this description works for the American national narrative, and I trust that, so far as it goes, it would be right to attribute it to many others. But, of course, each national narrative is different, and there will be many features, including some important ones, that the many

national narratives do not share. Consider, for example, the manner of patterning. National identity stories may have a distinctive genre, but which genre is chosen is bound to vary. We may find a tragedy in one place, a romance in another. Moreover, these differences would have important consequences for the other matters in the general case, notably the particular genre of self construction, and the particular cognitive pattern of interpretation generally applied to current affairs.

I will begin with the general case, turning now to a study of group defining narrative to exemplify it. Then I will turn to the patterns of the American National Identity story, both general and particular. Finally I will speculate a bit about how national identity narratives may differ, as a general case, from other kinds of group defining story.

Group narratives: Theater groups

While it is obvious that group narratives must vary widely in details of plot, their historical circumstances of each necessarily being distinctive, what is less obvious is that they often differ in genre, even when the groups are situated in the same way in, and in the same corner of, the real world. In an earlier paper, Bruner and Feldman (1996) reported a study of experimental theater companies in New York City. Analyses of their interviews revealed striking genre differences between the groups even though their real world situations were very much alike. The commonalities between them were these: they all attended the same University, they graduated in the same year, all three groups came together on the basis of friendships made at school; and they were all struggling with the same problems of money, space and audience typical of New York non-commercial theater. But if they shared a common reality, their narrations of it were distinctive. A group that we called "Seminarrians", told their story as a *quest*, a type of romance. Another, that we called "Apprentices", told theirs as a *Bildungsroman*, a tale of personal development and "growing up". In Northrop Frye's (1957) typology of genres these two tales could not have been more different, the first belonging to the high mimetic mode, the second to the low. According to Frye's fundamental distinction, the high mimetic has a superior hero and is in the romance genre (or if the hero is divine, the myth), while the low mimetic has an ordinary hero and gives rise to comedy and modern realistic fiction. By the way, Frye expected national epics to fall into the romance genre, a matter we shall return to later.

The Seminarians tell this story: “We are a small, closed group of actors, an ensemble, who share a common theater technique and philosophy taught by our founder and sustained by our managing director. We have remained faithful to our common principles from the day we formed.” Framed in a rich narrative of events in space and time, this narrative of dedication has the feeling of travels on a (successful) spiritual mission, hence a *quest* story. The Apprentices’ story is in sharp contrast. It is the story of a group whose individual members are, by virtue of membership in the group, enabled to undergo personal development as artists, all under the wing of their two group leaders (executive directors), who provide them with opportunities to improve and test themselves, hence a *Bildungsroman*.

We were stunned by the genre differences between the groups. After all, both groups were acting groups. But group identity narrative is *not* just a report of what people *do*, but also of how they do it, and with what relationships among them. All three groups were trying to work out their own approach to theater, each in its own way. They had different ideas about what was important in theater, and different ways of relating to each other, the Apprentices being highly familistic. And these two factors were of different relative importance — theory for the Seminarians, relationships for the Apprentices. The genre they constructed had to take all of these matters into account if it was to work as an interpretive model of *their* particular kind of shared experience, their particular constructed pattern of meanings.

The next consideration is the relationship between the personal autobiography and the group story. How similar or coordinated should we expect them to be? Which is the earlier or more basic of the two, and, more generally, what are the processes by which narratives move from within to without, or without to within?

The matter is not any clearer theoretically, or metatheoretically, than it is empirically. Anthony Cohen (1994) attributes to sociologists the view that individual selves are mere internal copies of social culture, and to psychologists the reverse of this view, with social structure a mere projection of private mental life. While the psychological view may trivialize the importance of the group as a bearer of structure, and indeed raise a question about how individuals ever manage to make a non-solipsistic, sharable story of self, the sociological view might seem positively Orwellian. It could give rise to suspicions that group tales would grab hold of and control individual minds. And perhaps that is sometimes the case, but it would be the exception, a terrifying one, rather than the rule.

As a solution to these competing claims for sole metaphysical legitimacy,

Cohen (1994) proposes that we adopt a more symbolic view of self accounts, in which medium they could partake of both group patterns and personal ones, and all at once. Then the unbridgeable difference between competing ontological commitments to individuals or to groups becomes nothing more than a rather uninteresting chicken and egg problem about a story that will be rewritten many times.

And in fact, probably most of the time we write and rewrite our group and personal stories at the same time. This was evidently the case for the theater groups we interviewed, for there were no pre-existing groups before they formed, and group stories came into being at the same time as personal stories about each actor's life as an actor were being born. Of course, there would have been plenty of cultural raw material around for writing both — theater lore, literature, even myth. And such cultural material provided an interpretive vocabulary for both group and individual stories. Each story could have informed the other, perhaps the group story the individual one by internalization, perhaps the individual story the group one by projection. In any case, among the Seminaricians, who all went on the same quest together, the group and individual stories were strikingly similar, while among the Apprentices, the two kinds of stories were much further apart as each individual was differentiated from the others by their personal *bildungsroman*.

All Seminaricians were on the same quest. They even report group experience in the first person plural, have more shared vocabulary, and a more uniform plot sequence across members. And not surprisingly, their account of the bonding of individual and group has a moral basis. Seminaricians see their group as standing for a set of principles, that are also their own personal principles. It is not that the boundary between self and group is blurred, but rather that the group and its individuals are seen as very much in harmony. In contrast, individual Apprentices each worked at mastering different acting skills, often alone, and so at different times, in different ways. All they shared were the family of leaders (parents) and members (children) that allowed them to grow, and the possibility of growth. Since this was seen by most as an uncompleted task, they remained disparate at the end of the narration.

Note that genre not only patterns the telling, and affects the form of individual autobiography, but that it also serves as a cognitive structure for experience, which is the third point I want to make about group narratives in general. As Ricoeur (1985) says, “[emplotted] order may be assigned to the productive imagination for which it constitutes the schematism” (p. 19). Group narratives, then, are vehicles that both constitute the reality of the group, and,

at the same time constitute a way of thinking for each individual member.

The way of thinking that narrative cognition invites is *interpretive*. It is a form of thought that assigns meaning to particular experiences or events *by placing them in a narrative pattern*. By supplying a common interpretive framework for the experience of group members, narratives of group identity even create the interpretive community with whom meanings are to be shared.

There are as many possibilities for group defining narratives as there are meaningful kinds of group affiliation in human experience. Most lives in modern Western life are enriched by multiple group affiliations — with the family, the neighborhood, the workgroup and the nation, to name a few rather standard ones. Many such affiliations carry a group-defining story with them. A particular event can appear repeatedly in a single person's various group identity narratives, and with variable effects. For example, a promotion at work can have different meanings in one's family story, and one's workplace story. It could be a turning point in one story but not the other, or a moment of glory in one and of alienation in the other. Multiple narrative frames lead us to multiple meanings, within multiple narrative perspectives from which an event can be viewed. This can be empowering and freeing, or simply disorienting. That would depend, very likely, on how aware somebody was of the story frames they were using, and how these frames fit into a broader meta-narrative about identity, something beyond the scope of this paper.

The American National narrative

American National narrative, like other kinds of group defining stories, is (a) patterned, (b) affects personal autobiography, and (c) serves as a cognitive basis for interpretation.

I turn first to pattern. Tom Engelhardt (1995) calls his book about American national identity *The End of Victory Culture*. He traces our American version of self to a mythic tale, now instantiated one way, now another, but always built to fit a plot type that he calls "triumphalist". This narrative depicts a scenario where challenges are posed, met, and conquered, always with moral credit to the victor who decisively destroys the enemy. The narrative is a typical *romance* with respect to genre: A superior hero is opposed by a much stronger, but morally inferior, antagonist with whom he has a climactic battle in the end after a series of lesser adventures. Moreover, it partakes of this Romance feature: a dialectic of opposites. Frye (1957) says that "the central form of romance is

dialectical: everything is focussed on a conflict between the hero and his enemy, and all the reader's values are bound up with the hero" (p. 187). The triumphalist Western plot requires that the hero must win in the end, which has the effect of selecting a particular romance subgenre: the quest. Thus, the American narrative is patterned by both genre and plot. The plot is a distinctive one, described by Engelhardt (1995) as "triumphalist". The genre is that of a particular kind of romance, a quest.

That is the pattern of the canonical American narrative: the classic Western. The cover of Engelhardt's book is decorated with a lurid pop drawing of a lone cowboy pursuing an Indian in the wild west — a drawing typical of those that decorated the covers of the "dime novels" where the Western narrative made its first appearance.

Now I have to take a little diversion to talk about the history of the Western and its subsequent development. Then we will turn to the effects of this story on individual autobiography as given by American undergraduates today, and then to the issue of how it works as a cognitive system.

Although the Western seems canonical today, it actually emerged as a popular genre quite recently, toward the end of the last century. Interestingly, it was a commercial product from the start. Slotkin (1993) derives it from a more generic romance: the story of the frontier. He notes that both the romance of the frontier and the popular Western became important after the historical realities that lay behind them began to disappear. Frye (1957) says that the romance is a wish fulfillment genre, one that takes place in a golden age and often sentimentalizes the past, so the timing noted above is in fact just right.

The Western narrative got a tremendous popular push from Buffalo Bill (William Cody), and his Wild West Show. According to Slotkin (1993, pp. 69–87), William Cody was a frontier jack-of-all-trades until about 1869, by which time he had become a popular and well-known scout for gentleman hunters from the East. He wrote his first novel in 1869, and his first drama in 1871. The Wild West show developed from that, and after many years of touring, opened an exhibit called "The Wild West" on the Midway next to, and seemingly part of, the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893. It had cowboys and Indians, and horses, on exhibit, and Cody's plays with these characters were staged. Cody insisted that The Wild West was not a show, but rather a place. Or rather that his exhibition was a piece of the real thing itself. Slotkin notes that the idea that there was progress from the untamed to the corporately organized that dominated such thinking about the frontier as that of Theodore Roosevelt in his *Winning of the West*, was iconically represented on

the Midway itself. The end of the long road was the White City, a place of perfect harmonious order, the beginning The Wild West.

Cody himself was an incredible character, blurring not just in his commercial products, but even in his own person, the fictional and the real. Slotkin (1993, p. 72) writes that after Cody had achieved a certain theatrical success, and correspondingly, verisimilitude as a representative of the wild west, he was invited to take part in the battle between the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne that took place in 1878. Delayed by his theatrical engagements back East, he arrived late and alone and found himself with a lone Indian on an open plain. Wearing his favorite costume, something with velvet and lace, he slew the Indian, scalped him, and carried the scalp into the Army's camp, saying he was "the man who took the first scalp for Custer". By the way, he took both the scalp and the story back East with him, where they served as exhibit and stage play in his *The Wild West*. In the play, Cody acting as Buffalo Bill, "slew" an actor playing the Indian and then, at the triumphal moment of the dramatic rendition, thrilled his audience by holding up what they all knew to be the *real* scalp from the actual event depicted in the play.

Though the Western did not become an important popular narrative until the 1890s, it had extensive roots in the past. In popular historical writing about the frontier, and in the literature about our national historical origins — the search for freedom, the Revolutionary War against British Oppression. The stirring words of the historical figures of those times: "Give me liberty or give me death" told Americans of the 1890's who they were by telling them who they had been. The exceptionality, populism, and triumphalism of these origins created fertile ground for the Western and its typical genre and plot patterns.

Until recently, that is until the baffling American defeat in the Vietnam war, the cowboy story was our American national identity story. With Vietnam, according to Engelhardt, something, indeed everything, went wrong with the American identity narrative. According to Engelhardt, the loss of our defining narrative was also fed by another source, and that was the disaggregation of American society. In the new multiculturalism that began at almost the same time, many subgroups of Americans, as part of defining their subgroup identities, began to separate themselves from the canonical narrative, or rather, to relate themselves to it in a variety of new ways. Sometimes it was adopted but appropriated by the special groups as distinctly belonging to them, and to them only. In other cases, the distanced relationship took the form of identifying with the Indians rather than with the cowboys. Women, blacks, Asians, Chicanos, and gays sometimes felt more like victims than heroes.

Some groups de-subscribed from the canonical triumphalist narrative altogether, for example, in favor of a story of love and toleration where apparently polar forces find a reasoned, negotiated settlement in which they can peacefully co-exist — rejecting the romance genre’s dialectic of opposites at the same time. But even then the cowboy story was always in the picture, acting here as a foil. A story of toleration like Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech is always anti-triumphalist in the American context. It was an anti-myth that eventually acquired a mythic status of its own, and it was unsurprising to hear it echoed in the words of Rodney King on the eve of the Los Angeles riots that were triggered by the police brutality he himself had suffered: “Can’t we all just get along?”

At the same time, Westerns — novels, and especially movies, underwent a parallel change. Will Wright (1975) documents a series of changes that transformed the classic cowboy story first into a vengeance story in which the cowboy though still basically a good guy is acting from blacker motives. Then to what he calls the “transitional” story, and finally to the professional Western in which the now professional cowboy hero (a tough-guy for hire) can be motivated entirely by greed, and only other aspects of his character, usually social, such as his close connection to other members of his group, makes him likeable enough still to work as a hero in any sense at all. The successive changes are an increased moral muddying of the purity of the Western hero’s motives that go from entirely charitable to entirely selfish, making him a hero of a more complex and ambiguous kind, yet a hero still. Of course, this had its exact parallel in the way the understanding of other, nonfictional, heroes evolved in the same period — from Vietnam’s soldiers to Presidents.

How could such extreme changes take place and yet have the hero still function as a hero at all? Part of the answer lies in the mythic status of the Western, with its resonant eternal meanings, and its echoes of Westerns past. Part of it lies in the highly patterned structure of the cowboy myth — its constant plot functions across the variant subgenres, and the constancy of its genre. For, the required plot functions of the subgenres have a good deal of overlap, including not least the cataclysmic ending. In the same way that this thick patterning allowed the Classic Western to absorb Indians but also land speculators and Eastern railroad owners, and even corrupt agents of the law, as bad guys without losing touch with the original mythic meanings, the myth survived significant evolution of the archetypes expressed in the main characters seen in the various subgenres. In fact, survival of the myth probably depended on it, as the blacks and whites of an earlier America, and especially of its way of understanding

itself, gave way to the grays that began to invade our national consciousness after Vietnam. And yet, with all the muddying of the protagonist's virtue, the contemporary Western still retains the polarity between good and bad so central to this myth. The heroes are still good guys, even if they are flawed. No longer in the observed, the polarity of good and bad remains ever latent in the text.

So far we have seen that the American National Narrative began historically with our historical Revolution for Independence. We triumphed in that event and asserted our exceptionality. The America of those days was a small area, but a much larger space beckoned, and a much larger population arrived to claim it. Thus began the spreading of America toward the Pacific, through terrain that was wild — the moving frontier. Each new portion of the wild space was tamed successively, and the American progress triumphed over it and all its many dangers. The prototype hero of this story was a strong (that is, even more dangerous, had he not been civilized) American who could triumph over danger and emptiness, bringing American civilization — safety, order, churches and schools, to a dangerous empty space.

The Revolution story fed into a frontier story which fed into the Western, and sent its basic pattern out laterally to other subgenres such as the Pinkerton stories, and so-called “hard boiled detective” fiction. But throughout these dispersals, the same story was told over and over again. It was a story we never tired of hearing. And the same patterned template was used to tell it: the same set of plot functions, the same dialectic between good and evil, the same strong (and good) hero, the same build-up of small adventures leading to the same violent confrontation at the always triumphal end, and the same romantic genre — the quest. It was the interpretive cognitive structure all Americans shared, and it framed the national dialogue about civic events. And then it launched us into the Vietnam War, and for whatever reasons, a large group of mostly younger Americans refused to interpret the battles of that War as good against evil, or civilization against savagery, or our engagement there as progressive. It was not a quest, it was violence unjustified, ignoble. This rejection of the national mythic story was at least as important as the rejection of the draft itself. Moreover, after we lost, all Americans ceased to see that War as triumphal. Our first real loss shook everyone's attachment to the victory narrative we had been telling over and over again. But what did we replace it with?

A recent story in the New York Times reported a teenager's suicide in Pierre, South Dakota, and went on to discuss the large number of prior teen-age suicides in the same town, and in several other widely dispersed and dissimilar places. Naturally, people were interviewed to speculate about why, and several

factors were ruled out, but bafflement remained. The New York Times (1998) report suggested that perhaps the problem was the lack of a canonical group narrative: “And in the middle of a half-plains, half-mountains state, Pierre seems unsure if it is more ‘Mayberry’ [a friendly small town in a popular TV show] or ‘Old West’”. This explanation was reported to come from the Rev. Charlie Wharton, the police chaplain, who was said to have added, “You get to this point, you want to try to figure out what you can blame. Believe me, I’ve looked.” Evidently the cognitive patterns that could give meaning to lives and events are widely shared, for everyone knows the wild west and the Mayberry stories. Wharton’s notion is that these adolescents are suffering because they simply cannot decide to adopt some known narrative as their own, and are thereby rendered narrativeless. It is implicit in his view that without a story to bestow it, their lives have no meaning.

Historically, the canonical narrative of American national identity has had powerful resonance with autobiographical narratives of individual identity. This shouldn’t surprise us since with the quest genre we expect fusion between group and self as we saw in the theater group that we called Seminarians. We have tended to identify ourselves with a cowboy vanquishing the alien other — in business, in professional lives, even in private life in dealing with weakness, disease and death. Americans, for example, do not speak as passively suffering illness. Instead, we battle it. As our adversities were to be overcome, not suffered, we were also not caught in our fate. But things have changed, whether in the experiential quality of American life or only in narrative, and more and more the young especially, who are, by the way, the children of the generation who were young adults in the late 1960’s, reject this particular national story as the story of their own lives. With the end of the quest genre also came the end of fusion of self story and the older group story.

We collected interviews on American Identity with undergraduates at New York University. Nearly all of them pointed to a gap between how they *should* see things as Americans (triumphally) and how they actually see them. Many reported extreme discomfort with adopting the American triumphalist narrative as their own. One student even mentioned John Wayne in pointing to the American he was not. Still it was surprising that the Western was so thoroughly, and consciously rejected, and one may wonder why. It may be that choosing to be an undergraduate in New York selects for an unusual group, namely just those kids who feel they cannot fit in with the American canonical tale.

Different people give different reasons for why they are not typical Americans. Many refer to ethnic differences, to gay identity, or to values that function

in their stories much as ethnic differences do in others to make them outsiders. One solution was to resist the suggestion that being an American is part of their identity (or, by the way, that the President represents them, or even that he should). Another is to define what an American is in a new way: Americans are people who have a family.

Thus, a new National Identity story seems to be emerging among at least this group of young adults. In the tale they tell, genre and plot are minimal. Rather they outline a plight they feel they are trapped in on the brink of adulthood. Perhaps this should come as no surprise, since we know from our earlier work (Feldman et al. 1993) that plight is the typical shape of adolescent interpretations, especially of coming-of-age stories.

I can make a few preliminary observations about the new plight that has replaced the triumphalist tale for this group of college students. Though the interview was completely focussed on American identity, we found as much lexical emphasis on personal life (*family, house, home, etc*) as on government-related content words (*government, political, power*). Their version of being American is living in a house with a family, a matter I will return to in a moment. And we found very high frequencies of the words *different* and *stereotype*, by contrast with Thorndike and Lorge (1944). For though it is not their own, the American Western is hegemonic in their picture of the America around them, asking them to conform, even pressing them to conform. And this sets up their plight: divergent paths lead to conformity and wealth, on the one hand, or to independence and meaning on the other. It is what is at stake in this dilemma that comes as the biggest surprise: whether the young person will succeed in having a family (spouse, children, house) as adults. Managing it wrong could leave one alone, and both paths have that risk. Conformity brings the money for a family, but the family could be incompatible with a career, and with a certain mean selfishness the career requires. Being non-conformist simply threatens success, and therefore the financial means to have a family.

If being an American is having a family and a house, plainly the American identity narrative is in transition. In some regions, and certain generations, the classic Western may still have its mythic proportions. But among some people, the hero of the classic Western is a story about someone else. To some extent, this may always have been the case, for there were perhaps always many American identity stories, some of them tracked by the changes in the Western genre itself after it evolved out of the classic form. Certainly the powerless and impoverished cannot have identified with the classic cowboy hero. Or when they did, perhaps they saw the meaning of this story in a different way, say with

a heavier emphasis on bringing justice to an unjust world. And yet there is something distinctive about the canonical and hegemonic flavor perceived in this story even today. Or maybe even more especially today. It shows up in our young people's fear of non-conformity with it. Is the American case different from other national identities in its singularity? I don't know.

Finally, consider the odd status of the American national narrative today. Matthews (1998) points out that ours is a *completed* triumphalist story. By 1998, Vietnam notwithstanding, America had become the sole large world power, apparently having defeated, sometimes willy-nilly, all its adversaries. The need for a new narrative is also partly due to this. Remembering that the quest we have been on was a struggle against the odds, it simply has no relevance in these post-triumphal times.

Features of national narrative

The Western is one national narrative among many. What can we learn from that case about the more general case? What can we expect of national narratives as a group? I want to back up now and consider how national narratives might be expected to exemplify the still more general case of the group defining story. National narrative is in many respects typical of group defining story, not least in its patterned structure (and even in its particular patterns: indeed we even saw one acting group as of the same quest variant of the romance genre as the Western). All national narratives are in some way about power, even when as in the case of some small countries (such as Denmark, see Borish 1991) they are about the absence of power. When they are about great power, this doubtless affects the range of suitable genres. National identity stories tend, Frye notes, to be romances. But of course they need not be triumphal, especially when they are seen as ending in defeat rather than victory.

If Frye (1957) is right that the romance genre is typical of national stories, one important, but by no means distinguishing, feature of national stories may be their genre. Such national narratives as the Serbian story of an old injury crying for revenge, or the Nazi story of a superior people in a life or death struggle to extirpate inferior alien infiltrators probably are romances. Their triumphalist plot patterning is more distinctive, but it too is found in other kinds of narratives — say, in battles against injury or illness. Even the combination of romance genre and triumphalist plot does not seem to distinguish national identity stories from all others.

So, it seems there is much in common between national narratives and group narratives of other kinds. The distinctiveness of national narratives has more to do with how nations are distinctive than with how their narratives are — their police power. Most group stories, and especially workgroup stories, go unarmed. National groups, have coercive power other groups do not share — police, courts, prisons, soldiers, and guns. It gives their narratives what Durkheim (1968) called “exteriority and constraint”, of a special kind that has the potential to cause havoc.

Turn now to the uptake of national narratives in individual autobiography and the making of the self. National narratives are plainly much like other group narratives in serving as vehicles for self-definition. Like other group narratives, they vary, some leading to more identification between self and group and others to less. But, the coercive power of nation states must also affect the way national narratives are taken up as stories of the self. First, consider fusion and distancing between individual and group. The police power of nations, even of weak nations, is still powerful to the individual within them. This could lead to exaggerated reactions, either of fusion — leading people to accept the national story uncritically as their own, or of rebellion. Moreover, whether because they are backed by political power or for other reasons, some national narratives, like many religious stories, have a flavor that could be described as “prescriptive”. They can tell us not just who we are, and were, but who we should be. We saw this in our interviews with the American undergraduates who, having rejected triumphalism, describe the triumphalist narrative as pressing on them to conform and fit in or be ejected as an alien other. So whether we want to take on our national narratives as our own or not, they do write their story on all of us who constitute a nation. They are part of what we react to.

It seems to me that triumphalism has damagingly inhibited other sources of strength in American political life. It certainly provided cover for our non-negotiatory national style in resolving disagreements with other nations. In international relations, high-handed, non-negotiable, even bullying stances were too easily made acceptable by their fit to the much admired image of the lone, silent, but heavily armed, hero. But internally too, the cowboy has often beaten out (and beaten up) the communitarian side of American civic life. The style of the 1998 Kenneth Starr grand jury inquiries into President Clinton tells us that no one is safe from the surviving vestiges of triumphalism, if even the President is not.

If the citizens were still using the classic narrative as their cognitive model for interpretation, the President should have been pushed by these events into

the role of a bad guy. But he has not been. The American people, in their continuing high approval ratings, may have expressed not just the new maturity about private sexuality so often referred to, but a refusal to see him in this role in a story they know well. In order to do this, they have had to reject the narrative altogether, given that that is where it leads.

But without a new narrative pattern, interpretation of the events is hard, is confusing, is unfocused, and most important, is unshared. That is what I believe we see in the state of things today (the date of this writing is October, 1998), and especially in the need to discuss these events over and over again. We are trying to find their meaning, and along the way we are trying to find the narrative frame that will let us do that in our national discourse. This is something we all do together. For such important civic events, being in a conversation with others is important to everyone. The new developments in our national story are under discussion for some of the same reasons that we shared the Western, because we nearly all want to be part of a social, intersubjective, dialogic community when it comes to something as essential to self as National Identity.

Given the power of states to *enact* their story with or without permission from others, there is an important question about how we shall evaluate national narratives. Zimmermann (1996) was among the first of many observers to note the essential role of national narrative or myth-making in the Bosnian war. An ancient historical injury was dusted off, and told over and over again as the turning point of a new Serbian national identity story. Once this story achieved historical verisimilitude, the events that ensued may have seemed necessary, even right. Genocidal national stories haunt us with their uncanny power. They can, at times, lead apparently normal people to find meaning in, and to justify, unspeakably barbarous acts. Plainly national narratives do lead to terrible consequences that ordinary group stories do not. But, *mutatis mutandis*, all group stories raise important evaluative questions. Some workgroup stories must be better than others not just for the survival of the group, but also, for the style of life of the groups' members. By using the word "style" I do not mean to mark this as a trivial matter. On the contrary, it is one that deserves serious attention as we contemplate the important place of corporate cultures in the modern world, but I cannot take it up here.

Conclusion

What, then, can we learn from studies of narrative thinking about the problems of national identity in the world today? Perhaps we can see the following five possibilities: (1) Narratives of national identity can be approached by seeing them as a special case of the group-defining story. (2) Group-defining stories can be highly patterned, having a distinctive genre and plot structure, with all group members able to tell their group's story in much the same way. (3) Narratives of national identity are a special case of the group-defining story by virtue of their particular exteriority and constraint, which is derivative from the police power of nations. (4) Just as group membership confers meaning on individual lives, group-defining stories have an effect on stories of the self — that is, on the individual autobiographies of group members. When members are strongly identified with a group, member's autobiographies may be expressed with the same narrative form that the group story has. (5) The patterns of group-defining narratives, genres among them, are not found in stories alone, but also become part of the cognitive equipment of the members. The way they function in cognition is as interpretive frameworks that tell what meaning can be attached to events. In general, group-defining narratives facilitate interpretation, or allow particular events to be given a meaning, by supplying a particular shared context within and with which they take on a determinate meaning.

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CHAPTER 8

“You’re marked”

Breast cancer, tattoo, and the narrative performance of identity

Kristin M. Langellier

[My tattoos] tell my story; they are illustrations of my personal myth. They make me feel strong and at the same time they remind me of my mortality.

Michelle Delio (1994, p. 13)

Rhea, a married Franco-American from Maine with three children, is in her early forties and tenth year of survival after being diagnosed with breast cancer at age 32.¹ She has had breast cancer twice, the first time undergoing a lumpectomy with radiation and the second time, four years later, a mastectomy. Three years after the mastectomy, Rhea has her scar tattooed with a design of Victorian pressed flowers. Near the end of the second of two interviews chronicling her experience, Rhea says, “you’re marked” to describe the “aura” of having breast cancer. “You’re marked” captures the palimpsest of breast cancer written on Rhea’s body: the layered markings of the breast cancer, the mastectomy scar, and tattoos, each inscription overwritten, imperfectly erased, and still visible on the parchment/skin. From the interior to the surface, from tumor to tattoo, these textured layers of meanings are stamped literally and figuratively on Rhea’s body. And, like women’s bodies everywhere, this tattooed body is a site of struggle over meanings.

In the United States, breast cancer now strikes one in eight women in their lifetime; 46,000 women died of it in 1994 (American Cancer Society 1997). Arthur Kleinman (1988) includes breast cancer as “a culturally marked illness, a dominant societal symbol that, once applied to a person, spoils radically the individual’s identity and is not easily removed” (p.22). Treatments for breast cancer, sometimes referred to as the Slash/Burn/Poison trilogy (surgery,

radiation, chemotherapy) are traumatic and often mutilating, an additional source of stigma, often starkly visible and a challenge to body image and femininity.² The experience of breast cancer is thus a biographical disruption of physical and emotional integrity, threatening death, marking women's lives, and changing their sense of personal and social identity. Arthur W. Frank (1995) asserts that illness is a call for stories: the body needs a voice which disease and illness take away. The wounded storyteller narrates a story *of* the body *through* the body.

In telling their illness stories, women order events and construct what the breast cancer experience means to them and to significant others as personal narratives (Bury 1992; Garro 1994; Riessman 1990; Williams 1984). Kleinman (1988) terms these stories illness narratives, differentiating between *disease*, a diagnostic entity encoded by medical discourse, and *illness*, how the disease is perceived, responded to, and lived through by the sick person in her relationships with others, such as family and social network. Mishler (1984) and Bell (1988) similarly distinguish the voice of medicine from the voice of the life-world. Young (1989) calls narrative an enclave of the embodied self within the medical realm. According to Frank (1995), the wounded storyteller reclaims the capacity to tell, and hold on to, her own story, resisting narrative surrender to the medical chart as the official story of the illness.

The meanings of illness are fashioned out of culturally available images and symbols as well as the more personal language of individuals and families (Barnard 1995). Personal narratives reveal how illness is lived and responded to, defining relationships among body, self, and society. In Rhea's narrative, tattoo becomes a potent sign, marking the social body with significance at the same time that it marks the physical body with design and change (Kapchan 1993). Tattoo incorporates — corporealizes — culture on the skin's boundary between inside and outside, subject and object, self and world (Young 1993). Rubin (1988, p. 14) writes that in tattoo's irreversible forms “the traces of such alterations of the body amount to a kind of biographical accumulation — a dynamic, cumulative instrumentality representing the palimpsest of intense experiences which define the evolving person”. Tattoo also promises a narrative.

Rhea's tattoo narrative is part of a larger corpus of interviews with breast cancer survivors who were asked to describe their experiences of the illness.³ Her interview was selected for analysis because of the narrative power conferred by its layered wound, its theoretical significance, and its personal meanings for the narrator. She asserts that “the tattoo was the biggest stride” in her response to breast cancer, “a proactive kind of thing to do”, and a “risk”: “I'm just not

that brave to do that, I know, and yet I did it". In this essay I analyze Rhea's tattoo story as a narrative performance of identity which emerges from the lack of agency in getting cancer and *getting tattooed* in radiation therapy to the active agency of *getting a tattoo* on her mastectomy scar. Rhea's tattoo performance transforms the meanings of her marked body for herself at the same time that it transgresses the cultural discourses of tattoo and breast cancer. I also argue for the theoretical significance of approaching identity as a performative struggle over the meanings of experience as discourses navigate the body and the body anchors discourse (Young 1993).

The tattoo renaissance

Unlike clothing, hair, make up and other modes of body decoration which are transitory and revisable, tattoo is more permanent and powerful, evoking a visceral response from viewers, fascination blended with distaste, even repugnance (Rubin 1988; Sanders 1989). As a form of indelible body alteration, tattoo has a long and culturally diverse history.⁴ Within its ancient Eastern roots, tattoo enjoyed social centrality, carrying magical and religious associations with prophylactic and curative powers as well as signs of elevated social status. But tattoo's meanings in the West have been primarily negative, aligned with the primitive, the anti-social, the idolatrous. Banned in the third century as a violation of God's handiwork, Christianity again banned tattoos from the eighth to the tenth centuries as a form of devilry and a disfigurement of the body created in God's image.⁵ Although tattoo gained brief favor among the American elite in the late nineteenth-century, by the 1920s it had fallen into disrepute, increasingly seen as vulgar, barbarous, taboo — a visible display of its bearer's psychological or social deviance. By mid-twentieth-century the practice of tattoo was firmly established as deviant and disreputable in the middle class, public mind: "a symbolic poke-in-the-eye directed at those who were law-abiding, hard-working, family-oriented, and stable" (Sanders 1989, p.19).⁶ Stereotypic and stigmatizing associations include the marginalized, rootless, and dangerous, for example, drunken sailors, carnival sideshow freaks, convicts, youth gangs, punks, and bikers, and, among women, tramps and prostitutes.

The contemporary period, however, dating from the mid-1960s, has spawned a tattoo renaissance whose advocates argue is transforming the negative and disreputable meanings of tattoo. This tattoo practice tries to move associations of tattoo from a generally devalued craft to a partially legitimated

form of art and to simultaneously dissociate tattoo from its tarnished, taboo image (Sanders 1989).⁷ As a form of body art, tattoo fuses performance art with the aesthetics of Japan and neo-tribal cultures, fantasy/science fiction art, portraiture, and abstract impressionism. Each new tattoo is quite literally a “live” work of art (Lautman 1994). Advocates emphasize the aesthetics of tattoo, the innovative skill and academic training of its artists, and the knowledge of its clients. The new tattoo connotes nonconformity as the individuating, personalizing, and customizing of the decorated body. The tattoo renaissance has been accompanied by the organization of the Alliance of Professional Tattooists, Inc. (APT), formed to address concerns over tattoo’s image, artistic practices, health and hygiene (Krakow 1994).

Clinton Sanders’ (1989) ethnographic study, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattoo*, describes the new tattoo artists, new clients, and new practices of the contemporary period. For example, “coming from a higher socioeconomic background than the traditional tattooee, the new client commonly has more disposable income, emphasizes the decorative/aesthetic function of the tattoo over its affiliative/self-referential function, and shares the tattoo artist’s interest in the production of a uniquely creative and innovative custom-designed image” (p. 29).⁸ In contrast to the assumptions of pathology and deviance which grounded previous studies of tattoo, Sanders presents tattooing as a normal, symbolically meaningful form of permanent body decoration with pro-social, self-affirming, even “healthy” meanings while retaining its ties with unconventionality. He argues that the choice to mark the body with tattoo changes one’s experience of the physical self and has significant potential for altering social interaction.

Tattoos textualize the body; they literalize Foucault’s metaphor of the body as a surface onto which patterns of cultural significance are inscribed. The tattooed body as a site of adornment is simultaneously the site of a struggle over meanings, including such binary oppositions as masculinity and femininity, public and private, health and pathology, civilized and primitive, and cultural and natural. One term of the binary, associated with the male, is unmarked; its opposition, the female term, is marked as unequal, deviant, deficient. Hence men’s and women’s participation in tattoo are different and unequal (Mifflin, 1997). In the West, men’s bodies have been more frequently tattooed than women’s; and for men, tattoos often stamped a rebellious masculine identity, a manly rite of passage separating the individual from the normative constraints of society. By contrast, “it is only by being marked in relation to the unmarked male that women come into being, a being that is inevitably partial: it is the

being 'woman', not the 'I'" (Mascia-Lees & Sharpe 1992, p. 154). Placing tattoo within a gendered context suggests that women's bodies serve as a site of masculine control: "he is the norm and therefore unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom he marks" (Phelan 1993, p. 5). In a further critical step, Cherrie Moraga (1983) rewrites the universalized female body with the specifics of race (Chicano), class (working class/poor), and sexuality (lesbian), arguing that this female body is made the contested middle term between the male/dominant Anglo culture and the male/subordinate ethnic/Chicano culture.

Tattoo for a woman is thus particularly problematic and complex, given she cannot escape nor choose marking in relation to the unmarked male, given the complex co-articulations of her gender with race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, and given the ways in which meanings of the female body are controlled and contested. As Iris Marion Young (1990, p. 11) asserts, "women's oppression is most completely tied to our bodies, because patriarchal culture gives women's bodies such variable meanings and submits them to so many controls". This argument recalls the historical function of tattoo as a form of social control, discipline and punishment, for example, tattooing slaves in Rome, prisoners in concentration camps, and criminals. In contrast, however, the new tattoo culture describes tattoo as a "basic affirmation of control" (Lautman, p. 8); "tattooes mark their bodies with indelible symbols of what they see themselves to be" (Sanders 1989, p. 61). In the act of customizing or personalizing the body, a woman symbolically separates from individuals or groups who have been exercising control over her choices.

This brief summary of contemporary tattoo suggests the narrative challenge Rhea faces. On the one hand are the historical and cultural inscriptions of discourse where breast cancer, the mastectomy scar, and tattoo converge as stigmatizing layers marking a "spoiled identity" (Goffman 1963) on an already negatively marked, as female and ethnic, body. On the other hand, Rhea's tattoo may be understood as a personal, healthy act of taking her body back from the spoils of disease and mutilating surgery as well as from cultural discourses, such as gender, class, ethnicity, and health, which define her identity in negative terms. In her narrative performance she seeks to redefine self and tattoo by strategically navigating the contradictory meanings of her multiply marked body. Both tattoo and narrative are indeed risky performances, sites of peril and possibility.

Narrative as performance

Approaching narrative as performance entails two related but distinct arguments about the pragmatics of putting narrative into practice (Langellier 1999; HopKins 1995). According to Maria Maclean (1988), the effect of telling a personal narrative — “let me tell you a story about what happened to me” — is to enhance experience and to create a two-way narrative contract between teller and audience. Significantly, this narrative contract initiates a performance “which is both an ‘act’ and an enactment, a doing and a representation of a doing” (p. 72).

First, as an enactment, a representation of a doing, narrative performance refers to the enhancement of experience, how the narrative is carried out “above and beyond its referential content” (Bauman 1977, 1986). Enhancement is augmented through performance features that intensify the experience, among them narrative detail, reported speech, parallelisms, appeals to the audience, paralinguistic features, and gestures (Bauman 1977; Fine 1984). The enhancement of experience in storytelling reveals the radical interdependence of the narrated event (“what happened to me”: the story; the events in the past; the told) and the narrative event (“let me tell you”: the events in the present act of telling) (Bauman 1986, pp. 2–6). In this radical interdependence, the narrator takes experience (the narrated event) and makes it the experience of those listening to the story (the narrative event) in the enactment of performance.

Second, as an act and a doing, performance also refers to the constitutive nature of narrative, how it is formative of reality and identity. In this second sense of performance, or more specifically, performativity, narrative names a site where the social is articulated, structured, and struggled over (Butler 1990; Parker & Sedgwick 1995; Twigg 1992). Reality, “what happened to me”, is both constituted **and** contested because telling a particular story in a particular way unavoidably privileges certain interests (experience and meanings, realities and identities) over other ways. In this enactment, narrator and listener are themselves constituted (“let *me* tell *you* a story”), participants whose subjectivities are constructed by a symbiosis of the performed story and the social relations in which it is embedded: relations of gender, class, race, sexuality, geography, religion, and other expressions of identity. Narrative performance gives shape to these social relations, but because such relations are multiple, polysemic, complexly interconnected, and contradictory, it can do so only in contingent and destabilizing ways.

The two-way narrative interplay between narrator and listener may be

cooperative and/or combative. Such interplay, or struggle, adheres not only to the individual teller and listener alone, but to the play of collective and institutional forces of discourse as well. Kristina Minister (1991) reminds us that an interview narrative is always a public performance for “ghostly audiences” exceeding the interviewer. For Rhea, the “ghostly audience” includes the medical profession and other women with or at risk for breast cancer. Frank (1995, pp. 54–6) adds that “stories *repair* the damage that illness has done to the person’s sense of where she is in life”, and thus a story told to others is simultaneously a story told to the self, a self available — *there* — for telling. The multiple audiences constructed in the narrative contract of the tattoo story — self, interviewer, absent others — participate in the discursive struggle over the meanings of breast cancer and tattoo.

Narrative performance thus refers to a site of struggle over personal and social identity rather than to the acts of a self with a fixed, unified, stable, or final essence which serves as the origin or accomplishment of experience (Smith 1994). From the perspective of performance and performativity, the analysis of narrative is not only semantic, engaging the interpretation of meanings, but must also be pragmatic: analyzing the struggle over meanings and the conditions and consequences of telling a story in a particular way. Performativity contextualizes narrative within the politics of discourse, that is, institutionalized networks of power relations, for example, medicine, religion, the law, the media, the family.⁹ Narrative as a situated performance event is particularized, embodied, and material — a story of the body told through the body which makes cultural conflict concrete (Langellier 1999). Identity is a performative struggle, and it is this struggle over the meanings of Rhea’s body marked by breast cancer, mastectomy and tattoos that I analyze as performance act and performative enactment.

Rhea’s tattoo narrative spans two interviews, seventeen months apart. In the first, conducted by a research colleague early in 1994, Rhea recounts a brief story of how “they tattoo you” preparatory to radiation following her lumpectomy. Near the end of this interview, she mentioned briefly her desire to have her mastectomy scar tattooed. Later, when my colleague and I heard that she had gotten the tattoo, I conducted a second interview in the summer of 1995. The Appendix outlines the second interview, noting its four major parts and highlighting the movement between the “small stories” of specific past-time events and the larger tattoo narrative of the entire, ongoing experience.¹⁰

The pattern in Rhea’s tattoo narrative of spiraling from conversation to story to conversation to story resembles the “spinstorying” performance

identified by Langellier and Peterson (1992) among women storytellers. My selection of excerpts was guided by the questions: when does Rhea move from conversation to tell a story within the overall interview narrative and what do these stories “do” with regard to narrative identity? I selected at least one story from each of the major parts of the narrative, transcribing five stories for closer analysis of performance features and performative strategies.¹¹ Following Bell (1988) I make interpretive links among the stories to clarify the performative struggle of identity in the narrative. Throughout the analysis, I also draw on other aspects of the interview narrative, especially the fourth, evaluative part of the interview (which does not contain “smaller stories”), for interpretive and comparative remarks, without attempting to analyze the interview in full.

The radiation tattoo story

Approximately nine minutes into her first interview (which took place prior to her mastectomy tattoo), Rhea recounts the ordeal of radiation following her lumpectomy. Radiation is a localized treatment for cancer, administered over a number of weeks by a linear accelerator. Treatments are preceded by a planning session and simulation during which measurements and technical X-rays are taken in order to calculate the angles of radiation. The tattoos in this story refer to the medical procedure marking the body — Rhea’s breast following a lumpectomy — to align the machinery.¹² The story is preceded by a general theme of how her illness “feels cultural”, that is, situated within her Franco-American ethnicity, and by specific statements about “trying to be so tough, so strong” and “isolating myself”.

When you go for your radiation
it's it's a gruelling experience because hh
you're taped to the table and
 you can't move for two hours and you've got —
 you you're um ^^styrofoamed up
 they've got chunks of styrofoam
 and you have to sit still and . um
they tattoo you:
And that was another thing, I guess, because
 um for Catholics to be tattooed
 means you go to hell? . .
So a religious thing would be that um

I had to get over the fact of I had four little dots of tattoo hh
 and when I grew up the thing is that/
 people who had marked their bodies wa-
 were children of the devil/
 and that you were to go to Hell so I had to — hh
 and there was no talk of that, you know,
 all of a sudden they come
 and in a sense it’s like “this is tattoo”/
 and they are going to tattoo you and/
 I was like “well, there is my passport to Hell”
 kind of attitude, you know
 I was feeling that but I knew better
 because it was like a religious thing.

Radiation is a “gruelling experience” which objectifies, isolates, and disempowers the narrator. The narrated event occurs in a medical setting, a cancer treatment center, in the habitual past: “when you go for your radiation”. The narrator initiates the storytelling by using the pronoun *you* rather than *I* (“when you go”), a performative strategy of involvement drawing the interviewer and audience closer to the experience (Tannen 1989). In the narrated event the teller is passive, without movement or speech, her body literally immobile and her mouth metaphorically “taped” as “they tattoo you”, anonymous technicians marking an anonymous body. The lack of choice and control recalls the use of tattoo in compulsory, disciplinary ways, but for the narrator “another thing”, the context of religion and hell, is raised. She explains what tattoo means for Catholics: the mark of the devil banned in early Christianity.¹³

The rising intonation on “go to hell”, coupled with the pause, requests understanding or confirmation of “the religious thing” from the interviewer. Receiving no audible response, the narrator elaborates, in the narrative event with the listener, what tattoo meant for her growing up Roman Catholic. The narrator is not acquainted with the interviewer (who is, in fact, also Catholic). Significantly, Rhea offers no medical explanation for the tattoo; indeed her preference for the voice of the lifeworld over the voice of medicine characterizes both her interviews as she resists surrender to the medical narrative and technical language of diagnosis and treatment. She emphasizes that “I had to get over the fact that I had four little dots of tattoo”, shifting here to *I*. These marks may be seen to form the four corners of a frame, the breast cancer framing Rhea’s lived body and her effort to reframe them within her own experience.¹⁴ “[T]here was no talk of that” refers to the silence of the medical setting on the religious (or any other) meanings of tattoo, and perhaps her own silence, too.

In addition it suggests her lack of preparation, physically and emotionally, for the tattoo which comes “all of a sudden”.

After reiterating in the present narrative event that “‘this is tattoo’ and they are going to tattoo you”, she says jokingly, as direct speech to herself in the narrated event, “Well, there is my passport to hell.” This internal dialogue preserves dramatic continuity while evaluating the meaning of the narrated event in the past (Labov 1972). Breast cancer and its treatment (the radiation tattoo) suspend the narrator in a liminal state between life and death, a fear shared by all cancer patients and made more ominous by Rhea’s personal history of recurrence. Passports also serve as government documents certifying (Rhea’s new) identity as a breast cancer patient and granting her permission and protection to travel in a foreign country. The three references to hell may suggest that having breast cancer and radiation is like going through hell: undergoing the little death in order to avoid the big one (Paget 1993). Significantly, she casts this passport to hell as a feeling and immediately adds that “I knew better”. The disjunction of feeling and thought exert interpretive control over the meanings of the experience for the self and interviewer/audience. As an adult, the narrator continues to practice Catholicism, albeit somewhat nontraditionally, within the Franco-American community with which she strongly identifies.

The radiation story en/acts trying to be tough and strong in the face of breast cancer as the narrator displays a certain stoicism, despite narrative details that depict precisely how gruelling the experience was. The narrative performance of identity in the radiation story especially engages the institution of medicine, which “tattoo[s] you”, and of religion, which calls the mark devilry; and it highlights the constraints on Rhea’s agency — her lack of mobility, speech, and preparation. The joking performance partially dissembles the damning meanings of tattoo; however, the “religious thing” will emerge once more in the fifth story analyzed below. Frank (1995) argues that medicine enacts a benevolent form of colonization, claiming the patient’s body as its territory, as least for the duration of treatment, and clinically reducing the particular experience to the unifying view required by its practices. For Rhea, breast cancer and the radiation tattoo threaten to colonize her experience and to efface the personal and cultural dimensions of her identity as a Franco-American woman.¹⁵ Moreover, colonization may extend beyond treatments for those living with the threat of recurrence: Rhea’s breast cancer requires additional treatment, periodic mammograms, and repeated biopsies, as we shall see. With the next four stories, I juxtapose this narrative performance of identity of getting tattooed with that of getting a tattoo, tracing Rhea’s refusal of narrative surrender.



Deena Metzger as photographed by Hella Hammid

The frame shop story

Rhea narrates the story of the tattoo to cover her mastectomy scar several months later in a second interview which I conducted. I know Rhea from Franco-American activities on campus, but at the time of the interview I had not heard her talk about her tattoo. Following mastectomy, women consider three options: appearing one-breasted without a prosthesis, wearing a prosthesis, or breast reconstruction (Love 1990). Like two-thirds of women who undergo mastectomies, Rhea rejects breast reconstruction (Kasper 1995).¹⁶ Her choice of a tattoo to cover the scar, over which she continues to wear a prosthesis, is inspired by a poster entitled “The Warrior” and correspondence with its subject, Deena Metzger (1983).¹⁷

In the frame shop story, Rhea takes the poster to a local business for framing. This story occurs approximately six minutes into the interview within the first segment (see Appendix) delineating the background and conditions under which she decided to get her scar tattooed. Prior to the frame shop story,

Rhea has detailed the poster: the photograph, the subject's body type, the tattoo, and the accompanying poem.

So I took this poster
 down to downtown Bangor to the frame shop and um
 I gave it to a woman —
 there was a woman
 there was an older woman there
 to frame and
 the poor woman she just nearly lost it right there/
 I mean it was just too much for her, you know
 it was too: strong
 she had a hard time with it
 *hhh and for me that was a real act of courage because I felt
 so isolated and alone
 that I felt kind of uh like uh um oh__
 one thing the nudity?

[I: um hum]

and the other thing was the ^^odness/
 because of the tattoo that is really subculture
 so that first I'm dealing with woman's nudity/
 and then I'm dealing with the subculture of having a tattoo

[I: um hum]

So um . you know, that was hard to
 to *concentrate* on trying to choose a mat and a frame
 and I wanted to try to choose um female tones/
 I wanted a grey in a in a in a mauve type of frame
 and it was very difficult to negotiate
 under those *circumstances*
 so that gave me an inkling as to
 *hh the shock I guess
 the shock of the mastectomy
 the shock of the tattoo
 the shock of the nudity, you know
 and just trying to be in public with something like that.
 But I stood my ground and
 you know I kind of blocked out what the- what the vibes
 you know, I mean the poor woman
 I don't know if she was disgusted or shocked but
 she was having difficulty, I don't know
 maybe she was uh just *uncomfortable.

This story enacts a second framing of Rhea’s breast cancer experience: the frame formed by the radiation tattoo is repeated in the poster frame in which the narrator imaginatively places herself. The narrated event precedes Rhea’s own mastectomy tattoo, but it vividly represents an instance of a visceral, negative response to tattoo and enacts the narrator’s courage in its face, “trying to be in *public* with something like that”. Her evaluation of the narrated event as “a real act of courage because I felt so isolated and alo:ne” echoes the emotional context of the radiation tattoo. She emphasizes that it was “hard to concentrate” and “very difficult to negotiate”, “but I stood my ground” thus completing the transaction.

The narrative performance augments the agency constrained in the first story. Rather than the pronoun *you*, Rhea uses *I* and *me* throughout the narrative with active verbs (took, gave, stood) emphasized. In the frame shop story the narrator’s concern with the public, middle class meanings of tattoo are highlighted and embodied in the woman’s shocked response, intensified and itemized through repetition: “the shock of the mastectomy/ the shock of the tattoo/ the shock of the nudity”.¹⁸ Rhea’s rising intonation after the first mention of nudity checks the interviewer’s response. Rhea identifies herself as middle class and knows that I am, too. At an earlier point in the interview, she discussed the difficulty of having “to negotiate past her own middle class identity” to enter tattoo subculture. Later in the interview, when I asked Rhea what she means by this, she explains that the middle class has not been exposed to the subculture of tattoo, citing taboos on the tattoo parlor, the nudity, and the secrecy as well as tattoo subculture’s own “disdain for middle class”. The theme of nudity in Rhea’s story is specific to the site of tattoo (the absent breast) and specifically gendered, as I discuss below in relation to the third story.

Rhea places significant narrative attention on the strength of the woman’s response which she describes in numerous ways: “she just nearly lost it”, “it was too much for her”, and “it was too: strong” are echoed in the closing depictions of “the poor woman” as “disgusted” or “shocked” or “having difficulty” or “just uncomfortable”. Goffman notes that the individual bears full responsibility for assuaging the social discomfort of her stigma. Sanders (1989) reports that tattooees elaborate at length on the interactional consequences of tattoo, categorizing people by their negative or positive responses. Undoubtedly the breast site and mastectomy scar complicate these responses. Through its detail, emphasis, and repetition, the frame shop story foreshadows Rhea’s monitoring of and sensitivity to others’ responses which she casts less in terms of interpersonal conflict than in terms of social and cultural struggle over the meanings of

the mastectomy tattoo. Her narrative construction of the shocked woman, its terms and tone, rings with more empathy than judgment, a theme threaded through the next stories. Rhea's keen awareness of the public nature of breasts and of the stigmatized meanings of breast cancer, mastectomy scar, and tattoo in this story sets the stage for her own tattoo experience. In the frame shop story performance, the narrator projects herself within the poster frame; she imaginatively frames herself/her mastectomy with a tattoo.

The three men story

The second part of Rhea's narrative tells about the process of getting the tattoo (see Appendix). In stark contrast to the radiation experience for which she was unprepared, the tattoo preparation spans nearly three years during which time she consults a tattooist and considers designs while her mastectomy scar "settles". The three men story, occurring about twenty minutes into the interview, recounts an episode during the tattooing which takes place at a tattoo convention in a hotel suite. The hotel room setting is more private than the convention floor but public nonetheless.¹⁹ Whereas the frame shop story highlighted the conflict over class meanings, this story reveals particularly gendered meanings: first, in the tattooist, a woman; second, in site of tattoo, the absent breast; and third, in the spectators, three men.

Despite its new incarnation, tattoo remains largely a male domain. Rhea emphasizes in the first section of the narrative that without the connections of her father-in-law, himself a commercial tattooist, she would not have ventured into the subculture. She insisted upon a woman tattooist, selecting Juli for her reputation for cosmetic tattooing to hide scars and her delicacy of design. Because tattoo is more stigmatizing for women than for men, women prefer placements on parts of the body able to be concealed from nonintimate others but visible for personal pleasure and to those with whom they are intimate: the breast, the shoulder, the hip (Sanders 1989). Sites are often chosen to enhance and beautify the body. Rhea's placement was predetermined by the mastectomy scar, and it is worth stressing that without breast cancer and mastectomy, she would not have sought a tattoo. The tattoo is voluntary, its catalyzing conditions decidedly not.

So I went up^

*hh and I showed Juli what I wanted

and um she had to she did all her *cleaning* of all her materials

she, you know, she went through the whole process
 *hh of whatever she does to get ready and
 she started tattooing [tk] .
 and during the course of the tattooing three men came in
 [tk] and um, two of em — two, yeah, three
 hh all three of em came over to look
 because a lot of the thing about the tattooing too/
 is that there is not a um a um modesty?
 modesty is not part of the game
 and uh hh two of the men two of the men were older
 and um were ^{^^}curious as to what, you know, I was having tattooed
 and and I think from the ^{^^}angle
 cause it’s the left side of my *hh
 and where we were by: the window
 and I think from the angle they were
 they could not see that I did not have a breast there
 but they ^{^^}came over and
 they ^{^^}handled it well
 their faces and they were kinda like *hh .
 you know, they were okay with it, you know *hh.
One* young man came —
 and it was his room in fact that Juli was using
 ’cause it was like connecting room —
 one young man came over
 and I: felt so bad for the guy/
 he was probably early twenties
 I think he almost almost threw-up.

[I: hum]

and he was like . what I had envisioned in my mi:nd *hh . .
 if someone would see me that . um couldn’t han-
 you know what I mean, he was my worst nightmare come true[^]
 as far as like how someone would react to what *that* looks-
 the poor guy was-
 and he was stricken *hh
 he remained stricken
 when I left the room he was *dra:wn
 his face was absolutely white and drawn even [laughingly]
 the poor guy almost threw up

The narrator quickly orients the interviewer and audience to the tattooist’s preparation. Sanders (1988) describes the tattooist’s overt, ritualized display of knowledge and technical skill in order to control the potentially conflictual

interaction with clients which involves extensive physical contact, the willful infliction of pain, and the exposure of intimate body parts. Appropriate receiving demeanor on the client's part entails motionlessness and silence as well as the middle-distance stare away during the tattooing. The tattooist's display of expertise, here the "cleaning" and "whole process", together with the expectation and enforcement of the tattooee's cooperativeness, structure striking parallels between medical and tattoo settings. Both require a professionalism on the part of the service provider which depersonalizes and silences the receptor. Neither setting prizes modesty; and each setting permits spectatorship of the patient/client by strangers.

Rhea's story subordinates the interaction with the tattooist for that with the spectators to the tattooing — the three men, two older and one younger, who "came over to look" as she gets her tattoo.²⁰ Tattoo subculture, where "modesty is not part of the game" and visual display is, contrasts to the middle class culture of the frame shop where exposure shocked. The two older men who "were curious as to what, you know, I was having tattooed" refers to the subcultural interests about tattoo placement. As Rhea speaks of the two men's angle of vision, contrasting where "they were" and where "we were", she demonstrated her position during the tattooing for me, framed by the window and structuring a third framing of her tattoo experience. Interestingly, naming what they cannot see from their angle, the scar marking the absent breast, is first deferred by the narrator ("it's the left side of my *hh) and then emphasized ("they could not see that I did not have a breast there"). In the tattoo sub-cultural setting, it is the mastectomy scar — not the nudity, not the tattoo — which shocks and tests "how someone would react to what *that* looks" [like]. This story, cautiously performed, juxtaposes the two older men's positive reaction with the younger man's negative one: "they ^^handled it well" and "were okay with it" whereas "he almost threw up". Rhea repeats and elaborates the portrayal of "the poor guy" in five stressed details as "stricken", "remained stricken", "dra:wn", "absolutely white" and "drawn even". These same adjectives could be used to describe a patient's reactions to breast cancer surgery and treatments (radiation, chemotherapy). The dramatic description culminates with the echoed "the poor guy almost threw up", accompanied by a laugh. Shared with the interviewer, the laugh seems to be as much on herself as on the young man.

Rhea's story enhances the experience of the three men's reactions through a focalization strategy (Rimmon-Kenan 1983) in which the narrator functions as a camera, both seeing and saying what she sees. This strategy positions the

interviewer/audience with the narrator scrutinizing the men's faces for reactions rather than submitting to their gaze. Phelan (1993, pp. 10–11) delineates voyeurism as a risk of visibility. Here, however, a dominant voyeuristic situation — female nudity with male spectators — is disturbed: they are in the light, particularly the younger man, while we observe, concealed in the shadows. The voyeuristic gaze is turned on them. The narrator constructs the narrated scene only visually — as in the radiation story, no talk is attributed to any participants — while her voice and vision guide the narrative event. Deborah Kapchan (1993, p. 17) suggests that body markings simultaneously draw and repel the gaze of the observer by establishing a decorative boundary between the gazer and gazed upon. The narrator's focalization strategy exploits this reflection, detouring through the gazed-upon to reveal the gazer.

The accepting response of two older men receives much less attention than the vividly elaborated negative response of the younger man. The "poor guy's" response recalls "the poor woman" who was shocked at the poster. Again, the narrator embraces more than rejects the other's negative reaction. Her feeling "so bad for the guy" suggests a concern for his reaction, described so like that of a breast cancer patient, perhaps even a caretaking response. The young man's response differs from that of the woman in the frame shop in that the repetitions of "stricken" and "almost threw up" connote the disgust of the abject (Kristeva 1982) more than shock. In the younger man's response, Rhea encounters her "worst nightmare come true", before the tattooing is even complete and within the affiliative tattoo subculture. How would others respond to her mastectomy tattoo, outside tattoo subculture and in the context of rural Maine? The three men story functions as transitional site between medicine and tattoo, recalling the radiation tattoo story and anticipating medical responses to the tattoo in the last two stories.

The gynecologist story

The last two stories occur in the third section of the tattoo narrative (see Appendix) where Rhea describes several reactions to her tattoo. Among these, members of the medical community acquire special performative force. The narrator distinguishes them as a group; they have more and longer stories with more intensified performances than others. Moreover, exposure to medical personnel, unlike that with intimate others, is neither voluntary nor mutual. The option to "pass" as an unspoiled identity — without breast cancer, scar, or

tattoo — by wearing clothing and a prosthesis is unavailable. Kleinman (1988, p. 158) suggests that the reactions of health professionals may contribute to patients' shame, given that doctors' discursive power consolidates not only institutional interests but gender and class interests as well. In addition, Rhea's tattoo significantly challenges the medical alternatives for mastectomy (Kasper, 1995). Rhea's gynecologist, a woman, is the first medical professional to see her tattoo. The story occurs approximately twenty-eight minutes into the interview.

But um then the medical community I've seen
the first one I saw was my: the woman gynecologist?

[I: um hum]

I I said —

cause she's a little conservative, I think, you know
she does a little middle class thing —
and so I'm saying "Wait a minute" [assertively, with hand gesture]

[I: laughs]

you know, I always t-
this is how I always start

I said, "wait a minute" [performs voice and gesture again] .

[I: laughs]

before I open up the little johnny
I said uh "I got a tattoo" all right [both laugh] .
and she she ^^kind of like, you know
she ^^kind of like "eyeee —"
you know, a little "oo—"
you could see a little bit of a . "ooo" heh heh

[I: laughs with N]

but she she ^^did all ^right with it she liked it/

[I: um hum]

and then the ^^second time she saw it which was more recent
she's she had a better rea-

you know, so she's getting more used to it, you know
she's getting more used to it
you do have to kinda like sli:de into the idea hah

This narrative performance, despite its brevity, has a different "feel" from the previous stories because of its animation. Performance features — vocal expressiveness and sounds, gestures, direct speech, parallelisms, and the alternation of past and present tenses — embellish the telling. Rhea first characterizes the gynecologist in terms that portend a rejection: "she's a little conservative" and "does a little middle class thing". The repetition of "little"

here and to describe the gynecologist's reaction ("a little 'oo'", "a little bit of a 'ooo'") may also belittle her, contesting the knowledge and power of medical personnel. The moment of exposing the tattoo is dramatically enhanced, and the performative strategies employed reframe the normative conditions of the medical examination ritual. In this performance frame, Rhea composes and poses herself.

First, the narrator constructs her intervention within the medical routine of the narrated event with an assertive "and so I'm saying 'Wait a minute'", accompanied by a hand gesture, and then she reiterates in the narrative event that "this is how I always start", and returns to the narrated event to perform it again with a forceful voice and gesture. Labov (1972) notes how reported speech enhances experience by suspending time and delaying narrative action. Second, the shift from past tense "I said" to the present "and so I'm saying" inaugurates the use of the conversational historical present (CHP) as an enhancement strategy (Wolfson 1978). The alteration of the conversational historical present with past tense is a reliable performance strategy that heightens the drama of a story. Following its first use, Rhea switches to past tense "I said", back to CHP with "before I open up the johnny [gown]", and then back to past tense "I said uh, 'I got a tattoo' all right". "I got a tattoo" is again spoken as an assertion vocally and physically. The "all right" switches from Rhea's performed voice in the past narrated event to the narrative event with the interviewer, a bid for bonding rather than approval that might signal uncertainty; and the interviewer responds with laughter.

Narrative agency inaugurated by the "wait a minute" performance frame is extended in the humorous performance of the gynecologist's reaction. The three vocalizations of the gynecologist's response gives her voice but not speech, and while not unsympathetic to the doctor, clearly carry the narrator's perspective. As creator of the contextualization and performance of this verbalization, the narrator retains control of the listener's reception of it. The evaluation "she did all right with it, she liked it" returns to past tense and drops many of the performance features. The narrator's description of the second episode with the gynecologist reinforces the doctor's positive response, and the story concludes with a final performative gesture, the sound and motion of "slide into the idea".²¹

A striking feature of this story is the increasingly active participation of the interviewer. Positive minimal responses present in the earlier stories are augmented at three key points with interviewer laughs. Wolfson's conclusion that CHP is an interactional variable influenced by the relationship of speaker and

listener gains support here. Performance is intensified when norms of evaluative interpretation are presumed to be shared. Interviewer and interviewee are age cohorts, and they share several social attributes, including sex, class, and ethnicity as well as a lengthy social acquaintance. Neither participant is affiliated with the medical setting, encouraging an alignment at the gynecologist's expense. The narrator is also aware of the interviewer's reputation on campus as a feminist, which may influence her choice of "conservative" as a descriptor. In addition, the interviewer and interviewee are now comfortably more than thirty minutes into the interview.

In many ways the gynecology story inverts the radiation tattoo story. The first narrative represented an immobile, silent narrator under the power and surveillance of medical technicians. The enactment is courageous but subdued, more a brave attempt at humor than humorous. By contrast, the gynecologist story constructs an active and initiating narrator, intervening within the medical examination ritual, speaking and giving "speech" to the doctor in a humorous enactment. The last story extends and deepens Rhea's agency in relation to medical professionals.

The biopsy story

This story, the longest, occurs a few minutes after the gynecologist story and culminates the interview section on responses to the tattoo, echoing and complicating the narrative performance of identity of previous stories. Like the gynecologist story, it implicitly contrasts getting a tattoo with getting tattooed in radiation. It replays the tattoo performance with the gynecologist but for a tougher audience: male, higher medical status surgeons and oncologists who are, according to the narrator, even more conservative than previous reactors. Structurally, it repeats the three men story, with two positive and one negative respondent. A crucial difference, however, is that it brings the specter of breast cancer from the first radiation story back into the foreground. The medical occasion is the narrator's ninth biopsy, about which she says in measured, low tones: "I ah really__ was worried__ about this one__." This biopsy, another in a long series of returning to doctors and the continuing interruption and disruption of breast cancer in her life, raises emotions she describes elsewhere in the interview as feeling "stupid", "wrong", "foolish", "ridiculous", and "embarrassed"; of feeling "helpless"; and of feeling "fearful" and "afraid".

the next thing is . um .

I’m trying to think if I saw/who else for medical people *hh
the next thing was . my recent surgery that I had probably

I: So, you just had a biopsy
is that what you-

my ninth one, yeah

I: Wow

and ah I ah *really__ was worried__ about this one__ because
the doctor is is my surgeon hh

and at . times . you know, and, and ah-

we talk a little bit about his personality, whatever/

at times he’s very conservative and sometimes- *hh

So* he came i:n

and I said “whoa, wait a minute”, [voice and gesture]

you know, I do my little thing

and I said “I got a tattoo” .

and

the guy loved it.

[I: laughs]

he just he thought . it was . absolutely great__

he thought it was: marvelous

he *hh he liked the feel of it/

he liked the look of it-

oh I had seen^^ somebody else, that’s what it was/

I saw the tumor guy, the tumor clinic person *hh and

he is ultra-conservative Mr. Hampden himself, you know *hh .

and that guy lo-

he was just superlatives superlatives superlatives/

he says-

you know, doctors are supposed to like, remain really like, you know way
off-”

[I: laughs]

and he said, “excuse^^ me”, he said, “but I really”/

you know, I mean like all this going

he really loved it/

he thought it was fantastic and *hh

he, I think he um um

and I do’know it was just . a good answer__to__the tattoo/

I mean to the to the scar. *hh

And then he wanted information/

so I sent him . you know, for the poster/

cause he thought he would get a poster *hh

cause what he told me was that if he had information on it
 he says “not everybody could do this but”
 he said, “if even one woman in five years” .
 he said, “if I could tell her about this and
 if I could help her and
 if she could feel better about herself because of this”
 he said it would be worth it for him

[I: um hum]

and that was the reason why he gave for that he wanted to know

[I: um hum]

the information about, you know, the tattoo person and, you know
 like the poster. *hh

So the surgeon-
 that was the tumor clinic person-
 the surgeon was uh impressed__

[I: um hum]

and so *hh when I went to the hospital for surgery, you know,
 I do'know if, you know-
 cause I'm awa:ke .

I don't go under, they just give me a local-
 and we do the whole thing and

he *brought* in-
 and this is not an exaggeration-
 he brought in about twenty people to show

[both laugh]

heh heh he says “do you mind?”
 and I said, “no^^, no” .
 and I said, “can I charge admission?” /

[I: laughs]

cause he kept going getting nurses
 and he kept going getting people

I: wow

*hh and then they had this big conversation about reconstructive surgery
 and what they felt, you know,
 the differences of between the tattoo
 and its look . and feel and, you know, the feeling of it
 and . what happens with reconstructive in their opinion,
 you know, what their opinion was of reconstructive surgery.

I: and what, what,
 when they say the feeling of it what do they mean?

I mean, I can't-

I ^^think that it’s uh

I: or what do you mean?

Well, for what it did to them

because, you know, like what they were saying/

it was doing, you know

the feel of it was that it made them feel hopeful/

it gave them, um

-and that was with the tumor person too-

it gives them ah it’s it’s it offers beauty where once there w-

and you know like once somebody said

that’s kind of the thing I hear a lot

“where it was ugly it’s now it’s now this beauty.”

[I: um hum]

hh so they talk about the tattoo in terms of um .

giving a new image^^/

giving new life^^ um

what it does to them looking at it, I gue:ss, you know,

cause they see it as um . um hope^^ or uplift^^

you know what I mean, it just/

they had a lot of, you know, there was just a range of remark

but . it’s uh was positive.

I’ve only had one *medical person* that has not had a good reaction

and I think they were very Christian

[I: um hum]

hh and uh when he left the room he says/

“well, God bless you” [mimicking curt tone]

so that was his [quietly, pause] comment

cause he was just a kind of a *hh, a fill-in type of person

cause I had some problems with the other surgery/

with the last surgery

but that was the only ...

For the purposes of discussion, I divide this story into three parts: the individual reactions of the surgeon and oncologist (the “tumor guy”); the surgery “diversion” (her word from elsewhere in the interview); and the reaction of the third doctor, the “Christian guy”. The narrative of the surgeon and oncologist reprises the gynecological story, with their possible rejection delineated by their “very conservative” and “ultraconservative” natures.²² The dramatizing of the dialogue and gesture of exposure, “I do my little thing”, again in the chronological historical present, functions as a kernel (Kalčík 1975) from the preceding gynecologist story which the interviewer recognizes and responds to with

laughter, confirming their shared history and evaluation. The surgeon's and oncologist's responses are cast in a lengthy series of highly positive terms ("loved it", "absolutely great", "marvelous", "superlatives, superlatives, superlatives", and "he really loved it"), stronger than those of the two older men or the gynecologist. The narrative correction, "it was just a good answer to the tattoo/I mean to the to the scar *hh", strikingly exposes the palimpsest's layers. Whereas in tattoo subculture the mastectomy scar was the unnamed and discomfiting mark, in the medical setting of this interaction, among cancer specialists, the scar layer is routine and named by the narrator, and the tattoo is the remarked shock. The doctors' response to the tattoo is simultaneously an answer to the scar which is a response to the breast cancer, the reason Rhea is again in the hospital.

Rhea enhances the doctors' positive response by again using CHP but more importantly by alternating their direct speech ("if even one woman in five years", /he said, "if I could tell her about this, and /if I could help her and /if she could feel better about herself because of this") and indirect speech ("it would be worth it to him"). Sawin (1992) analyzes the rhetorical impact of reported speech in personal narrative as a sophisticated form of embedded evaluation. The reporting of direct and indirect speech participates in both the narrated event (her interaction with other characters in the story) and the narrative event (her present interaction with the interviewer/audience). Thus, the authority of the doctor, an appropriate and powerful commentator, pronounces judgment on Rhea's act of getting a tattoo, and not for her alone but also for other women who may undergo breast loss. The interviewer/audience are left to draw the positive conclusion about tattoo.

The second part of the biopsy story moves the audience into the operating room for the surgery, for which Rhea is awake. Again the enactment of the experience is intensified through CHP, dialogue, and vocal animation. The mood is festive, despite the somber occasion. As in the three men story, the narrative lens focuses on the spectators rather than the narrator. The central image of twenty people ("not an exaggeration") which the surgeon gathers to see the tattoo balances a critical moment in the story. Is Rhea's tattoo not just an object of attention but rather a circus sideshow with its multiple connotations of stigma? Has her strategic exposure of the tattoo in this medical interaction been wrested from her control? Has the carnivalesque body on the periphery of the conventional and familiar, performed in the gynecologist story, turned to the grotesque body of the rude, improper, coarse, vulgar, profane?²³ Analysis of performance features helps to respond to these questions. To the

doctor’s “do you mind?” Rhea responds, “no^^ no.” with rising and then falling intonation and a laugh. Her “can I charge admission?”, said playfully but forcefully, is supported by the interviewer’s laughter. Charging admission suggests that the narrator’s collaboration with the doctor is one from which she gleans agency and benefit. Rhea returns to this moment at a later point in the interview, saying “so actually the tattoo was like a diversion, a reason to party instead of, you know, focusing on [the lump, the cancer]”.

The discussion of reconstructive surgery extends the sense of success and agency for Rhea. The narrative performance takes a more serious turn and tone from the image of the surgery party. “Their” opinion of reconstruction, emphasized and repeated, is juxtaposed to her embodiment of the tattoo — its look and feel visually but also in speech. As a participant in the conversation, the narrator inserts her opinion of reconstruction as she gives the doctors information and tells “the whole [tattoo] story”, she adds later in the interview. The feelings of being wrong and afraid at returning once again to the doctors are supplemented by her ability to act as an expert and a resource for the medical community, at least momentarily a speaker to their audience. The consequence is Bakhtin’s carnivalesque inversion of social hierarchy rather than a carnival of grotesque freaks.

As the interviewer I noted Rhea’s repeated references to the “feel” of the tattoo as well as its look.²⁴ When I ask for clarification of what “the feeling of it” means to the medical professionals or to her, the narrator speaks slowly and struggles for words — her performance is searching, with repetitions and self-interruption — to construct their feelings. She finally says, “like once somebody said / that’s kind of the thing I hear a lot / ‘where it was ugly it’s now it’s now this beauty’.” This evaluation transforms the mastectomy, and by extension the breast cancer, from scar, stigma, and shame to hopefulness and beauty, a sober and precious moment in the narrative performance after the preceding playfulness. Tattoo has reconstructed the damaged body as an aesthetic object. Rhea’s narrative strategy, again an example of evaluation embedded in the speech of a third party, functions somewhat differently from the previous example of the doctor’s speech. “Somebody” lacks the authoritative commentary of a surgeon but the statement nonetheless confers evaluation as the same time that it de-emphasizes Rhea’s involvement in its shaping, a strategy to preserve her narrative and gender modesty within the visual bodily display. Rhea achieves a positive evaluation of her own action within a self-effacing statement. Again the access to self detours through others, but with the aim of taking them with her to consider tattoo as an option to reconstruction.

Rhea closes this section by returning to indirect speech of the doctors, attributing to medical professionals — “them looking at it” — the feelings of the tattoo as “new image^^” “new life^^”, and “hope^^ or uplift^^”. She performs this section with rising pitch in an uncharacteristically slow rhythm. Her own feelings, surely also about a new image, life, and hope, are accessible only indirectly through the feelings of others. She exposes her tattoo to the view of the medical community in a triumphant performance, yet her strategic narrative, operating indirectly through embedded evaluations of reported speech, conceals much of herself from audience scrutiny. In the fourth section of the interview she confides, however, that “the tattoo has more significance and more . it’s a it’s a priority for *me* to see”, emotionally surpassing her new prosthesis.

The final part of the biopsy story receives little narrative attention, but the negative response of the “very Christian guy” echoes the damning meaning of the radiation tattoo as the mark of the devil, rendering her a grotesque demon with a passport to hell. What the narrator herself raised as a meaning for tattoo here emanates from a powerful social other. This doctor’s (a “fill-in”) presumably judgmental response recalls that of the stricken youth of the third story, but the narrator treats the doctor with less sympathy. She also gives this doctor speech, but her curt mimicking of “well, God bless you” explicitly expresses her rejection of his, “the only” negative, response within the medical community. Narrative performance of his speech allows her to change the meaning of the utterance with her own inflections.

But this final interaction intimates that the tattoo narrative remains ambiguous and unfinished both as experience and narrative. Rhea follows the Christian guy segment with the observation that “[people] don’t know what to do with it . because there’s me, I am middle class, you know, and then there’s the tattoo, so what do you do with those two things?” The identity performed is thus fragmented, contradictory, unstable, not final. At a later point in the interview, she concludes that “there’s more layers to this tattoo thing ... but sometimes, too, it’s just enough for it to just be, let it stand for itself”.

The narrative performance of identity

In reading the layers of this ethnic female body marked by breast cancer, radiation, mastectomy, and tattoo, one simultaneously reads Rhea’s struggle to take her body back from the spoils of disease, surgery, and the multiple stigmatizing forces of discourse. Although Rhea surely comes to this tattoo under

conditions of necessity — not of her own making — she constructs tattoo on her own terms as a symbol for reclaiming her body-self. Against the invasion of cancer and continuing fear of recurrence, the tattoo symbolizes choice and control, imagination and movement, courage and creative resistance among losses. Her narrative performance of identity responds to the markings of breast cancer and mastectomy with her own body marking: I marked myself, I am tattoo. Her narrative performance embodies the multiple scars of her identity and differences. Marking her own body transforms its meanings for her and potentially disrupts the cultural discourse of tattoo and breast cancer (Spence 1995).

The tattoo incorporates the story of Rhea's body as a visual memory and as a symbol of courage and hope. As Delio (1994, p. 13) writes, "[my tattoos] make me feel strong and at the same time they remind me of my mortality". In Rhea's narrative performance of identity, infolding the corporeal and cultural trauma of her personal history with breast cancer and unfolding her lived experience into social space (Kleinman & Kleinman 1994), we also hear the desire of her story and the dynamics of hoping (Barnard 1995; Good, Good, Schaffer & Lind 1990). On the boundaries of breast cancer and scar, between necessity and possibility, Rhea derives agency and hope from the products of her imagination — tattoo and narrative. As Frank (1995) describes the wounded storyteller, the body itself is the message: "[The] ill body *is* a story, and [s]he wants it to be a good one" (p. 50). About the body, of the body, and through the body, the excess of performance overwhelms language, voice, and text.

As this performance analysis suggests, both tattoo and narrative are more than an intrapsychic process and more than self-expression; change in consciousness prompts cultural critique. Barnard (1995) clarifies that the dynamics of hope involve "the interplay of personal imaginative processes with the possibilities of one's historical situation, as these are made available and communicated through potent cultural symbols and social practices" (p. 54). Rhea's tattoo narrative performance engages as much with social arrangements as with self-conceptions; the tattooed body is the performative boundary between inner and outer, self and world. At the social level the reformulation of possibilities for self takes the form of critique of the very categories by which society defines the stigma and deviance of breast cancer, mastectomy, and tattoo. Rhea's tattoo narrative constitutes not only a personal transformation but also a social and political story of transgression.

The narrative performance of identity suggests, however, that transformation and transgression are never given, stable, or final. Telling one's illness story

in personal narrative always carries risk, the double edge and fine line between recuperation and transgression which Linda Alcoff and Linda Gray (1993) examine in terms of survivor discourse. Rhea's narrative performance is transgressive to the extent that it breaks the silence on breast cancer, breast loss, and tattoo, brings them into the realm of discourse, and contests their dominant, stigmatizing meanings. Rhea's narrative performance of identity is recuperative to the extent that it inscribes these experiences within existing structures of domination: Disclosure can increase as well as diminish domination. Among the traps of visibility Phelan (1993) lists surveillance, voyeurism, and fetishism; among the traps of audibility Estroff (1995) warns of the commodification of voice and experience. Likewise, Plummer (1995) examines the politics of telling sexual stories. How does Rhea's narrative performance of identity resist the recuperation of medical narrative and other dominant ideologies of gender, ethnicity, and class? To respond to this question, one must consider the struggle over meanings in narrative performance in its dual sense as act and enactment, its representations of tattoo and the conditions of telling. What are the consequences of telling the tattoo story in this particular way in this particular performance?

First, Rhea represents the struggle over meanings not as internal to her self but as a series of social interactions with others: radiation technicians, the woman at the frame shop, the three men at the tattooing, the gynecologist and other medical personnel. At the borders of the tattooed skin, the dynamic engagement of self and other change the status and identity of the bearer (Kapchan 1993, p. 8). Within these encounters, stigmatizing meanings — tattoo as sinful, disreputable, pathological, exhibitionist — are confronted, contested, and realigned with health, beauty, and hope. Her narrative performance affirms rather than conceals her scars of identity just as the tattoo covers but refuses to hide the scar and cancer. The negation of the breast by cancer and mastectomy is re-marked by tattoo, keeping the absent breast visible, calling greater attention to it by its decoration and display; and her narrative performance makes her story audible through its power. Rhea's tattoo narrative transfigures the body with mastectomy into an aesthetic object, another variation on the female form, resisting the reconstructive alternative offered by medicine, increasingly normalized within breast cancer treatment. The good story refuses denial and stands against social pressures (Frank 1995). Her narrative performance of identity moves toward the external/ exterior/ other(s) rather than internal/ interior/ self as the locus of critique and social change.

Second, Rhea's narrative performance of identity is addressed neither to self nor to the interviewer alone but also to a "ghostly audience", especially the medical profession who have particular valence in this dialogue because of their authority and influence over women with breast cancer. As she has herself resisted breast reconstruction, Rhea intervenes within "their opinion" of reconstruction with her own knowledge and experience of tattoo. By her embodiment and narrativizing of tattoo, she addresses medical and middle class others, inviting them to consider tattoo in a new way. Although Sanders's (1989) study of contemporary tattoo culture stresses its affiliational aspects within group aesthetics and identity, Rhea significantly dissociates herself from tattoo subculture. Her narrative construction of others' responses is more often sympathetic and affiliative, resisting demonization even of negative responses to the tattoo. Her narrative performance of tattooed identity acts to smooth rather than disrupt interactions with others, to soothe rather than discomfit, but without sacrificing its challenges to gender and class identity and to the stigmatizing of breast cancer and mastectomy.

Rhea's tattoo performance invites comparison with other self-stigmatizing subjects, such as the British youths described in Dick Hebdige's (1988) *Hiding in the Light* or HIV/AIDS tattooees (Brouwer 1998). In the first case, Hebdige suggests that these male, working class youths tattoo their faces in order to exercise power on their bodies because they possess little else, reading this act within the current economic climate as "throwing your self away before They do it for you" (p.31–2). Like these youths, Rhea occupies outcaste status by virtue of her disease and her scar, as well as her identity as a Franco-American woman. And like them, her tattoo turns being-looked-at into an act of aggression. Rhea shares the exercise of power over her own body, but her tattoo performance differs from these youths' not only in the conditions and site of the tattoo (the mastectomy scar) but because her performance affiliates with the They of middle class culture despite tattoo's challenges to its values.

The conditions of Rhea's tattoo may ally her more closely to the conscious and willful tattooing of their "tainted" identity by HIV-positive individuals which Brouwer situates within the larger project of visibility in AIDS activism. Parallel performative claims for these tattoos are numerous, among them how they signal a disruption of expectations for health through a refusal to "pass", a challenge to norms for "patient" or "victim" behavior, membership in and solidarity with a community, a sense of hope and even playfulness to others with the disease, and a gaining of control over and pride in one's life. However, Brouwer suggests that the risks of greater visibility for HIV/AIDS tattooees

exceed Rhea's mastectomy tattoo, particularly in the forms of oppressive, punitive surveillance and verbal or physical harassment in public settings. Moreover, the risk of reducing the wearer's identity to "disease bearer" is augmented for HIV/AIDS tattooees when the visual image serves as a statement (always ambiguous) without an accompanying narrative performance on which Rhea insists.

Third, the narrative performance of identity significantly inserts Rhea's voice into cultural discussions. Tattoo is not merely a visual display, an object for others' gaze on a silent body: She speaks through, of, in her body. Rhea actualizes her voice within story events by the movement from silence (in the radiation tattoo story) to speech in the final two stories. In the face of others, she performs bravery rather than shame, although without bravado or hostile confrontation. Particularly effective are narrative strategies of focalization and the embedding of reported speech. Focalization scrutinizes others' responses rather than submitting to the male or medical gaze. The reframing of a voyeuristic situation resists an eroticizing of the self to titillate the audience. Her resistance to pose and do the ideological work of culture both exerts power and disrupts the reproduction of dominant powers. Rather than spectacle or carnival sideshow, Rhea constructs her identity as a participant in medical dialogue with an audience of medical professionals. She effectively "owns" her disease and scar, personalizing her illness within the anonymity of medicine. This strategy also deflects attention from her psychological state, especially her potential construction as victim, to place others in the narrator's angle of vision. Strategies of embedded evaluation as reported speech similarly deflect attention from Rhea's internal state to the statements of others. Evaluations embedded in the authoritative speech of others have the dual effect of furthering Rhea's own meanings and preserving her narrative modesty.

Fourth, Rhea forgoes the full disclosure of the confessional (Atkinson & Silverman 1997); she neither tells all nor shows all. Like the tattoo which she strategically conceals or unveils, Rhea strategically resists the confessional imperative on significant axes, especially the emotional and sexual. Shared social attributes (gender, class, ethnicity, age) between the narrator and interviewer intensify performance during key episodes, such as when the narrator and interviewer collaborate to view medical personnel. But the narrative performance stops short of the intimacy of putting Rhea's body, emotions, and sex life on display for the audience. Keenly aware of the public nature of breasts as well as the "ghostly" public audience, Rhea's narrative performance strategically reveals and conceals the tattoo and her experience. In

deflecting a voyeuristic gaze, she eschews sensationalism and self-exploitation. These strategies of concealment are evident in other activities she reports in the interview; for example, she agrees to give the doctors copies of Metzger’s poster and brochure but not photographs of her own tattoo.²⁵

Finally, Rhea acts as her own expert on tattoo experience, inviting medical consideration of tattoo but refusing the power of the medical profession to determine its legitimacy. Alcott and Gray (1993, 280–1) specify the danger of the confessional to dichotomize theory and experience such that theory is necessarily split from and dominant over experience. Theory lodges in experts and confessors; experience inhabits victims and survivors. Tattoo becomes transgressive, however, as Rhea both names and theorizes her experience in her narrative performance (Mascia-Lees & Sharpe 1992). Her narrative performance of identity reveals the self-conscious process by which she understands *that* and *how* the personal is political, *that* and *how* her body is specifically and materially marked in its social conditions and possibilities for existence. Acting as a creative agent in her own life, Rhea embodies the power of tattoo to reclaim her body and come to voice from the spoiled identity of disease and stigma. The layered markings — of breast cancer, mastectomy, and tattoo — perform her creative and courageous struggle on the hope-full boundary of necessity and possibility for self and other women. Such an act, always risky and complex, unavoidably mingles the recuperative and transgressive potential of personal narrative.

The theoretical position taken here asserts that the full meaning of narrative is performative rather than semantic, located in the consequences of narrative as well as its meanings. An important implication of this approach is that one cannot determine the transgressive and/or recuperative dynamics of narrative based upon the text alone nor the performer’s experience, outside its conditions of performance. One condition of performance routinely unremarked is the research context itself. Does it reproduce the structures of domination? Estroff (1995) asks “whose story is it anyway?” casting particular interrogative light on the ethical dilemma of illness narrative research: “If chronic illness represents an inevitable loss of authority, control, and self, do we in some way replicate or worsen this process by our intense focus on illness-related experience, compounded by the narrative privilege of author/scholar? Or do we perhaps reverse and counteract the sense of loss by giving some additional voice and empathic moments of reflection to the subject that they would otherwise not have?” (p. 79). Issues of authority, voice, and responsibility are most often cast in terms of consent, collaboration, and returning the research to participants in an effort to narrow the gap between academics who research and write, and those who

are researched and written.²⁶ These tensions engage relations between people under particular discursive conditions rather than abstractly correct methodological principles.

Although I cannot address them thoroughly here, a narrative performance approach requires that I make myself visible as a partner in the narrative contract with Rhea in the interview and in the writing process. I have given her the complete rough transcripts of the interview and retranscriptions for analysis as well as the draft of this essay, inviting and incorporating her responses. After creating a pseudonym for her, for example, I understood from subsequent discussions that she wished to use her own name. From her perspective, my following of normative social science conventions rendered her experience as a breast cancer survivor and Franco-American woman invisible, reproducing dominant power structures. When my research located a source on tattoo in French Canadian culture (Dube 1979), she welcomed the knowledge of an ethnic link to her choice. We have also appeared together at a regional conference and continue our collaboration on this and other projects. As Frank (1995) clarifies, part of what turns stories into testimony is the call made upon the listener to receive that testimony. Publication unavoidably increases the risk of narrative at the same time that it enlarges the circle of testimony, implicating myself and others in what we witness.

The performance approach to narrative asserts that every performance is unique, and therefore every narrative identity multiple, fragmentary, and unfinished. Identity is a performative struggle, always destabilized and deferred. The narrator's specific body, bearing multiple marks of location, positions her at the nexus of culturally specific experiences of health, gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on, as well as in relationship to the interviewer and audience. Sidonie Smith (1994) concludes that identity's body as a site of multiple markings may name a point of departure rather than an arrival home. The visibility and audibility of the tattooed body with breast cancer enacts the power of the body-self to transform and alter its conditions of existence. Through the wound that gives her narrative power, Rhea performs the marks of identity in a corporeal and social enactment of the possibilities for self that implicates others, too. "You're marked" reminds us that the boundary between health and illness is dynamic and fluid.

Appendix: Rhea’s Tattoo Narrative

(* indicates story excerpt analyzed)

Part 1: The Inspiration and Conditions for Getting the Tattoo

- why not reconstruction
- breast cancer statistics
- the Deena Metzger poster and body types
- * the frame shop story
- conditions for getting the tattoo
 - father-in-law
 - conversation with prosthesis fitter
 - the woman tattooist
 - the “class discussion” (subculture of tattoo)
 - looking in the mirror

Part 2: Getting the Tattoo

- planning the design
- * the three-men story
- getting the tattoo
- her responses to the process and tattoo: “you can live with it”

Part 3: People’s reactions to her tattoo

- family’s reactions (husband, daughter, two sons)
- sister-in-law and nieces
- the medical community
 - * the gynecologist story
 - prosthesis fitter story
 - (letter from man in prison story)
 - (woman administrator at university story)
 - * the biopsy story (the surgeon, the “tumor guy”, and the “Christian guy”)

Part 4: Her evaluations of the tattoo

- risk was worth it
 - it “fills in”
 - “doing something about myself”
- getting the tattoo vs. putting it out in public
 - “I’m not that brave to do it but I did it”
- the medical community
 - giving the doctors information vs. “feeling stupid”
 - showing the medical community the tattoo as a “diversion”, “party”
- the erotics of the tattoo
- “I feel proud”
- meaning even beyond the prosthesis: “it’s a priority for *me* to see it”

Notes

I thank Rhea for the gift of her story and for our ongoing discussions of this research. Susan Bell offered generous and insightful criticism of the manuscript. I also acknowledge the contributions of the Narrative Study Group, Cambridge, MA, especially Elliot Mishler and Catherine Kohler Riessman.

1. I use the narrator's real name at her request. Franco-Americans, the result of numerous migrations from French Canada, compose the largest ethnic group in Maine. Estimates of Maine residents with at least one parent with French ancestry range between one quarter and one third of the population.
2. The phrase *Slash/Burn/Poison* is attributed to Dr. Susan Love, breast surgeon and author of two books on breast cancer, but is especially invoked by cancer patients and activists. See Altman (1996, 169).
3. Rhea is one of seventeen women from whom Claire Sullivan and I requested breast cancer stories in an ongoing research project at the University of Maine. Open-ended interviews lasted from one to two or more hours. Participants told their stories with little guidance and prompting. For analyses of the interview narratives, see Langellier and Sullivan (1998) and Sullivan (1997).
4. Tattoos can be reversed, at some cost in money and pain, by dermatologists or plastic surgeons through chemical peels, dermabrasion, and laser surgery. The latter option is not readily or universally available.
5. Leviticus 19:28: "You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh on account of the dead, or tattoo any marks upon you." (*The Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, Revised Standard Edition, 1965, p. 147).
6. In the context of religious pressure and an outbreak of hepatitis, tattooing was made illegal or restricted to those above age 21 in 32 states by 1962; over 47 major cities, including the five boroughs of New York City, had ordinances against tattoo (Krakow 1994).
7. Titles of recent books illustrate this semiotic shift: *The New Tattoo* (Lautman 1994), *Skin Shows: The Art of Tattoo* (Wroblewski 1989), *Tattoo: The Exotic Art of Skin Decoration* (Delio, 1994), and *Punk and Neo-tribal Body Art* (Wojcik 1995). Also see the periodical *Tattoo Art International*.
8. "The new tattoo advocates are informed, articulate, and no stranger than anyone else you're likely to meet — indeed, you've already met them since they represent every aspect of society, from mechanics and waitresses to doctors and lawyers" (Lautman 1994, p.7); "Tattoos nowadays are becoming increasingly acceptable; there is not just one 'type' of person who may get a tattoo, there are no barriers of sex, age, or class in tattooing" (Delio 1994, p.7). "Major demographic shifts have brought in a greater number of females and generally older, better educated, more affluent, and more artistically sophisticated clients" (Rubin 1988, p. 235).
9. Weedon (1987, p.108) writes that "neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourse constitutes the

minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, usually with institutional bases.”

10. For clarity I use “story” to refer to the excerpted segments, reserving “narrative” for the entire interview. The excerpted stories meet Labov’s referential and evaluative criteria for a personal experience narrative. “Story” also retains the Labovian specificity of the past-time event narrated in each excerpt, although in my emphasis on performance features, I do not analyze Labovian structure. See Labov (1972).

11. My transcription is designed to suggest rather than to document performance features. I preserved repetitions, false starts, and self-interruptions in the speech, but I also tried to promote readability and the “feel” of telling. Segmentation reflects the speaker’s rhythms and meaning units. Line breaks denote brief pauses. The symbol / indicates that the next line continues without pause. Longer pauses are marked by a period preceded by a space. Emphasized words (increased volume) are underlined. The symbol ^ or ^^ indicates a rise in pitch; the symbol _ indicates a lowering of pitch. A hyphen [-] indicates an abrupt cutoff of sound, often a self-interruption or shift in the direction of a thought; the symbol : is a sound elongation. When the narrator separated a word out by clipping enunciations, I preceded this word with the symbol *. Since this narrator characteristically takes audible breaths at particular points, I marked these by hh, *hh (inhale) or hh* (exhale). The notation [tk] indicates a slight click of the tongue or smack of the lips. I also inserted some parenthetical descriptions of vocal or gestural qualities. The interviewer’s speech and laughter are flushed right in brackets.

The question of how to transcribe for performance analysis remains a vexing one. See Madison (1993), Fine (1984), and Riessman (1993) for some alternatives.

12. For a fuller description of the radiation process, see Love (1990, pp. 299–311).

13. Other breast cancer patients create alternative metaphors for the radiation measurements and markings. Batt (1994, p. 23), for example, compares the technicians to surveyors charting a field; Hooper (1994, p. 119) likens the Magic Marker lines on her chest to a butcher’s diagram of the cuts of beef.

14. See the diagram in Love (1990, p. 303) for an illustration of a radiation tattoo “frame”. I am indebted to Susan Bell for this insight.

15. Govenar (1988) argues that the dominant Christian position on tattoo was not adopted by Chicanos in the urban barrios of the southwestern United States where tattooing, including religious designs, was widely practiced. Dube (1980) traces a similar adoption of tattoo practices among French Canadians.

16. At the beginning of the interview, Rhea explains that she rejects breast reconstruction because she’s had enough surgery (lumpectomy, mastectomy, and nine biopsies). Later in the interview, she adds that “I did not want to negotiate a breast with a man”. No female surgeons did breast reconstruction in that area of Maine at that time. The increasing availability and normativity of breast reconstruction will no doubt play a role in women’s options after mastectomy.

17. The photograph was made into a poster accompanied by part of a poem, “Tree”, the image tattooed on her scar: “I am no longer afraid of mirrors. . . . What grows in me now is vital and does not cause me harm. . . . I am no longer ashamed to make love. Love is a battle I can win.

I have the body of a warrior who does not kill or wound. On the book of my body, I have permanently inscribed a tree.” Reprints of the poster have appeared in over twenty publications. See Sharf (1995) for an analysis of the “invitational rhetoric” in Metzger’s poster.

18. Sharf (1995) reports the publisher’s concern over the unabashed display of a mastectomy in Metzger’s photograph, agreeing to use the photo on the book’s cover only in its fourth edition. Tattoos remain a rare practice among women with mastectomies. My reading in breast cancer research, survivors’ journals, writings, and interviews has yielded only two references in addition to Metzger’s.

19. Rhea’s decision to get her tattoo at the convention is the subject of discussion among family members, as she humorously narrates in the second interview (rough transcription):

John [husband] says “what if it’s in public? You know, what if Juli’s tattooing down in the convention? what if people see?” And then my son, who was a senior at the time I think, he says, “guess what, Dad? there’s nothing there!” [both laugh] Nothing to see, ya know, huh, huh [laughingly; I join in laughter]. So he says, “oh, yeah”, you know, huh.

For a more extended analysis of this story, see Peterson & Langellier (1997).

20. Rhea reports that getting her tattoo was not painful because the scar being covered contained no nerves. Tattooing the tail of the ivy tendril curling under her arm, the only part of the tattoo not on the scar, she described as “excruciating”, however. Most tattooists maintain that women are less bothered by the pain than are men (Sanders 1988).

21. The story of the gynecologist’s reaction to the tattoo is appended with the narrator’s observation that “she immediately gave me a tetanus shot ... but she had been doling out tetanus”, including one to Rhea’s daughter at an earlier appointment. Rhea considers but dismisses the interpretation that the doctor’s gesture displayed “prejudice against tattoo” or “the prejudice against needles”; nonetheless, associations of tattoo with unhygienic conditions and with AIDS high risk behaviors are invoked.

22. The moniker “Mr. Hampden himself” refers to the town of Hampden, the upper middle class residence of area professionals, especially doctors.

23. About the perspective of tattooed body as grotesque, Young (1993, p.xx) writes, “On account of this grotesquery, tattoos are associated with the improper, the dark side, the underworld, the demonic. Of course this dark world has its romance, the tang of the taboo, the quest of the forbidden.”

24. I couldn’t determine if “feel” included touch as well as what *feelings* the narrator was referencing. For an important discussion on the tensions between the look and feel of breasted experience, see I.M. Young (1990).

25. Nor does she describe her own tattoo in detail in the interview. She does, however, show me her tattoo.

26. For some discussions, see Estroff (1995), Alcott (1991–2), and Kirsch (1999). I discuss issues in regard to my own research in Langellier (1994).

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PART III

Between Past and Present

Autobiographical Memory
and Narrative Identity

CHAPTER 9

Richard Wagner's creative vision at La Spezia

or

The retrospective interpretation of experience
in autobiographical memory as a function
of an emerging identity

Jerome R. Schulster

Introduction

A discrepancy in autobiographical accounts

On Monday, September 5, 1853, Richard Wagner wrote a letter from La Spezia, Italy, to his wife Minna, who remained at home in Zürich.

On Saturday evening — as I told you last time — I set out to sea; I thought the sea air would do me good. We had a strong headwind and heavy seas; it certainly brought back memories! All around me people were being seasick; I too freely threw overboard the entire contents of the meal I had eaten on land at midday; but then I lay down in my berth and thereafter had no further trouble from seasickness, spending the entire night stretched out in my bunk.

We arrived in the Gulf of Spezia early yesterday morning: my diarrhea had subsided, whereas my dizziness and violent stomach pains had increased. As a result, there was nothing that could cheer or distract me. Although I left quite early in order to spend an hour walking in the mountains wherever the fancy took me, and although everything I saw was quite splendid and beautiful, with strange and surprising vegetation, — nothing sunk in; my mood grew increasingly mawkish, and each time that I thought that it was your birthday tomorrow and that I was five days' journey away from you, I felt like screaming out in my unhappiness. I almost choked with despair. After lunch I took another

carriage and instructed the driver to take me along the Gulf for a couple of hours' ride: It was a Sunday, everyone dressed up and shorn! But I couldn't stand it there either, and so I went back to my room, swore never again to go on a journey *by myself*, and finally collapsed in exhaustion. However, I became so anxious about falling asleep that I even asked for a doctor: but then I spent a quiet night. Unfortunately, my dizziness and stomach pains this morning are as bad as ever; my mood is unbearable, and the thought of being so far away from you today lies on me like a ton-weight. In addition, I feel so helpless here, and so pitifully alone, that I can scarcely think any longer of continuing my journey. Today or tomorrow morning at the latest, I shall return to Genoa: I'll see then how I feel! If I still feel as I do today, the only remedy will be to return home immediately...

(Wagner, 1987, #166, pp. 290–291).

The following day, Tuesday, after taking the coach back to Genoa, he wrote to Minna again.

Ridicule me as much as you will, I'm *turning tail*!...My decision to turn back was unavoidable after my thoroughly convincing myself how things stood with me. At Spezia yesterday, as soon as I conceived the thought of turning home, my whole state of health promptly grew better...

(Wagner, 1901, #56, pp. 127–126).

Yet, in 1869, during the dictation of his autobiography, *Mein Leben* (Wagner, 1992) to Cosima, his soon-to-be second wife, Wagner “remembered” a profound experience that occurred on the trip to La Spezia. His account was as follows:

Even this voyage, which lasted only one night, turned into an arduous adventure as a result of violent head-winds. My dysentery was supplemented by seasickness, and by the time I reached Spezia I could hardly take a single step and went to the best hotel, which to my dismay was situated in a narrow and noisy alley. After a sleepless and feverish night, I forced myself to undertake a long walk the following day among the pine covered hills of the surroundings. Everything seemed to me to be bleak and bare, and I asked myself why I had come. Returning that afternoon, I stretched out dead-tired on a hard couch, awaiting the long-desired onset of sleep. It did not come; instead, I sank into a kind of somnambulistic state, in which I suddenly had the feeling of being immersed in rapidly flowing water. Its rushing soon resolved itself for me into the musical sound of the chord of E flat major, resounding in persistent broken chords; these in turn transformed themselves into melodic figurations of increasing motion, yet the E flat major triad never changed, and seemed by its continuance to impart indefinite significance to the element in which I was

sinking. I awoke in sudden terror from this trance, feeling as though the waves were crashing high above my head. I recognized at once that the orchestral prelude to “Das Rheingold”, long dormant within me but up to that moment inchoate, had at last been revealed; and I saw immediately precisely how it was with me: the vital flood would come from within me, and not from without.

I immediately decided to return to Zürich and begin setting my vast poem to music (p. 499).

The so-called “La Spezia vision” is a significant event in Wagnerian lore because it is the sudden moment of creation, the inspiration, the profound insight from which the opening music of Wagner's monumental tetralogy, “Der Ring des Nibelungen”, was drawn. Yet the discrepancies in the two accounts of this experience, one immediate in temporal proximity, the other in a relatively distant retrospect, raise a question of the historical truth of the La Spezia vision.

It is the purpose of this chapter to present and examine primary sources surrounding the Spezia journey (Wagner's letters, diaries, notebooks, and autobiography) and secondary sources as means of weighing several arguments for and against the truth status of the vision. The decision *against* the historical truth of the vision, but in favor of its narrative truth (Bruner 1990; Freeman 1993; Spence 1982), is then discussed. Though the vision at La Spezia may not have happened in any literal sense, Wagner's reading of the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer framed his conception of himself and his creativity. It urged him to present himself to others as an Artist who had had such creative, visionary experiences. The vision at La Spezia fit this new identity. But equally important, Wagner's growing awareness of his emerging identity of “Master”, spawned, it will be asserted, by his new relationships and by significant experiences at the time, dictated, in a sense, the person to whom he should first reveal the Spezia vision.

A brief historical context: Wagner's life at the time of La Spezia

Richard Wagner (1813–1883) (Deathridge & Dalhaus 1984; Gutman 1968; Millington 1987; Newman 1976; Tanner 1996; Westernhagen 1981), a young conductor and opera composer in Dresden, had seen his star rise suddenly with the wildly successful premiere of his grand opera “Rienzi” in October, 1842. Two subsequent operas, “Der fliegende Holländer” (The Flying Dutchman) in January, 1843, and “Tannhäuser” in October, 1845, were reasonably successful. Wagner was appointed to the post of Kapellmeister for the King's Court Theater in Dresden.

Wagner's creative life continued at full thrust during this period. He completed, among other things, the score of the Romantic opera, "Lohengrin" (1848), the text of a new opera, "Siegfrieds Tod" (Siegfried's Death), based on the legend of the Nibelungs, and a brief prose sketch of a comic opera about Hans Sachs and the Mastersingers in 16th century Nürnberg. The sketch would later form the basis for "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg", written and composed in the latter half of the 1860s.

However, frustrations at Court, intrigues with persons connected with the theater, as well as frustrations with society and with the world of opera in general, led Wagner to participate in the Dresden Uprising of May, 1849. Wagner narrowly escaped arrest by fleeing first to Paris, later settling in exile in Zürich, Switzerland.

There Wagner wrote several of his longer theoretical Prose Works (Wagner, 1966a), for which he is justly famous and infamous: "Die Kunst und die Revolution" (Art and Revolution, 1849) (Wagner 1966c); "Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft" (The Artwork of the Future, 1849) (Wagner 1966d), "Das Judentum in der Musik" (Judaism in Music, 1850) (Wagner 1966g), "Oper und Drama" (Opera and Drama, 1851) (Wagner 1966f), and "Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde" (A Communication to My Friends, 1851) (Wagner 1966e).

For most of this Zürich period, Wagner lived with his wife Minna on the scant income from the sales of his publications and from royalties from occasional performances of his operas. His most regular source of income, however, was the purse of one Frau Julie Ritter, a wealthy Dresden widow who, with her children, Karl, Emilie, Julie, and Alexander, deeply believed in Wagner's creative genius and his mission.

Wagner's frustrated efforts at the composition of "Siegfrieds Tod" coincided with his growing dissatisfaction with the relationship between music and drama in opera in its current form. His re-thinking of the relationship of opera and drama, set forth in his tome of the same name, led to a total, albeit gradual reconceptualization of the structure and the meaning of the Nibelungen drama. During the years 1851 through early 1853, he wrote the poems for "Der junge Siegfried" (The Young Siegfried), then "Die Walküre" (The Valkyrie), and "Das Rheingold" (The Rhine Gold). At the time of his trip to La Spezia in late summer 1853, however, Wagner had not formally composed any of the music for the four drama cycle, soon to be called "Der Ring des Nibelungen" (The Ring of the Nibelungs, usually referred to as "The Ring").

In Zürich in May of 1853, Wagner conducted a prestigious 3 day festival of his music, attended by, among others, Emilie Ritter and Julie Ritter Kummer.

Then Wagner received Franz Liszt and these same members of the Ritter family at his home in early July, 1853. After their departure, Wagner embarked on a long-anticipated cure and vacation, first with Georg Herwegh through the Swiss Alps, then alone into Italy. He viewed his journey to Genoa and La Spezia as necessary for his much needed “re-entry” into the pleasures of the real world.

Wagner enjoyed the royal sights of Genoa. Then, on the evening of Saturday, September 3, 1853, he traveled via steamer from Genoa to La Spezia. Both autobiographical accounts (above) agree that it was a horrific journey.

Analyses

Against historical truth: The frequency of accounts of the vision at La Spezia in Wagner's correspondence

Irving (1988) argues that “...we are tuned to frequency or repetition [of autobiographical material] as increasing signs of certainty and of importance”. If Wagner's account of the vision at La Spezia appears frequently in his accounts of his Italian journey to others, then we have little reason to doubt its truth status. We may accept it as a representation of a significant moment in his life, as he elaborated later in *Mein Leben*. If, however, accounts of the vision do not appear frequently in other *concurrent* descriptions of the experience, or at all, then we may begin to question its veracity.

As evidenced above, Wagner's two communications to his wife Minna, the one from La Spezia on Monday, September 5, and the second from Genoa on the following day, Tuesday, September 6, make no mention of any vision, creative or otherwise. These letters to Minna are of course important because they are the two documents closest in time to the experience.

But other accounts of the trip to Italy followed quickly in letters written upon Wagner's return to Zürich. Wagner wrote to Franz Liszt on September 12, 1853 (Wagner 1973, Vol. 1, #127, p. 323):

At Genoa I became ill, and was terror-struck by my solitary condition, but I was determined to do Italy, and went on to Spezzia [sic]. My indisposition increased; enjoyment was out of the question; so I turned back to die or to compose, one or the other; nothing else remains to me.

Wagner tells briefly of his Italian journey to three other correspondents: On September 15, Wagner wrote to his younger sister Cäcilie Avenarius in Leipzig (Wagner 1991, #81, p. 203); on September 23, Wagner wrote to Robert Franz,

an admirer from Dresden (Wagner 1967–1991, Vol. 5, #254, pp.435–437), and in January of 1854 he wrote to August Röckel (Wagner 1987, #171, p.300). By this time, the composition sketches of “Das Rheingold” were completed. In all of these letters, Wagner explicitly mentions his journey to La Spezia. He almost always alludes to his indisposition, in varying degrees of graphic detail; in none does he mention any creative vision related to the composition of “Das Rheingold”.

But then on December 29, 1854, Wagner (Wagner 1967–1991, Vol. 6, #193, pp.308–312) wrote to Emilie Ritter, the daughter of Frau Julie Ritter, his beloved benefactress:

You know of my Italian excursion and the wretchedness that afflicted me... Even in Spezia I had a perfect vision: suffering from the most dreadful nervous condition, with a loathing for all which caught my eye, I stretched out a while one day in order to defend myself with closed eyes against the appalling agitation: when I had sunk momentarily into a light sleep, the instrumental introduction to *Rheingold*, with which I was previously still struggling, suddenly appeared to me with such clarity and certainty that I suddenly comprehended what was happening to me. Immediately I resolved to return and forego the outside world. One hour later I was sitting in the carriage on the journey home...

Thus, the first account *in print* of a creative vision at La Spezia appears in a letter to Emilie Ritter written some 15 months after the date of its supposed occurrence.

Continuing the frequency analysis, let’s look briefly at other empirical evidence: With Wagner’s *Sämtliche Briefe* (Wagner 1967–1991) in hand as a data base, we discover that there are 257 surviving letters written by Wagner between his return from Italy (September, 1853) and his vision letter to Emilie Ritter (December of 1854). A vision is not mentioned in any of the 257 letters. Of course, it is true that Wagner met many of his correspondents face-to-face and, therefore, could have related the tale of the vision in person. So, the letters of more critical interest are those written to his correspondents *after* La Spezia but *before* any face-to-face encounter, such as the letter to Liszt on September 12, 1853.

Likewise, we must examine letters to Emilie Ritter *after* La Spezia but *before* his revelation of the vision to her in December of 1854. Of whatever Wagner wrote to her, two letters survive: one from December of 1853 and a second from May of 1854 (to be excerpted below). Again, nothing was said about La Spezia until the letter of December, 1854.

Against historical truth: Wagner's corrupted memory aids

The account in *Mein Leben* of the vision at La Spezia, presented above, was probably dictated to Cosima in 1869. Perhaps his memory was jogged. Wagner's method of autobiographical recall is worth discussing at this junction.

Wagner began dictating *Mein Leben* to Cosima on July 17, 1865, using, as a memory aid, the "Annals", originally called the "Red Pocket-Book", a diary of brief, telegraphic but continuous entries he began in August of 1835. At that time, at 22, young Wagner reconstructed as best he could events and dates of his early childhood and adolescence and, from 1835, continued to make notes as events transpired. The notes for his memory of La Spezia are quoted below:

[in Genoa] 3 days: then dysentery. Steamer to Spezia: nasty. Bad accommodation. Ill. On second day attempt walk; pine hill. Afternoon nap on sofa: awoke with conception of instrumental introduction to Rhinegold (E flat major triad): sinking amidst rushing waters. Resolve immediately to turn back and begin work (Wagner 1980, p.103).

Note that the autobiographical sequence is intact: Bad sea journey/bad night — walk in the hills — afternoon nap — then vision.

But, alas, this memory aid has a tale of its own: In February of 1868, for unexplainable reasons, Wagner "copied" the contents of the Red Pocket Book into the Annals, beginning with entries from Easter of 1846. He then *destroyed* all but the first four original pages of the Red Pocket-Book, leaving intact only the entries for his life as originally recorded up to his arrival in Paris in 1839 (thus, his autobiographical notes from spring 1839 to spring 1846, Paris and much of Dresden, are completely missing). Speculation as to why Wagner destroyed the contents of the Red Pocket Book centers on the fact that Wagner wished to "temper" (not to say "tamper with") the entries about his participation in the Dresden Uprising and about his various affairs, particularly that with Jessie Laussot. In effect, by "editing" his copied entries and destroying the originals, Wagner was giving himself the freedom to reconstruct his life's narrative. Thus, he may have doctored his diary entries for the Italian journey of 1853 to suit his after-the-fact invention of a "vision". For our purposes, the Annals, his memory aid for *Mein Leben*, provide no assurance whatsoever about the historical truth of a vision at La Spezia.

A further aside into Wagner's autobiographical excursions: In addition to his extensive autobiography *Mein Leben*, which recounts Wagner's life from his birth until 1865 (when Wagner was 52), Wagner wrote "An Autobiographical Sketch" (Wagner 1966b) between the years 1842 to 1843 (when Wagner was 30),

which recounts his early years and early compositions up until his first successes in Dresden with “Rienzi” and “fliegende Holländer”. While in Zürich in 1851, he wrote another, more defensive, semi-autobiographical piece called “A Communication to My Friends” (Wagner 1966e). During the dictation of *Mein Leben* and after, until his death in February of 1883, Wagner’s life was recorded day by day in the famous diaries of Cosima (C. Wagner, 1978–1980).

A final reference to a vision at La Spezia in print occurs in a published letter (Wagner 1966i) dated November 7, 1871.

In sum, on the basis of the analysis of the frequency of descriptions of the event, we must conclude that sickness, exhaustion, and loneliness were the primary components of Wagner’s narrative of his La Spezia journey, not some wonderful creative vision as later described in *Mein Leben*. He certainly may have had inchoate experiences, the first stirrings of the great music he was about to set to paper two months later, for he had already indicated as much to others. But he most likely did not have an elaborate creative vision. Yet it seems that once a vision was created and revealed in the letter to Emilie Ritter, Wagner retained it as part of his personal myth, to be further elaborated in his autobiography.

Against historical truth: The time structure of the experience at La Spezia

Early biographers quite naturally assumed that the La Spezia vision actually occurred as Wagner described it in *Mein Leben*. However, the discovery in the Burrell Collection of the September 5, 1853, letter to Minna, presented above, raised serious question about the historical truth of the vision.

Defending the vision, more recent Wagnerians, especially Westernhagen (1981), explain the glaring omission of this momentous vision in Wagner’s correspondence with Minna by suggesting that the famous vision occurred *after* Wagner wrote the long letter of Monday, September 5.

This explanation can be countered by a point-by-point analysis of the two long accounts of La Spezia, the one in his letter to Minna and the other in *Mein Leben*. Here I suggest that the *context* for the vision, as described in its account in *Mein Leben*, did not in fact occur on the afternoon of September 5th, *after* Wagner’s letter to Minna had been written, but rather on the day of his hike into the woods. On which day did Wagner take a hike?

Let us consider: Wagner embarked on his sea journey from Genoa to La Spezia on the evening of Saturday, September 3rd. The trip is about 80 km or so. There were strong headwinds and choppy seas; the trip was long, uncomfortable, and sickening: On this matter the two accounts are completely consistent. When

Wagner's marital relationship with Minna was reasonably calm, as it seemed to be in the summer of 1853, it was maintained in their correspondence on the foundation of poor health, aches and pains, symptoms, the ineffectiveness of various cures, the quality of sleep, and on his desperate loneliness (since, obviously, he only wrote to her when separated from her). His account of the sea voyage Saturday night is quite dramatic and graphic in detail. Yet the following night, Sunday night, was "a good night", with (one assumes) the help of a sleeping potion from the doctor. The reader should note that the phrase "a good night" is especially meaningful in context of the graphic and excessive detail into which he goes about his otherwise poor health status to Minna. If Sunday night were really not a good night, Wagner surely would have no reason to describe it differently to Minna. Thus, Sunday night *could not have been* the "sleepless and feverish night", referred to in *Mein Leben*, after which, the next day, came the vision. The "sleepless and feverish night" can only be the seasick night on the steamer en route to Spezia. Recall that, in his letter to Minna, Wagner states only that he spent "the entire night [the Saturday night of the sea voyage] stretched out in my bunk", but he mentions nothing about actually sleeping. Therefore, since Monday afternoon followed a much needed *good night's sleep* on Sunday, one may safely conclude that the Spezia vision did not occur on the afternoon of Monday, September 5th, contrary to Westernhagen's suggested time structure.

In *Mein Leben*, Wagner says that, upon landing in La Spezia, he went to the "best hotel", which "was situated in a narrow and noisy alley". At what time did this happen? It is not too great a speculative stretch to suggest that he could have located the hotel just before dawn (in the letter to Minna, he said he arrived "early yesterday [Sunday] morning") and he could have tried to catch a short rest before sunrise. It would have certainly been annoying and dismaying that the alley was noisy. This timetable would therefore make the phrase, "the following day", refer to a dawning Sunday, not Monday. Furthermore, if "the following day" referred to Monday, as Westernhagen would have us believe (and as *Mein Leben* leaves open to ambiguity), then what utterly unremarkable things did Wagner do all day Sunday?

Well, we know what he did: It is clear in both accounts that Wagner took a long walk in the vegetation in the hills surrounding the Gulf and that this long walk prostrated him with exhaustion. In his letter to Minna, this long walk is *explicitly* stated to have occurred on Sunday, September 4th. In *Mein Leben*, there is mention of a similar long walk in the vegetation, after which followed a similar state of exhaustion but also the Spezia vision. If, as biographers such as Westernhagen have tried to argue, we accept the possibility that the vision

happened on the afternoon *after* Wagner wrote his Monday, September 5th letter to Minna, then there must have been a *second* long walk followed by exhaustion and, this time, a vision. But there is no mention of *another* long walk in the hills, or *any* excursion at all, or any further exhaustion on Monday afternoon in his letter to Minna from Genoa on Tuesday, September 6th. In fact, Wagner reported *feeling much better* once he resolved to return home. Again, whereas Wagner may have had a reason to omit mention matters of inner creative states to Minna, given his relationship to her, he would have had no motivation to omit a description of a second long walk followed by exhaustion, if in fact there had been a second one. Biographers, such as Westernhagen, who assume without question that the vision actually occurred as described, are forced to place it on the afternoon *following* his long letter to Minna on September 5th. But they are asking readers to make a tremendous stretch of the autobiographical sequence of events.

In sum, a closer look at the Spezia journey and a close comparison of the times of the descriptions allow us to reject the “Monday afternoon” explanation for Wagner’s omission of the vision in his letter to Minna. Either the vision did not happen as described or the explanation really lies in Wagner’s relationship with Minna.

Against historical truth: Relationships and the content of Wagner’s correspondence

Other biographers, such as Ernest Newman (1976), have argued that the practical and bourgeois Hausfrau Minna would have been totally incapable of grasping the significance of a creative experience such as the vision at La Spezia. So, one could reasonably argue that Wagner simply did not share the account of his creative vision with Minna in his letter of September 5. It is true that Wagner and Minna related to one another in terms of health concerns and loneliness. It is also true that they sought different paths in other areas of domestic and artistic life. At times, their great differences flared, especially when Wagner found another woman who was sympathetic to his views. More on this later.

But it should be noted that even if Minna perhaps did not comprehend the depths and the extent of her husband’s inner creative turmoil, she still had a *practical* interest in each and every one of her husband’s compositions, especially during the Zürich period when they were in need of income. She and others at this time, even the great Franz Liszt, strongly encouraged Wagner to consider composing a practical and popular opera for Paris.

We know that Wagner's artistic evolution was taking him elsewhere at this time, of course, and, from past bitter experience, he utterly loathed the music scene in Paris. So, not surprisingly, Wagner struggled against and resisted this pressure. Still, though neither "Das Rheingold" in specific nor the Ring in general would fit the mold of a "practical and popular opera for Paris", one might assume that Minna would be interested in hearing about any sort of vision or creative inspiration, if for no other reason than because it would be a strong sign that Wagner was about to resume the composition of opera after a 5 year musical drought. It surely would have pleased Minna that he was composing again; it may have relieved some of the pressure on him. For this reason alone, Wagner might have shared his Spezia vision with Minna, if, in fact, it occurred. But he didn't.

Characteristics of our relationships with others determine the content and extent of what thoughts and memories from our past, present, and future, indeed, what "self" we share with them (Gregg 1991; Hermans & Kempen 1993; Schulster 1996). With this position in mind, let us agree with biographical consensus: The Spezia vision was withheld from Minna because of their relationship. But then we must ask: Are there other persons whose relationships with Wagner would warrant a full description of the vision at La Spezia?

There are: Given the artistic nature of their relationships, one would certainly expect a full account of the creative vision to either August Röckel or to Franz Liszt. Unlike Minna, Röckel and Liszt, both composers and conductors, would have had the mental equipment and experiential background to appreciate the importance of a musical vision. Indeed, Wagner's correspondence with them allows us to trace the poetic and musical genesis of "Der Ring des Nibelungen". Wagner-the-opera-composer is an identity, a self Wagner would take care to co-construct with these friends.

Especially with Liszt. Certainly the relationship between Liszt and Wagner *before* the latter's Italian journey, so well illustrated by their correspondence, begs for the animated description of the creative vision at La Spezia. Yet it is simply not there in his letter to Liszt on September 12, only a week after it supposedly occurred!

Nor is it anywhere to be found as Wagner continued to share his eagerness to set to work on the composition of "Das Rheingold". For example, in another letter to Liszt from Zürich (September 29, 1853), dated less than a month after La Spezia, but before the two met again in Basel, en route to Paris, Wagner only said, among other things, that:

I am longing to get to work at last. My ordinary life is unbearable unless I, so to speak, devour myself. Moreover, I cannot keep my peace, as I particularly want to do, unless I devote myself to this music
(Wagner 1973, Vol. 1, #132, p. 331).

Several of the letters reveal Wagner's excitement and tremendous effort in the composition of "Das Rheingold", as, for example, his letter to Liszt on about November 14, 1853 (Wagner 1987, #168, p.295). On February 7, 1854, he informed Liszt that:

I am now writing the *Rheingold* straight out in full score, with the instrumentation: I could not find any other way of writing out the prelude (the depths of the Rhine) as a sketch so that it was clear; that is why I had recourse straightaway to the full score (Wagner 1987, #172, p.313).

After the fact, on March 4, he wrote to Liszt,

I... have now reached a new stage of development where I have adopted a totally different approach: thus — just think of it — the *whole* of the instrumental introduction to the *Rheingold* is constructed on the single triad of *E-flat!* (Wagner 1987, #173, p.314).

The reader will note that Wagner's revelation to Liszt of the tonal construction of the prelude to "Das Rheingold" comes a full 6 months *after* it supposedly came to him in the vision at La Spezia. Indeed, recent scholars suggest that the composition of the prelude to "Das Rheingold" was actually a prolonged affair, not the result of a single inspirational moment (Darcy 1989/1990).

I have illustrated here that Wagner explicitly and frequently shared his excitement and the inner workings of his creative processes with fellow composer, Franz Liszt. Wagner may not have revealed his vision to his wife, Minna, but, in context of the depth and the extent of his relationship with Liszt and in context of the importance of the composition of "Rheingold" to that relationship, the omission of the vision at La Spezia forces only one conclusion: the vision, in the sense of historical truth, did not occur.

Three questions

Deathridge and Dalhaus (1984), Darcy (1989/1990), and other recent scholars have noted that it is fairly easy to doubt the historical truth of the vision at La Spezia. But Wagner was neither whimsical nor arbitrary about matters of presentation of self or about his creativity. One must assume that he had a reason for inserting the account of La Spezia into his life narrative.

If one concludes that the vision did not actually occur as Wagner described it to Emilie Ritter in the letter or as he “remembered” it in his autobiography, *Mein Leben*, then one must answer three questions: (1) Why did he invent the vision? (2) Why did he wait over a year after it supposedly happened to invent it? And (3) why was Emilie Ritter the first to hear of it? The second question is tackled first.

Why did Wagner wait over a year after it supposedly happened to invent the vision at La Spezia?

Some Wagnerian scholars have suggested that the timing of the first description of a creative vision at La Spezia (in the letter to Emilie Ritter on December 29, 1854) is the result of Wagner's enthusiastic reading of the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer in the fall of 1854. This is highly likely: Schopenhauer's philosophy, as set forth in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (The World as Will and Representation) (Schopenhauer 1969) and in the essays *Parerga und Paralipomena*, (1974) completely resonated with the 41 year old Wagner. In Schopenhauer, Wagner found his inner-most psychological pain mirrored by a respected and published, if not exactly well known philosopher.

But Wagner found much more in Schopenhauer than a reason for the “final denial of the will to live”. Here were philosophical explanations for his genius and the workings of his creative processes, for his strongly felt alienation and loneliness as an artist in a bourgeois society, and for the unique position of music and opera among the arts. These, of course, were ideas and themes Wagner had, just years before, covered in his essays, primarily in *The Artwork of the Future* (Wagner 1966d) and in *Opera and Drama* (Wagner 1966f). The similarities, it will be asserted below, further fueled Wagner's desire to understand himself as an example of Schopenhauer's “true genius”.

In *The World as Will and Representation*, but also in his essays, Schopenhauer described two aspects of consciousness: The first aspect concerns the external world which we are aware of only as a *representation* or ideas mediated through the senses and the intellect. This representation of the external world is constructed along the dimensions of time, space, and causality. The second aspect concerns the inner world of desires, intentions, motives, and emotions, which receive expression in our behavior. These originate in the Will, an inaccessible, primitive, blind, striving source of energy, not unlike Freud's later construct of the Id.

Schopenhauer, like Wagner, fully appreciated the power of music. Music

acts directly on the will, i.e., on the emotions of the hearer. Music gives rise to passions, not to ideas. The task of the true artist, the composer, therefore, is to express those contents of *his* will or passions in music such that the music impacts directly on the will or emotions of the listener.

Schopenhauer further contrasts the *true* artist or genius with a mere musical *talent*: A mere talent is he who creates *consciously* from external concepts and follows the fashion of the moment for the sake of popularity. The true artist, in contrast, creates unconsciously, from the Will, and follows its dictates. As we shall see, Wagner had explored this concept in his prose as well (Wagner 1966g).

In his distinction between the mental processes of everyday, waking consciousness and the timeless world of the unconscious, Schopenhauer laid the groundwork for Wagner's understanding of the creative process (Magee, 1983). Like many other philosophers of mind, Freud included, Schopenhauer posited the existence of an "inner eye" by which the contents of the Will (or unconscious) are perceived.

The dream-organ is, therefore, the same as the organ of conscious wakefulness and intuitive perception of the external world, only grasped, as it were, from the other end and used in the reverse order. The nerves of the senses which function in both can be rendered active from their inner as well as from their outer end... it is the dream-organ... whereby somnambulistic intuitive perception, clairvoyance, second sight, and visions of all kinds are brought about (Schopenhauer 1974, p.251).

Surely the parallel statement, "I sank into a kind of somnambulistic state", from the *Mein Leben* version of the Spezia vision demands our attention.

Thus, the process by which the artist gains "immediate knowledge of the inner nature of the world unknown to his faculty of reason" involves a dream or a trance, that is, one of many altered states of consciousness, with which, if we are to believe several other tales of *Mein Leben*, Wagner was quite familiar (Schulster 1979/1980).

And so, in answer to the second question, "Why did he wait over a year after the vision supposedly happened to invent it?" it is fair to say that Wagner's structuring of the La Spezia vision was influenced by his reading of Schopenhauer and that he had not yet read Schopenhauer until the fall of 1854. His letter to Emilie Ritter came fairly soon after.

Wagner would return to Schopenhauer for the preparation of his commemorative essay, "Beethoven" (Wagner 1966h) in 1870. As this time coincides with the period in which he was dictating *Mein Leben*, it may explain the more detailed and dramatic description of the vision therein.

Why did Wagner invent the vision of La Spezia?

The answer to our first question, “Why did he invent the vision?” is short but the unraveling of the process is long and circuitous. The short answer is that Wagner wished to demonstrate to the world and also, perhaps, to himself that he, Richard Wagner, fit the mold of the true Artist described by Schopenhauer. Artists create through visionary experiences; La Spezia, as described in his letter to Emilie Ritter and in *Mein Leben*, was Wagner's presentation of “evidence” that he was such an Artist and that his creative processes worked in the same way. Important too: By the time he wrote Emilie, the final score of “Das Rheingold” was completed, as well as the first draft of the full score of “Die Walküre”. Wagner could safely crow about the fruit of his inspirations! Personal myths, as well as cultural and religious myths, are usually created after the fact (Brockmeier 1997; Freeman 1993).

The long answer to the question, “Why did he create the vision”, lies in the complexity of the processes that were probably going on in Wagner's psyche at the time surrounding La Spezia. I assert that a new identity was emerging in Richard Wagner in the mid-1850s. His growing awareness of this new identity is reflected in both his perceived need for a visionary experience and, to answer our third question, in his choice of a correspondent with whom he would first share it.

Erik Erikson (1968) has made the achievement of an identity central to his conceptualization of the psychological growth and development of the individual. But identity is neither simple nor static. We, all of us, perform a number of roles in our lives, and thus, really, exist in a multiplicity of identities (Markus & Nurius 1986; Gergen 1991; Hermans & Kempen 1993). Each identity will be more or less a combination of physical, internal and external forces. We can be tall or short, slight or muscular, athletic or clumsy, overweight, balding, or curly. We have different temperaments, ascribed identities, national and/or religious, and role-specific identities, depending on the roles in life we happen to be performing at the time: We are at once men or women, professionals, public figures, team players, parents, sons or daughters, friends, patients, tourists, etc. Some have argued that the number of and relative importance of sources of identity have changed over the centuries (Baumeister 1986, 1991).

Some of us, maybe most of us, are aware of a more stable, core identity, around which minor satellite identities revolve. What is generally referred to as the “self” is both the composite of all these identities and roles, as well as perhaps that which holds the package together and prevents fragmentation.

Identities and roles, major and minor, central or peripheral, long term or temporary are supported, confirmed, or “validated” by our relationships with others in family, in friendship, and in society. Unwanted characteristics are similarly discouraged, disconfirmed, or invalidated. Identity, in other words, is as much a co-construction, a social, cultural creation, shaped and supported by relationships with others, as it is an internal “thing” that evolves from within.

Erikson’s epigenetic theory of personality development (1968) describes a normal period of crisis in the formation of identity, which typically occurs during the late teen years into early adulthood. At this time a young adult does the sorting, testing, and modifying of possible adult identities and roles. Some tentative or experimental identities will survive, solidify, and stabilize, depending on the individual’s internal strengths and motivations and depending on the responses he gets from his significant others; other identities, not backed by strengths or motivation or not validated by the individual’s society or culture, will be discarded; some older identities, like those established during childhood or adolescence, may be buried, only to resurface under special circumstances.

Wagner’s first identity crisis, stagnation, and eventual success

In *Mein Leben*, Richard Wagner describes his weathering of the identity crisis of the late adolescent period, and this in spite of numerous distractions and at best only ambivalent support from many in his family. His musical training through his teenage years was mixed with heavy gambling, carousing, drinking, and even dueling. Yet the gifted Wagner emerged in his early 20s to become a chorus master/conductor and an opera composer who successfully completed, if not performed, a respectable first opera (“Die Feen”, The Fairies). The sheer joy he experienced upon the completion of “Die Feen” is amply evident in his reply to a letter from his eldest sister, Rosalie, on December 11 of 1833 (Wagner 1991, #2, pp.5–11). Certainly a large part of his joy came from Rosalie’s apparent confirmation of his musical efforts and, thus, of his identity as an opera composer.

However, the next 9 years brought little further evidence that he was in fact genuinely talented as a composer. “Die Feen” was never performed; his second opera, “Das Liebesverbot”, was given a single flubbed performance in 1836 by the remains of a bankrupt company. In Paris to seek his fortune and fame, Wagner and his wife Minna teetered on the brink of starvation. He begged and cajoled money from family and friends and did hack work transcribing airs from Italian and French operas for solo instruments.

But he returned to Dresden in the summer of 1842 at the Court Opera’s

acceptance of his third opera, "Rienzi". As Wagner, in *Mein Leben*, and as history tells us, "Rienzi" was an overwhelming success. Wagner's talent as a conductor and composer, as well as his growing influence in the musical world, won him the position of royal Kapellmeister for the Court Opera in Dresden, a title which brought him respect, regular work, and, most important, a salary. He and Minna settled into a reasonable bourgeois comfort.

The revolution, the prose works and the identity of the artist

Though Wagner was contemplating several operatic projects at the time of the Dresden Uprising, he abandoned the active role of composer and, in exile in Zürich, wrote his essential Prose Works. These extensively outline Wagner's music of the future and the new relationship between music and poetry ("The Art Work of the Future" and "Opera and Drama") and it is in this light that musicologists and music historians most often study Wagner's Prose Works.

But the Prose Works also delve into the creative workings of the artist, here set in terms of the relationship of the Artist to his own inner processes, to his national roots, to his language, and to his people (the Folk). In short, in the Prose Works, Wagner set forth the "structure" of the identity of the German opera composer, the Artist.

Here is the essence: After a revolution, men will at last be free to realize their true Folk Nature by overthrowing the burden of culture, religion, egoism, caprice, and luxury. True Art will reflect the communal struggles and themes of the Folk. The Artist will create this true Artwork by tapping into or intuiting the Folk spirit. In his role as a "conduit", the Artist will be like a high priest who guides, instructs, and elevates the Folk community ("Art and Revolution"). Historical forces have separated the three artforms (Music, Dance, and Poetry) that were once united in the communal dramas of Ancient Greece. The Artist will re-combine these artforms into a new synthesis ("The Artwork of the Future"). In the opera of the future, poet and composer will be one in the same, and only then will the drama be given true expression through music ("Opera and Drama"). Above all, the true Artist should follow his own inner necessity and not stoop to popular fashion ("A Communication to My Friends").

Lofty theorizing. Nonsense, perhaps. Such is not uncommon in the history of ideas: Freud, in "Civilization and Its Discontents" would also play fast and loose with history to fit his needs. Wagner probably believed in his conception of history and the arts, because it supported his identity and mission as a composer, as much as other groups believe other forms of identity-supporting nonsense.

If we conceive of Wagner's Prose Works as outlining the positive identity for the German opera composer of the future, an identity Wagner was clearly shaping for himself, then his contemporary essay, the infamous "Das Judentum in die Musik" (Judaism in Music, Wagner 1966g), can be framed as an outline of the structure of the *negative identity* of the composer, or those identity characteristics that are to be discouraged or shunned. Wagner argues that the Jewish composer, personified by Giacomo Meyerbeer or by Felix Mendelssohn, cannot write German music because he has no intimate connection with the deeper substrate of the German folk-spirit. This is evidenced by his cultural mannerisms, his polyglot language, and his lack of any real depth of passion.

Of course, neither could an Italian write German music. (Who would want to? an Italian such as Bellini would ask!) Nor could a Frenchman. It galled Wagner that the Jewish Meyerbeer, a composer of enormously popular French Grand Operas who changed his name from Jakob to Giacomo while in Italy composing Italian operas, was considered a German composer by the French.

Stepping aside from questions of whether there really is such a thing as "German Music", as opposed to "French Music", and what, if any, a music's relationship to the ancestry of its composer might be, I'll note here that the man who more closely fits Wagner's positive identity characteristics for an Artist/composer is the Bohemian Jew Gustav Mahler, less the Bavarian Richard Strauss, usually considered Wagner's heir.

Wagner was exploring in his Prose Works one side of a universal process of identity formation: Erikson (1968) and, more recently, Gregg (1991) maintain that all cultures, not only the Germans, the Jews, the French and the Italians of the 19th century, enforce and reward the characteristics of the positive identity and discourage or reject the characteristics of the negative identity. Often the characteristics of the negative identity are projected onto an outgroup. It follows, too, that the meaning of an identity characteristic, as the meaning of an action, is drawn from the cultural context in which it occurs and also from the cultural context from which it is perceived. One culture's positive identity characteristics, used for *inclusion* in the community, may be perceived by a different culture as negative identity characteristics and used for *exclusion* from their community. The Jews' persistent use of Yiddish in Germany is an example of a positive identity characteristic, as perceived by the Jews, that was perceived negatively by the Germans; the Jews' insistence that they were actually racially different from the Germans, and vice versa, had positive and negative, ultimately tragic implications.

Indeed, inclusion in versus exclusion from a community seems to have

been a central issue in Wagner's dramatic conception. Most of Wagner's heroes (the Dutchman, Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Siegmund, Siegfried, Walther von Stolzing, Parsifal) are passionate loners or misfits who, for one reason or another, are peripheral to a community. More an issue in Wagner's earlier operas, the hero seeks an unconditional love-bond with a woman (Senta, Elisabeth, Elsa) and, through this relationship, the hero may move closer toward inclusion in the community. The communities often have as members shallow, weaker or fallen characters (Daland, Telramund, Hunding, Gunther, Amfortas). And then there are the bad guys: evil characters who have been excluded (Klingsor) or may be excluded from the community (Beckmesser) because they have violated its social rules and values. In some cases they actively seek the destruction of the community (Ortrud, Alberich, Mime, Klingsor). More a matter of Wagner's later operas, the hero defeats the evil characters in any number of ways and, at the same time, transforms the community. Some have observed that attributes of these evil characters are really caricatures of Jews (Adorno 1991).

Wagner's anti-Semitism would reach a level of venomous, obsessive paranoia, in parallel with the increasing penetration and influence of Jews into the worlds of German art, culture, and politics in the latter half of the 19th century (Magee 1988). This side of Wagner has been brought more to the fore lately, perhaps rightly so, in light of the terrible events of the 20th century. But without denying this aspect of Wagner or merely ignoring it, we should not let what happens later in history preempt our focus. The importance of the identity issues Wagner struggled with in the 1850s in nearly 700 pages of theorizing should not be brushed aside by less than 50.

There was much a stake: More than just Wagner, an individual composer, the very identity of *composer*, in the typological sense, was evolving during Wagner's lifetime. As late as Mozart and Haydn's era (the end of the 18th century), the composer was a church or court employee who wrote music mainly for the purpose of ceremony or background entertainment. Form over content: A composer wrote music according to rather rigid formal and tonal constraints. Antonio Salieri, Mozart's rival in Vienna, is often used as an example of the servile court composer. Contrast this "employee identity" of the composer with that of the mythic Ludwig van Beethoven: The gifted Artist who created from a cosmic, inner need for expression. Music was the medium for communicating the Artist's intuitive understanding of inner truths: Content, even if the forms were stretched to the point of breaking, as exemplified by Beethoven's 9th Symphony. Wagner clearly saw himself as Beethoven's heir,

and it is no wonder that Wagner should celebrate Beethoven's creativity in his 1870 essay (Wagner 1966h).

Then too Richard Wagner lived in a time when the many German states were emerging from the rubble of the Napoleonic Wars. Questions of what comprised a "German identity" and what differentiated the German from both other nationalities from without and from other groups from within, such as the Jews, were heatedly argued.

The end of the old identity and the emergence of the new

The identity of the Artist or Genius must be both evidenced by the artistic creations that come from his pen *and* affirmed his relationships with the society around him. In other words, the Artist must demonstrate through his creations that he is, in fact, the creative individual he claims to be. But he must also be affirmed by others, since, as suggested above, identity is as much a social or cultural creation as it is some inner awareness.

However much Wagner tried to discard it during the Zürich period, his old "Dresden identity", that of the successful Kapellmeister and the composer of reasonably popular operas, was anchored in the relationships with persons from his past. Minna, his wife, was especially eager to regain the bourgeois stability and respectability they had known in Dresden.

But Wagner's new relationship with Franz Liszt blossomed in Zürich, possibly because Liszt confirmed and encouraged Wagner's growing identity as an innovator, as the "musician of the future", and as a grand thinker. I asserted earlier that it is because of the special nature of their relationship as artists that the *omission* of any mention of the vision at La Spezia in their correspondence suggests strongly that it did not actually happen.

But the vision was invented and described to Emilie Ritter. Why Emilie? Why not Liszt? To gain an understanding of the creation and appearance of the vision and its relation to his new identity, we must turn to Wagner's relationships with the Ritters and associates, the other new forces in Wagner's life.

The Ritter family

Karl Ritter, the eldest son of Frau Julie Ritter, a well-to-do widow, came under Wagner's influence while the latter was Kapellmeister at Dresden in 1848, probably much in the same way that a young Richard Wagner was deeply impressed by composer Carl Maria von Weber years earlier in Dresden. Karl

and fellow classmate Hans von Bülow, both fledgling composers and conductors, sought careers in music; the young English woman, Jessie Taylor, was one of the friends of the family.

Frau Julie Ritter heard of Wagner's financial crises in Zürich, following his flight from Dresden in 1849, and, to help him, promised him support in terms of a regular stipend. She, it seems, was particularly interested in giving Wagner the means necessary to complete his ever-expanding saga of the Nibelungs, but it is equally likely that Frau Ritter saw in Wagner a means for training and introducing her son, Karl, to the world of music. Wagner deeply appreciated her support, both financial and emotional, and often referred to her as "Mother". Steady, supportive, reasonable, and strong, Frau Ritter was in many ways the mother Wagner never had: She unambiguously validated Wagner's identity as musician and creative artist. She also assumed the role of Wagner's confidant/confessor in his abortive affair with young Jessie Taylor, now married to Eugene Laussot, a wine merchant from Bordeaux.

The Jessie Laussot affair

Wagner's "affair" with Jessie Laussot in the spring of 1850 is relevant because her relationship with Wagner revived in him an older, buried identity, namely that of the passionate, young creative genius. I propose here that it was the *collapse* of the affair that set the stage for his new, emerging identity of this period.

Jessie Taylor Laussot was young, intelligent, musical, and through her own family and through her marriage to Eugene Laussot, quite wealthy. Frau Julie Ritter persuaded her to consider some financial support for Wagner in 1850 and, exploring the possibilities, Wagner accepted her invitation to visit her in Bordeaux in March of 1850. At first through her letters and later through Jessie in person, Wagner rediscovered (though may not have relieved) his sexual passion for a woman and, through Jessie's response to his art, he probably rediscovered some of the creative fires of the old days. He was loved both as man *and* artist. Visiting Jessie, Wagner experienced sympathetic bonding from a woman such as he had never known. Certainly not with Minna! Here, with Jessie, Wagner must have dreamt of the realization of the self-less artistic community, as implied in "The Art-Work of the Future", in which Wagner would play the role of Artist/High Priest. Doubtless, he thought this community would be funded by money from Laussot and from the Ritters.

It is clear from his letters to Frau Julie Ritter that Wagner deeply loved Jessie Laussot and it is not impossible that she led him to believe that she would

abandon her unhappy marriage and flee with him. Unhappily for Wagner, the proposed elopement was thwarted.

Wagner realized, in retrospect, that the end of this affair was the closing of a chapter of his psychological life. He wrote to Frau Ritter, from Zürich, after a trip to Italy in the summer of 1852, a year *before* La Spezia:

...life no longer has any happiness to offer me. It was precisely there that I realized I am no longer capable of enjoying life, now that I have lost my youth. Yes, indeed — my dear Frau Ritter, I remained young until a certain event in my life with which you are already very familiar: then I became old over night. I now know that I have no more hopes for the future! On one unique and decisive occasion I tried to seize hold of life as it really is, to hold it tight, and to find in it my salvation: it passed me by, I sank back into the world of my own imaginings...

Since I am, after all, an artist, I shall continue to lead this artificial life of mine as long as I can. Of course, only my art can still sustain me and disguise from me how insipid my life has become. The enormous effort it takes to do so is something I must seek to lessen as best I can. What this principally means is that I must at least spare myself the feelings of pain occasioned by over-frequent contact with the foolish world... (Wagner 1987, #148, p.266).

The reader's attention here is turned to the phrases, "Now that I have lost my youth." "Since I am, after all, an artist, ...only my art can still sustain me..." At 39, to the woman he called "Mother", Wagner confessed that, though still an artist, he was psychologically no longer a young man. He perceived that an end of a period of his life had been reached.

Wagner's emerging identity as master: Age relationships

It is important for our consideration here that Wagner remained in close contact with several relatively younger persons. And it is in this contact with younger persons, in context of Wagner's own perception of his age and in context of other outside events in his life, that lie the keys to his emerging identity as "Der Meister" (The Master) and to the motivation for him to invent the vision of La Spezia.

It is the young who, through their veneration of the wisdom of elders, place the elder in the position of "Master". And, conversely, it is the artistry, the wisdom, and the experience of the Master that enable him to guide the growth and development of the young. The Master/Apprentice system in the guilds in Germany, established in the Middle Ages, was merely a formalization of a timeless relationship between the ages.

For Richard Wagner to achieve the identity of “composer” or “artist” he must needs produce works of art. This he had done since he was 20. But for Richard Wagner to achieve the identity of “the Master”, to *be* the Master, it required the veneration and adulation of youth, which, of course, can only come with a difference in age between him and his followers and apprentices. To his older Dresden friends, to Frau Julie Ritter, to Uhlig, Röckel, Liszt, to members of his family, and perhaps even to Minna, Wagner was an artist, if not always with a capital A. This I called his “Dresden Identity”.

But to Karl Ritter, Hans von Bülow, Emilie Ritter, and others along the way (including Cosima von Bülow, soon to be Wagner's mistress and wife, Ludwig II of Bavaria, the young, impressionable dreamer soon to be a king, and, later, in 1868, a young Friedrich Nietzsche), Richard Wagner was more. I am asserting here that Wagner began to be cognizant of his emerging identity as “Master” because of his relationships with younger persons and also because of other external factors that occurred during the Zürich period of the early 1850s. This identity solidified and persisted until his death in 1883.

Let me detail briefly his relationships with these younger persons in the mid 1850s. Pursuant of his musical studies, young Karl Ritter took an attic room in Wagner's residence in Zürich, becoming his apprentice and, in a way, Wagner's adopted son. Like a good father, Wagner consternated about Karl's health and about his weakness for sweets. Through Wagner's efforts, Karl Ritter was to have made his debut as a conductor of the opera in Zürich. His incompetence, however, precluded this and Wagner, making good his patronage of the lad, made an unannounced debut in Zürich conducting “Der Freischütz”. Wagner convinced the more talented Hans von Bülow to follow the art of conducting, against the hesitations of his father and the outright resistance of Bülow's mother. Bülow also lived under Wagner's roof as an “adopted son”, albeit briefly. Bülow succeeded in Zürich where Ritter failed, but Bülow's ill-tempered remarks eventually forced the severance of the relationship with the Zürich musical world. The “Master/apprentice” relationship between Wagner and von Bülow continued via letter.

Thus, one essential requirement for the identity of Master is an age difference between Master and apprentices or followers.

Wagner's emerging identity as master: Social confirmation

Another requirement is the social approval or social confirmation of the Master. This, I suspect, was provided in late July of 1853 by the musicians and people of

Zürich, first by showing sufficient interest in Wagner's music to mount a three day festival of selections of his works, complete with a festive banquet, and second by honoring him with a special ceremony. Wagner described it in *Mein Leben* as follows:

After a long toil a calligraphic masterpiece in the form of an honorary diploma to be awarded to me by the Zürich Choral Society was at last ready; this diploma was to be presented with the participation of all the corporate and individual elements of Zürich society favorably disposed toward me, in the course of a solemn torchlight procession. Thus, on one lovely summer evening, stately ranks of torch-bearers approached the Zeltweg with a sonorous musical accompaniment and offered me a spectacle such as I have never again beheld to this day. There was singing, and then the formal address of the president of the choral society wafted up to me. I was so much moved by this event that my invincible optimism quickly took possession of my imagination: in my response I indicated plainly that I saw no reason why Zürich should not in fact be destined, in its solid bourgeois way, to give an impetus toward the fulfillment of my highest aims with respect to the artistic ideals I cherished... (Wagner 1992, p. 496).

Wagner had received his Master's degree.

Wagner and Luther

Erikson (1958, p. 90) highlights a similar profound moment in the life of young Martin Luther. Indeed, some parallels between themes of identity in the lives of Wagner and Luther warrant our brief focus. Though raised in the Lutheran Church, Wagner was in no way a religious man in the ceremonial or dogmatic sense of the word. But he considered Luther one of the great men of Germany. It is therefore worth speculating about the degree to which Wagner saw himself as a modern day Martin Luther.

Luther claims to have had mystical religious experiences and revelations, which ultimately led to his split from the Roman Catholic Church, subsequently called the Reformation. Did not Richard Wagner now claim to have had a vision at La Spezia? And did not Wagner propose a relationship of music and drama (in "Opera and Drama") that would ultimately lead to the reformation of opera?

With the Reformation, Luther swept away the layers of ritual, pomp and bureaucracy of the church that, he felt, separated man from Christ. And would not Richard Wagner, with his art, sweep aside popular pulp opera, with its marches and pageants, and return man to contact with his unconscious folk

origins or psychological depths? It is clearly hinted so in his letter written to the 29 year old Wagnerian, Arrigo Boito in 1871 (Wagner 1966i), a letter which, as listed above, contains mention of the Spezia vision.

Furthermore, Wagner's identification with Luther may have guided his choice for his next operatic project, after the explosive interruption of "Tristan und Isolde". The Ring stalled mid-composition, Wagner was looking for a more practical project. "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg" had already been in Wagner's mind since the mid-1840s, when he sketched in prose a story about Hans Sachs and the Mastersingers as sort of a comic afterthought (a "satyr-play") to the more serious "Tannhäuser". But he had several other libretti and unfinished sketches to choose from. What guided his decision? Regardless of what Wagner says in *Mein Leben*, it cannot be accidental that he chose the story of cobbler/poet Hans Sachs, the central character of the opera, who was, in real life, an early champion of the Reformation and a contemporary of Luther. Sachs is an artisan, a poet, a composer, and a Mastersinger. The Master/Apprentice relationship exists between Sachs and David, who is instructed in the art of song composition. But young Walther von Stolzing, an outsider, wants to win Eva's hand. Can it be accidental that his Prize Song comes to him in a wondrous dream, in contrast to the more consciously rule-bound compositions of the Mastersingers? Is it surprising that the community awards the bride to him over Beckmesser who seeks to steal another's song for the contest? Many of Sachs's moods and monologues reflect Wagner's thoughts and disillusionment. As the Ring resounds with the gender-related issues of identity and creativity in Wagner's life (Nattiez 1993), so "Die Meistersinger" resounds with issues of creativity, composition, German art, and the identity of the Master.

Of equal interest, too, is that Wagner apparently contemplated an opera on Luther in August of 1868, just after the premiere of "Die Meistersinger" in June of 1868, and just before the resumption of the composition of "Siegfried" in the winter of 1869 (Deathridge & Dalhaus 1984).

A summary of the long answer to our first question, Wagner invented the vision of La Spezia to supply evidence to himself and to the world of his emerging identities of Genius/Artist and Master, which were elaborations of his identity of composer, an identity already fairly well in place.

Why was Emilie Ritter the first to hear of the vision at La Spezia?

Now we may answer the third question. Earlier, in *Mein Leben*, Wagner stated that, "Among my German friends, only the two loyal ladies Julie Kummer [nee

Ritter] and Emilie Ritter had arrived in time for the [important 3 day festival] concerts” of his music (Wagner 1992, p. 496).

By 1853, the year of the Zürich concert, Emilie Ritter, Frau Julie Ritter’s daughter, had already deeply impressed Wagner. We’ve noted previously that his meeting with Jessie Laussot in Bordeaux in 1850 aroused Wagner’s passions and his dreams for a closely-knit artistic community. But also, apparently, did a letter from Emilie Ritter, which reached him there, enclosed in a letter from his Dresden friend, Theodor Uhlig. Wagner replied to her on March 26, 1850:

My dear Emilie,

Now it will indeed not be long before we will really meet each other face to face. If it required such events to bring us so close as we now feel from the most awkward distance, now it requires only the will and courage of love for us to give ourselves to each other completely.

It is a strange, wonderful and marvelous story that, almost without our knowledge, has occurred between us, and is now told to me like an unbelievably beautiful fairy-tale by our Jessie. When she tells her stories, I sit there like a child, pleased and happy like a child, and often weeping like a child. But then I awake as though from a long sleep. Fairy-tale dreams wake me, and are themselves awoken. Allow us, dear Emilie, let us make these fairy-tales wholly alive and true, so that they stand in the center of our life as cheering deeds. There is only one truth in life, which all that is unclear and vague demands in order to find greatest satisfaction: this truth is reality. Let us not attempt to appease ourselves with visions: let us be all that we are and all that we can be. We, who all love each other, can only achieve this if we are united. Allow us, now that we recognize how dear we are to each other, to have before us no goal other than that of our union between now and such time as it is attained — the true union of those who are drawn together by so wonderful a love from which the most beautiful bond must bloom. Allow us to be near each other as we are able. Thus we will be most blessed, and yet also only that which we are able to be.

Greet and kiss your mother and siblings. You all have my most heartfelt thanks for your love (Wagner 1967–1991, Vol. 3, # 62, pp. 261–262).

Emilie’s letter probably only pledged to him the strong, sympathetic, emotional support of the Ritter family, with, in addition, perhaps hints at an actual meeting between Wagner and the other Ritters. Wanting this, Wagner was quick to solidify and reciprocate the bonds of sympathy and love in his reply to Emilie. It would be a step toward the artistic community he had dreamt of; it would also be a step toward creating an unconditionally loving “family” circle, something that the young Richard Wagner never had.

If the bond between Wagner and Jessie Laussot was irrevocably destroyed in

the collapse of the affair that spring of 1850, the bond between him and Emilie Ritter was far more solid, if not ever physically passionate. Emilie was important to Wagner not only because she was the daughter of his stolid benefactress, Frau Julie Ritter, but also because she was young, probably intelligent, maybe attractive, and certainly sensitive emotionally to Wagner. Most important, she was a woman. Emilie would become part of Wagner's emotional support system, in contrast to his more practical, artistic support system (such as Uhlig and Liszt). She and her sister Julie were probably with him at the time of the torch light ceremony. Later, Emilie remembered his birthday in May of 1854, to which he replied (six months before the Spezia letter):

Good day, dear and faithful soul! Thank you for your birthday greeting! It was the only one I received from abroad.

Yesterday, I finished *Rheingold* completely. I am somewhat weary today, but I wanted to send you a greeting...

Were you here with me, indeed, then I would be able to say much to you. Then I would play and sing to you as well as I could. Finally you should win the heart of even the giant Fasolt. (You remember that this is the tragic hero of *Rheingold*?) (Wagner 1967–1991, Vol. 5, # 69, pp. 129–131).

Emilie was, in effect, the young admirer of the older Master, or, as dramatized in “Die Meistersinger”, the Eva to his Hans Sachs. And thus it was this young admirer whom the Master first impressed with the tale of his creative vision at La Spezia on December 29, 1854. From there it was history.

Summary

To voice skepticism here about the historical truth of Wagner's vision at La Spezia, to suggest that Wagner did not, in fact, have the vision he so beautifully and dramatically (and, I would venture, mythically) described in *Mein Leben*, is neither new nor original. Other Wagnerian scholars in recent times have been skeptical.

But skepticism alone is not enough: Explanations about Wagner's motivation must be advanced for his invention of the tale of the vision. Why did he invent the vision at La Spezia? What factors determined the timing of the invention of the vision? and Why was Emilie Ritter the first person to whom Wagner revealed the vision?

Wagner invented the vision at La Spezia because it had narrative truth: It described in dramatic strokes the origins of the music for the prelude to “Das

Rheingold”, the “vorabend” to his epic cycle, “Der Ring des Nibelungen”, which, to this day, remains one of the greatest musical conceptions in Western history. The tale of the creative vision made for an impressive story, if not a true story. But, most important, it fit Wagner’s growing conception of himself as a true genius, an Artist, the Master: It was the sort of creative experience a Master *ought* to have; it was *evidence* of his identity.

Though Wagner wrote extensively about the creative process in his Prose Works prior to his reading of Schopenhauer in the fall of 1854, Wagner needed Schopenhauer to suggest specific mechanisms: a vision in light sleep is one means by which the contents of the Will, the source of music, are communicated to the conscious mind of the Artist. Hence the *timing* and the structure of the first description of the vision at La Spezia, and its later elaboration in *Mein Leben*, were clearly dependent on Wagner’s reading and rereading of Schopenhauer.

But it was the Master/follower relationship that determined to whom the vision was first revealed. One imagines an older man, a fellow composer such as Franz Liszt, merely raising his bushy eyebrows at such a tale. Vision, indeed! No, the newly emerging Master needed a true, sensitive follower, one who would most likely accept the impressive account uncritically. In Wagner’s life, this true, sensitive follower could only be a young woman, and the main young woman in his life at the time was Emilie Ritter.

I have focused Wagner’s emerging identity as Master as part of the explanation for his reinterpretation of an autobiographical experience, which led to the narration of a creative vision at La Spezia. In the broader light of identity, *Mein Leben* should be considered less an historical document, more a mythical narrative of self-presentation. Yes, as Nietzsche would later describe it (Nietzsche 1967), *Mein Leben* is a “fable convenue”. But then, arguably, most autobiographical writings are.

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CHAPTER 10

Identity and narrative in Piaget's autobiographies

Jacques Vonèche

Modificar el pasado no es
modificar un solo hecho;
es anular sus consecuencias,
que tienden a ser infinitas.

Jorge Luis Borges (La Otra Muerte)

La vérité d'un homme
est ce qu'il cache.

André Malraux (Antimémoires)

Introduction

Autobiographies, like any storytelling, allow their writers to locate themselves within the formality of narrative (triumph over adversity; tragic defeat sustained with courage; acute insight into the arcana of Nature; errors in theorizing) and thus to regain some control over what is happening. This is what the French philosopher Paul Ricœur (1983/84/85) called *ipseity* by opposition to *identity*. *Ipseity* refers to identity as project, whereas *identity* refers to identity as permanence of the self.

Some sociologists, such as Pierre Bourdieu (1986), have denounced “the autobiographical illusion” under which, according to him, most autobiographers and biographers operate. This illusion of a permanence of the self is induced, for Bourdieu, by the permanence of external signs of identity such as signature, last, first, and middle names, birth rites, certificates, academic titles, degrees, etc.

Moreover this permanence of the self is doubled by the illusion, according to Bourdieu, that this so-called self also represents an organic entity shaping a

project, an intention of organizing one's own future life. For Bourdieu, this is totally undue because what seems to be an organized life is the rendering, after the facts of a totally random process into a willful project. At best, it is a case of *ex post facto* explanation; at worst, a cover-up operation. Never it is a scientific explanation. Indeed, for Bourdieu's neo-positivism à la Durkheim, institutions and their *modus operandi* are the only possible candidates for "scientific" explanations. For Bourdieu, the self is contextualized to an extent that it is absorbed by its milieu and therefore so totally different in different environments that the very notion of self becomes meaningless.

As one can understand, there is something excessive in this positivistic radicalism, but there is something positive, too: the idea of the general structure of the environment not as a mere backdrop for autobiography but as a partner in the process of life, even if perhaps not as determinant as Bourdieu wishes it to be. We would rather speak here of a dialectical process between the *actor* and the *scene* and we would consider Bourdieu's remarks as an invitation to pay more attention to the scene and to avoid the chronological trap opened by most autobiographers under the form of sentences like "I have always been interested in" or "From my youngest age on". Such sentences are intended to transform chronological order into logical necessity and randomness into order and intention.

In our opinion, Bourdieu is going too far in the direction of empiricism by putting all the burden on social institutions. After all, people do construct their own lives and environments to a certain extent. Stellar constellations are not gross given data; they are constructions made by astronomers. The same is true for human lives. They are constructed in human narratives.

Consequently, our aim here is to show how people use their autobiographies as a form of self presentation (*Selbstdarstellung*) that varies according to the *target audience* in function of which they organize and re-organize the plots of their lives. According to the target audience, Piaget can be a post-Bergsonian metaphysician (*Recherche*), a scientific psychologist (*History of Psychology in Autobiography*), or a disillusioned philosopher turned scientist (*Wisdom and Illusions of Philosophy*), to mention only three of his autobiographies.

Therefore, our task will consist of presenting the clearest possible definition of the interactions among the actor, the scene, the plot and the audience that form a biography.

The biographical method, contrary to Bourdieu's (1986) opinion, is not "common-sense smuggled into science", but a valid alternative to the experimental model of the single study method whose claim is to produce only

definitive results. As a matter of fact, psychological sciences, in their century or so of existence, have been incapable of producing empirically valid and testable theories on the basis of the single study method, in spite of all their efforts. Two main factors explain this. One is human nature. Human beings are not machines, not even computers; humans are constantly adapting to their environment. As a former perceptionist, I know how impossible it is to formulate general principles for human functioning even in domains like sensory and perceptual thresholds which vary constantly in spite of stable and objective measuring methods. Secondly, it is not possible to formulate general dynamic principles explaining validly these observed variations in terms of a theory.

In such a context, the biographical method seems a valid alternative to the inappropriateness of the single study method and its hypothetical-deductive prerequisite in, at least, five ways.

First of all, the single study method ends up, in social sciences, with the silly proposal of a truth-value level for scientific generalization. What does it mean to say that a theory explains 90% or 80% of the cases? Logically speaking, a good theory should explain all instances.

Second, the biographical method is similar to the lacy little country roads that allow the traveler to really discover the countryside, unlike the highways whose only merit is to bring one, more or less rapidly and safely, from one place to another, while riding in the middle of nowhere. The biographical method allows the researcher to study domains neighboring on the one under initial scrutiny, a study that is likely to shed some light on the research in progress. For instance, studying a college and its scientific and academic output may suggest some hypotheses about the characteristics of the town in which the college is located, its linguistic and cultural environment, the social origins of its student body, its way of life or/and any other factor affecting the functioning of the College. But the study of the biographies of its faculty will be much more revealing of the reality of that specific college because it will grant the study the concrete singular basis on which to ground research hypotheses. Similarly, the biographical study of Piaget tells us more about the situation of developmental psychology in the period corresponding to his life (1896–1980) than a questionnaire handed out to all living developmental psychologists living and working at the same time.

Third, the biographical method can be very useful for the understanding of institutional processes in adult socialization. For instance, the experience of the informal training in natural history given by the *Société des Amis de la Nature*, a group of high school and college students, that meant to avoid the excess of

fraternities in students' social life, was crucial for the formation of Piaget's genetic epistemology and psychology.

Fourth, the biographical approach can refresh a topic after the exhaustion of the different variables analyzed with an ever-increasing precision inversely proportional to their yield in terms of acquisition of new knowledge in the domain. Biographical data not being hypothesis-dependent are likely to lead to new hypotheses and new knowledge by virtue of their very unsystematicity and independence from theoretical prejudices. If, as George Herbert Mead believed, social living is exchanging meaningful symbols, then it is essential to understand how the actors themselves define their own activity in function of their expectations in their social interactions. This is only possible via biographical analysis since only biographical analysis can describe adequately how crucial sequences of social interactions are formed, preserved, continued or discontinued, destroyed, and missed. Biographies show how personality is affected by such changes.

Fifth, the biographical method disenclaves psychologists from their own milieu and experience more than other approaches because it forces them into an in-depth analysis of a concrete and specific life situation. A good example of this disengagement process is that of the relationship between the influence of Marxism and Roman Catholicism in Latin America. The sociological standard explanation for the hold of Marxism upon Latin-American intellectual elite is that Marxism replaced another dogmatic system, Roman Catholicism, in the minds of the intellectuals. Such an explanation supposes that wherever there was Catholicism there will be Marxism — which is not the case. In China, Marxism did not replace the ascendancy of any dogmatic system upon a population of intellectuals that was largely Buddhist or Confucianist in its beliefs, that is to say tolerant and open. But, when one looks carefully at the lives of Marxists leaders both in Latin America and in China, one notices that, in both geographical areas, those leaders have projected upon the masses the petty-bourgeois class alienation of their own milieu, excluded from the ruling class and excluding inferiors in order to preserve their own feeling of social excellence (petty-bourgeois overconformity). On the contrary, in countries where Marxism never became dominant, bourgeois intellectuals were in contact with the working class during their formative years by means of summer jobs and the like, with the sorry corollary that they were not going to make the Revolution for “those dirty bastards” with whom they had toiled all summer long.

To conclude, instead of formulating problems in abstract theoretical categories, the biographical method produces categories fitting the life history

of people. As such, it runs against all social rules and mental habits in which the rank and file of contemporary social scientists have been schooled. As a matter of fact, a scientific paper is supposed to be of a certain length, serving as the natural vehicle of scientific communication. It is conceived for the publication of results verifying or disproving a specific hypothesis. It supposes quantitative results to be analyzed statistically in order to prove a more or less important theoretical point. This is mostly done by comparing results between experimental and control groups.

The biographical method cannot subscribe to such an empiricist epistemology. It does not consider Mother Nature as such a good girl as to give herself away so directly and crudely to any researcher with the correct deck of methodological cards. Therefore it proceeds by means of an analysis of narrative both in style or literary genre and in content to investigate into the various relationships among the actor, the scene, the audience, and their effects upon the life of the autobiographer as perceived by the author and the analyst of the autobiography.

The case of Jean Piaget is interesting from a variety of viewpoints. He wrote several autobiographies aimed at different audiences, thus presenting himself in different ways and on different scenes. The comparison among them is thus revealing. In addition, the relative places of competitors, students, collaborators, adversaries, etc., vary accordingly. The same milieu is described differently according to the main purpose of each of the specific autobiographies. Other actors take a different position in each of them: Secondary figures in one context become fundamental protagonists in another. Piaget himself changes hats according to the function of the narrative. When the narrative is interrupted and continued, as in his standard autobiography spanning 1898 to 1976 in three installments, the author himself demonstrates some changes in his outlook, in his focus on certain people, and events, rather than giving an in-depth view of himself and his environment. But more interesting than all, from the standpoint of the biographical method, is that Piaget's interest in development as the explanatory factor in epistemology is deeply rooted in his analysis of his own development in adolescence and youth.

Indeed, Piaget studied development and used development as an explanatory factor in psychology, biology, and epistemology during all his adult life; but it appeared in Piaget's work only around 1920, when Piaget was 25 years old already. This is rather late for a man who claimed, in his main autobiography, a certain right to precocity. As a matter of fact, the one and only forerunner of Piaget's interest in development lies in his first autobiography, written at age 20,

as a “Bildungsroman” called *Recherche* (Search), not yet translated into English. So the origin of Piaget’s developmentalism is to be found in this attempt to represent the genesis of his own personality at the moment of a serious and final youth crisis.

Besides this “novelized” autobiography, Piaget wrote several other biographical essays since he was in the habit of explaining himself to others at the beginning of lectures and papers. We are not going to review all of these writings here. Our intention is rather to focus on two texts: (1) Piaget’s autobiography for the Clark University series edited first by Carl Murchison and then by Edwin Boring, *A History of Psychology in Autobiography*, also published in French in *Cahiers Vilfredo Pareto* and continued in the same publication on the occasion of his 70th (1966) and 80th birthdays (1976); and (2) the introductory chapter of *Insights and Illusions of Philosophy* (1971).

I. The standard autobiography

1. Genre

Jean Piaget’s first autobiographical essay, in the genre of an avowed autobiography, was published in 1952 in the fourth volume of *A History of Psychology in Autobiography*. The series was begun by Carl Murchison at Clark University as one of the numerous editorial projects that made Murchison rich and notorious if not famous. The first volume of the series appeared in 1930 at Clark University Press (another Murchisonian enterprise). The idea was, as the general title indicated, to make a history of psychology through individual intellectual histories of great psychologists. As Charles Spearman, one of the early contributors, wrote, “this may be helpful to younger men with their lives still to make” (1930, p. 299). Thus, the genre is clearly history for the moral and intellectual enlightenment of the “younger men” (apparently Spearman did not anticipate the success of psychology with women). We are in the venerable tradition of Lhomond’s *De Viris Illustribus* (famous *men* once again): history for the sake of education.

This pedagogical propensity disappeared after World War II as “American Psychology” became prouder and surer of itself as well as more convinced of the scientific nature of its endeavor.

Representative of such transformations is the preface to the fifth volume, in 1967, which stated that, in the past, editors have asked the contributors to “tell of the motivations that guided them in their professional careers, not fully realizing in the then unformed state of motivation psychology how little a man

knows correctly of his own motivations” (quoted from the 1952 preface, in Boring & Lindzey 1967, p.vi). Naturally, during the behaviorist 1950s, the editors had become enlightened, and “the invitation was changed to stress conscious motivations less and the events of the life more” (Boring & Lindzey 1967, p.vi). Contributors were then told that the aim of the series was to present intellectual and professional life histories, “illuminated by as much information about your personal background and inner motives as you are ready and able to divulge” (Boring & Lindzey 1967, p.vii). The 1952 preface explained that, in spite of the limitations and difficulties inherent in writing an autobiography, what the autobiographer “tells about himself and what he shows about his values can ... go far toward instructing the reader as to how human motive moves to make science progress. The accidents of living do not always seem irrelevant to progress when they operate in the manner shown in the pages of this book” (Boring & Lindzey 1967, p.vi).

Since the project of a history of psychology in autobiography aimed so explicitly at nourishing the progressionist view of at least some groups within psychology, it is to be expected that such view will be found in at least some of the autobiographies. To imply that one has contributed to progress amounts to establishing the legitimacy and veracity of one's ideas and of one's domain at large.

It is possible that, within the field of the social sciences, “great creator's” autobiographies (and some biographies) play a role that would be hard for them to play in, say, the field of physics or mathematics. The key to the function of (auto)biography in psychology may be the presentation of the life history of a thinker as an illustration of the thinker's theory, as an explanation of the origins of the theory in terms of the theory itself. B. F. Skinner explicitly makes this point by opening his autobiography with a section on his “early environment”. He writes that, after having given up the literary ambitions of his college years, his “extraordinary luck” kept him “from becoming a Gestalt or (so help me) a cognitive psychologist” (Boring & Lindzey 1967, p.397). However, he did not give up literature altogether, since he became interested in it “as a field of behavior to be analyzed”. “As a boy”, he recalls, “I knew two interesting cases of verbal behavior” (Boring & Lindzey 1967, p.401). Moreover, the woman he married had studied literature and, Skinner writes, “she attended my lectures on the psychology of literature and reinforced me appropriately” (Boring & Lindzey 1967, p.401). His lifelong “behavior as a scientist” is summarized in the selection of his most important articles entitled *Cumulative Record*. Finally, Skinner affirms that behaviorists see, explore, and manipulate themselves in the

same way as they see, explore, and manipulate their subjects (Boring & Lindzey 1967, p. 407).

The case of Freud's life history, as it is narrated within the psychoanalytic movement, illustrated the phenomenon at a far larger scale. In *Freud, Biologist of the Mind*, Frank Sulloway (1979) argues that "the chief aim of psychoanalyst-historians ... was to show that psychoanalysis emerged in a manner that, above all, was consistent with psychoanalytic theory itself" (p. 442). Because the legend and the mythology transmitted by those historians contributed to hide embarrassing but necessary conceptual elements of Freud's ideas and served to justify and promote the orthodox followers' monopolization of legitimate psychoanalysis, Freud's official biography amounted to questioning the theory he had created. It is not hard to see that, to a certain extent, the psychoanalyst historians were all writing their own biographies, legitimating their lives through that of a heroic father, vicariously trying to escape error and oblivion.

Autobiography is always written from the retrospective viewpoint of a person interpreting one's own past; its form and content largely depends on what the person is at the time of writing, and part of its function is to preserve and be true to the writer's personality. At the same time, however, an autobiography will affect its author's very being; to a certain extent, the autobiographer will become the true subject of his or her own narrative. Thus, one may find in the social and intellectual constitution of psychology that a "great figure's" autobiography can furnish a recapitulationist collective history. By narrating the development of a theory of mind and development through the development of someone who turns out to develop as the theory claims, such autobiography becomes a figure of thought essential to the "rhetoric of scientificity" (Bourdieu 1986). Through this rhetoric, a group of people aims to bring about the belief in the scientific nature of its products and in the scientific authority of its members, introducing a variety of ideologies — as it were merely stating unquestionable natural events.

The situation we examine here is in between that of Skinner and that of Freud. Although Piaget's autobiography has not given rise to a historical production from within the "Piagetian" movement, it is abundantly used by the movement, essentially by commentators or popularizers of Piaget's work. They are psychologists; however, they work under the "biographical illusion", once pervasive in the history of literature, according to which theories are grounded for the most part in the life of great individuals. This is not as surprising as it might seem, since Piaget's autobiography operates under the analogous illusion of an isomorphism between the stages of his own life and those of his theory.

2. Content

Emblematic of the message Piaget wishes to convey is the opening sentence: "An autobiography has scientific interest only if it succeeds in furnishing the elements of an explanation of the author's work. In order to achieve that goal, I shall therefore limit myself essentially to the scientific aspects of my life" (Piaget 1952, p.237).

Such an introduction presents two main advantages for the writer: It smuggles a scientific view of science and, at the same time, silences possible questioning by stating the limits of what the public is about to read. Within this straight-jacketed framework, Piaget, then, proceeds to describe his own precocity (he wrote a complete description of a steam engine car in pencil because he was too young to be entitled to use a pen), and how successful he was in his youthful exploits, since, at age eleven, he was already a proficient mollusk taxonomist well aware of "the demon of philosophy" (1952, p.239). Thanks to his malacological researches he "had the rare privilege of getting a glimpse of science and what it stands for before undergoing the philosophical crises of adolescence" (1952, p.239). So Piaget was not only precocious and proficient but, in addition, shielded from the sirens of philosophy ringing so perversely in the ears of innocent unprepared adolescents.

The ground is thus prepared for the introduction of "the problem of religion" as not worthy of any interest from the part of an intelligent young biologist because religious dogmas contradict biology and because the proofs of the existence of God are flimsy. Religion plays the role of an introduction to philosophy. Philosophy is reduced to Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, allowing the young Piaget to identify God with Life, at the emotional level, and knowledge as stemming out of biological necessity, at the cognitive level. In this way, Piaget realized that Bergsonian biology was insufficient and that between biology and knowledge there was a missing link: psychology.

Alas, the University of Neuchâtel had no experimental psychologist at hand. So Piaget had no choice but to write more or less philosophical essays (especially during boring lessons) about the role of nominalism and realism in taxonomy, essays that led him to discover that one way out of the dilemma between nominalism and realism was to consider that, at every level from cells to societies, there is one and the same problem: that of the relationship between wholes and parts.

In the copy of *Recherche*, re-read by Piaget in 1952, he put in pencil along this passage of the book: "Gestalt". And indeed, he declared in the autobiography

that he would have become a Gestaltist, had he known Wertheimer's and Köhler's papers at that time (1913–1915), which were brand-new. We know that this is a false recognition. Another false recognition is the explanation of the departure from Neuchâtel to Zurich. If the desire to work in a psychology lab had been Piaget's sole motivation, one wonders why someone interested in the genesis of knowledge would have selected Zurich over Geneva where stars like Claparède were working and where the only really positive review of *Recherche* had been written by Adolphe Ferrière.

Nevertheless, Piaget, disappointed by Lipps' and Wreschner's labs in Zurich and scared by the risks of becoming "autistic" (an influence of Bleuler's teaching) if centered on his own system, decided to go back to mollusks and did a statistical analysis on the variability of terrestrial mollusks in the Spring of 1919.

In the Fall of the same year, he went to Paris, studied clinical psychology under Piéron and Delacroix, logic and philosophy of science under Lalande and Brunschvicg whose historical-critical method with its psychological appeals struck the young man. But he also worked in Alfred Binet's lab in Paris on the standardization of Cyril Burt's test of intelligence. Centered as he was on the relations between wholes and parts, he discovered that the simplest forms of reasoning implied class inclusion, that is, the inclusion of one part in a whole, and class multiplication or relations among parts.

Piaget claimed he found in Paris the triple orientation of his life: (1) biological with the discovery of a sort of embryology of intelligence; (2) logical with the discovery that axiomatization is a form of ideal equilibrium; and (3) psychological with the discovery that the psychology of thinking is the real and causal equivalent or parallel of the ideal and implicative axiomatic. But he also found a job as "director of studies" at the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute. In this new permanent position at the Rousseau Institute, Piaget organized his own research program with children of the *Maison des Petits* (Children's House) on the development of thinking, starting with "most peripheral factors" (Piaget 1952, p. 11) such as language and social milieu.

This research was published in Piaget's first books on psychology which were great successes in the field.¹ Piaget became immediately famous and awkward at the same time since he was aware that he was studying language and not action (which, for him, was more at the core of thinking than language), and since he had not yet discovered the logico-mathematical structures of the stage of concrete operations. Consequently, he was centering his explanations upon the notion of *egocentrism* defined as an absence or an insufficiency in cooperation and *decentration*, that is, in terms of social constraints rather than

in terms of reversibility of thought and reciprocity between the whole and the parts.

With the birth of his three children respectively in 1925, 1927, and 1931, Piaget grew interested in the study of babies and published three books about that period of development.² The main methodological advantage of this research was, for Piaget, that, since intelligence was sensory-motor, the role of objects and of their handling by children were essential. This change in method allowed Piaget to understand that until the age of twelve children did not believe in the conservation of physical quantities after transformations, and that there was a stage-like progression from perceptual constancies to logico-mathematical conservations of mass, weight, and volume. This happened between 1925 and 1929. The problem was to be restudied in the mid-thirties with Alina Szeminska and Bärbel Inhelder.

In the meantime, Piaget pursued another interest: the relationship between heredity and environment in *Limnaea stagnalis*, a mollusk especially abundant in the Lake of Neuchâtel and very adaptive in addition. *Limnaea stagnalis* contracts its shell under the pressure of the waves in order to stick to the rock on which it is attached. The question was for Piaget: Is this adaptation (which takes place during growth) hereditary or not? After the observation of more than 80.000 animals in their natural environment and several thousands in aquariums (the shells were sitting in Piaget's office for the rest of his life), Piaget concluded that their adaption was hereditary (in fact, this adaption has been conserved in still waters for six generations).

In 1929, Piaget became director of the International Bureau of Education and Professor of History of Science at the University of Geneva as well as Professor of Experimental Psychology in Lausanne. He also reorganized the J.-J. Rousseau Institute during the period 1929–1939. At that time, he studied the genesis of number concept in the child with Alina Szeminska and that of physical quantity with Bärbel Inhelder. He discovered the natural group structures underlying the concrete mental operations of the child on classes, relations, and number.

From 1939 to 1945, Piaget studied the development of perception in the child with Marc Lambercier and others. He showed that perception obeys a law of composition probabilistic in nature that he called "law of relative centrat-ions" giving rise to wholes or Gestalten. In contrast, intelligence follows a law of additive composition according to which parts and totality are conserved during transformations.

Meanwhile, Piaget studied time, speed, and movement. At the International

Bureau of Education, he organized the distribution of educational books for prisoners of war. After the war, Piaget was offered a permanent position at UNESCO as Deputy Director General in charge of education. He refused. In 1946, he got a honorary degree from the Sorbonne. He already had one from Harvard (1936). In 1949, he received one from Brussels and one from Rio de Janeiro and became a member of the New York Academy of Science.

He studied space and geometry as well as chance because they were domains in the realm of intelligence that are not as reversible as mental operations.

He was invited to publish a book on logic and was preparing his famous *Introduction à l'épistémologie génétique* in three volumes. By then, his system was complete: Mental evolution proceeds from initial rhythmic structures to more and more complex regulations to reach at last the complete reversibility of mental operations.

This period, ending in 1950, is described in *A History of Psychology in Autobiography*. At the request of the sociologist of the University of Lausanne, Giovanni Busino, editor of the *Cahiers Vilfredo Pareto*, Piaget wrote two supplements to his original autobiography: one in 1966, for his seventieth birthday, and another one in 1976, when he turned 80 years old. These two parts have never been translated. They start out with the following introduction:

An autobiography is never objective and it is up to the reader to straighten it up in the sense of impersonal truth. It is nevertheless of interest because it furnishes some indications about what its author intended to do and how he understood himself. When it is about an author interpreted in many different ways, it becomes even useful: In recent publications, I have been considered variously as neo-associationist (Berlyne), transcendentalist (Battro), neo-gestaltist (Meili), closely akin to Marxist dialectics (Goldmann, Nowinski, etc.), or even, on some points, as tributary to Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas (Chauchard) (Piaget 1976/1966, p. 24).

Piaget goes on mentioning his other autobiographies, the one for the Sorbonne students and the one in *Insights and Illusions of Philosophy*.

As far as the events worth mentioning for him are concerned, Piaget picks four of them: (1) the Sorbonne appointment from 1952 to 1963; (2) the creation, in 1956, of the International Center for Genetic Epistemology; (3) his intense publishing, and (4) his involvement in international affairs in psychology and education. Scientifically, he mentions *Biology and Knowledge* (1966) and his work on structures.

This part of the autobiography (1966), as well as the following one written in 1976), is much less stiff and more anecdotal than the previous one. Obviously,

Piaget, writing for a local audience, feels free to *ad. lib.* He starts out with the role of criticisms received throughout his career starting, oddly enough, with the reception of his first books. In his memory, they were very controversial. He then mentions the “solid cooperation” (Piaget 1976/1966, p.27) with the French Paul Fraisse in perception: Each of them replicated the experiments made by the other and discussed their possible interpretations. The same happened in the field of logic with the Dutch E. W. Beth who, at first, criticized drastically Piaget's logic and then participated in a book edited by Piaget.

Contrary to the positive experiences with Western Europeans, Piaget had negative experiences with Americans and Russians who are “too simple-minded” (Piaget 1976/1966, p.27). Their thesis, according to Piaget is that thinking consists of “building-up images of objects and directing or organizing them by means of verbal signs (...) which are an accurate description of reality”. Thus, no stage, no sequence — the child can learn anything at any age provided that the child constructs high-fidelity representations of reality. Piaget was surprised that representatives of leading countries, such as USA and USSR, could think like old-fashioned schoolteachers who want to accelerate development and he was pleased to remind them, especially the Soviets, that thinking is not copying reality but transforming it. How can one explain creativity with a copy theory of intelligence? Piaget thought that copy theorists were so because they did not dare to go outside of the disciplinary field of psychology. Structures refer, in one way or another, to logical and epistemological considerations. Those considerations were off limits for them.

On the contrary, Piaget's interdisciplinary experience at the International Center of Genetic Epistemology, in which logicians, mathematicians, physicists, biologists, and cyberneticians collaborated with psychologists, showed him how fruitful such a cooperation could be for the development of psychology, a science necessarily at the crossroads of biology, artificial intelligence, and mathematics.

Piaget then proceeded to demonstrate how wrong Jerome Bruner was in refusing interdisciplinarity, since his position is self-contradictory. Bruner, according to Piaget, invokes, in his “doctrine” (1976/1966, p.24) three factors: imagery, language, and social communication. But imagery has necessarily neurological roots making the collaboration with neurologists necessary. Social communication supposes, by definition, a collaboration with sociologists. And, last but not least, language is considered by Noam Chomsky (at Harvard, according to Piaget!) as a generative logical structure preformed in the neonate.

Psychologists' fear of logic and epistemology stems out of a pre-conception according to which they are philosophical and not scientific. Evidence that this

is true can be found, according to Piaget, in the fact that the same psychologists have no problem with the sequence of natural numbers because numbers have been discussed for the last 25 centuries.

Numbers are not simply transmitted culturally, but, if this were the case, the question would remain as to who introduced them into culture in the first place. Are numbers the reflection of human action upon objects or are they properties of objects? This epistemological question cannot be escaped. Already at the animal level, Konrad Lorenz had demonstrated that the epistemological question was biologically central, as Piaget discussed in *Biology and Knowledge*. This position does not involve a return to philosophy because, as shown in *Insights and Illusions of Philosophy*, philosophy is only a form of wisdom and not a form of knowledge. The only true form of knowledge for Piaget is scientific knowledge because it is the only one to be verifiable. Good philosophers, such as Paul Ricoeur, recognize that.

Then, Piaget dwells on the nature of collaborative work in his group compared with what has been done elsewhere. In his group, the distribution of labor is organized in such a way as to define a common task and to appoint a task force (assistants, essentially) meeting weekly with Piaget and Inhelder to discuss results and fix methods and techniques of investigation in order to refine the general research project until no further discovery can be made. The difficulty with such an approach resides in finding broad enough topics, such as mental imagery in its relation with operations. Piaget argued that learning experiments conducted by Bärbel Inhelder, Magali Bovet, and Hermine Sinclair showed that Bruner's factors were insufficient, especially in the acquisition of language which is so dependent on operations. Memory as well depends largely of operational schemata. Finally, causality, approached in this perspective, parallels in its development the ontogeny of cognitive development, but from the standpoint of objects.

In the last part of this autobiography (1966–1976), Piaget reviewed all his books written alone or in collaboration. Then, he discussed his last researches on “prise de conscience” where he showed the antecedence of action upon conceptualization, which led, in turn, to the problem of contradiction. Contradiction derives from disequilibria between affirmations and negations, as in conservation tasks when younger children fail to understand that what has been taken on one side has been added on the other. Contradiction led to the ways in which it is overcome, which is by generalization and by two sorts of abstraction: empirical (from objects) and reflective (from actions). This was further examined in a comparison between psychogenesis and history of science,

carried out with Rolando Garcia.

A last visit to biology provoked Piaget's thinking and he formulated a theory of evolution according to which behavior is the motor of evolution and phenocopy its mechanism (akin to Waddington's genetic assimilation).

The last part of this section is made out of anecdotes about Prizes and Awards, The Jean Piaget Society, the way he was treated by students in 1968 (students upheaval in Europe) and the creation of the Jean Piaget Archives by Bärbel Inhelder as well as the way his 80th birthday was going to be celebrated.

3. *Commentary*

As we have already noticed, the style of this long autobiography changes from the 1952 version to the last one. The main reason for this change is the audience addressed by Piaget in 1966 and 1976: local, French-speaking people who are familiar with the tension between European and American science. Another reason is the fame of the author. In 1952, after the War that isolated Switzerland, Piaget was not as famous as he was in 1966 and 1976 when he was loaded with recognition signals of all sorts from scientific and political societies. But the surprise comes from his singling out of Jerome Bruner as a whipping-boy. Piaget's animosity is such that he failed to give Bruner's ideas a fair presentation. This attitude is in sharp contrast with Piaget's review of Bruner's book on cognitive development in 1967. Piaget's criticism is harsh but still within the boundaries of scientific discussion, whereas, here, it tends to become obsessive and age is not enough of an excuse in such cases. There is more than a scientific difference between Piaget and Bruner from the part of Piaget.

A possible explanation suggested to me by Piaget himself after a visit of Bruner to Geneva was the supposedly negative evaluation given by Bruner to the Rockefeller Foundation about the International Center for Genetic Epistemology that was, then, granted by the Foundation. Checking with the Foundations' Archives gave evidence that there was indeed one negative report, but written by Quine! The fact is that neither Piaget nor his collaborators tried to verify this in spite of all the sing-song about the role of verification in genetic epistemology. Most probably this was a way of eliminating a potential competitor for the title of "most famous developmental psychologist".

The entire tone of the first addition (1966) was defensive, anyhow, since Piaget insisted on responding to criticisms made by others to his theory in an amount that seemed to him excessive. Indeed, it was not, given his influence in the field. When one looks at Piaget's reception in psychological and education-

al sciences, as did S. Parrat-Dayan (1993a, b; Parrat-Dayan & Vonèche 1992), for instance, one notices the generally laudatory tone of the reviews rather than the opposite.

Another change in the last two additions is the emphasis put on collaborative work. The main collaborator is not anymore Valentine Chatenay, Piaget's wife and former student, but Bärbel Inhelder and gradually an increasing group of collaborators from the Center for Genetic Epistemology.

A general overview of the standard autobiography shows that Piaget's aim is triple: (1) emphasis on his own scientific precocity; (2) conformity of his own intellectual development to his theory; (3) demonstrating how cognitive developmental psychology is a by-product of early and constant epistemological preoccupations fitting the most stringent criteria of scientific experimental validation.

The role of precocity is evident at every level in Piaget's life. Not only was he precocious as a little boy, as an adolescent and as a young adult, but also during maturity. The evidence for childhood precocity is given by his inventions ("l'auto-vap" or steam-engine car) or his discoveries (the albino sparrow) which "launched" him in a scientific career. As an adolescent, he was offered a job as a curator of the Museum of Natural History in Geneva, the largest French-speaking town in Switzerland and he corresponded with international figures in the field who requested his opinion on the taxonomy of mollusks, and he was considered as a "biologist". As an adult he was asked to write his own autobiography much earlier than the other psychologists; he was also awarded a honorary degree from Harvard when he was not yet forty-years old. His early writings in psychology were very well received. But, Oscar Pfister's last remark in his review of Piaget's three lectures on psychoanalysis in Paris (1919) that Piaget would certainly make a contribution to the development of psychoanalysis, was overlooked at the moment of writing this autobiography, since "psychoanalysis is not science". At the point of passage between adolescence and adulthood now called "youth" Piaget recognized his role as a leading intellectual figure in French-speaking Switzerland but carefully omitted the central role of his metaphysical, moral, and social preoccupations in his thinking at the time (because they were not "scientific").

Now, if we examine these signs of excellence and precocity, we are struck by the general ingenuity of these signs. How many young children have "invented" new cars? How should the albino sparrow be considered? The observation of it is a stroke of luck, no doubt. The description is more interesting, because it is cautious and prudent since the sparrow "presents" all the signs of an albino. It is

“seemingly” an albino. Nothing more than that; which led some observers (Vidal 1994) to cast some suspicion about its reality. The curator job offered the young teenager casts even more doubts, since the job was, in fact, an assistantship and such a job had very little prestige at the time. In addition, how could one ignore in little French-speaking Switzerland the real age of Jean Piaget?

As far as the quality of his classifications was concerned, opinions at the Geneva Museum were not all positive, since, when Piaget became known in developmental psychology, the director of the Museum exclaimed ironically: “Well, if he is as good with children as he is with mollusks, psychology is in good hands!” (pers. com. by E. Lanterno).

It is indeed unusual that someone who is very good and successful in one field changes domains out of mere interest. Both Ducret (1984) and Vidal (1994) give some reasons for Piaget's withdrawal from biology. For Ducret, it is the “narcissistic blow” received in his discussion with Roszkowski about the nature of Mendelian speciation. For Vidal, the change in direction is essentially cognitive. Piaget failed to understand the new biology based on neo-Darwinism. Specifically, he never assimilated the experimental definition of species by sexual reproduction opposed to the epistemology of the gaze (*épistémologie du regard* as Foucault put it) that was the general epistemology of the then decaying Natural History. In effect, Piaget was never a biologist but a naturalist.

A clear dichotomy is made by Piaget between his young scientific and philosophical interests: The first are divinized, the second demonized. Later on, the same schizophrenia operated to separate good cognitive psychological research from bad psychoanalytical research on affectivity.

The life of the psychologist Piaget, seems generally governed by Piagetian concepts, such as a general movement from egocentrism to decenteration with periods in which autism tends to dominate the picture and periods in which social integration is better achieved. Equilibrium and equilibration as well as assimilation and accommodation play an important role in Piaget's own development.

In conclusion, this autobiography tells three narratives: one about the purely “scientific” development of Piaget; a second about the strictly “epistemological” motivation for his passage from “biology” to “philosophy” and, later, psychology; and a third one about the way the devils of philosophy and moral change are expelled from Piaget's system. Once again, in a strictly Piagetian approach, those devils are expelled at the end of adolescence; which is the right period for such a move, since adulthood is the age of science.

The aim of such a triple narrative is indeed cognitive cleansing. It eliminates

the close relationship between the last Piagetian taxonomies and a Bergsonian science of genera in favour of a reading in terms of the quality of functions in living beings. Such a functionalism in biology and about species of mollusks anticipates an alliance with Claparède's psycho-bio-medical functionalism. In the same fashion, the passage through philosophy can be explained in purely epistemological terms, since species can be considered either as biological entities governed by the bipolar adaptive mechanism of assimilation and accommodation, or as logical classes for which mathematical models exist. Understanding the relationship between mathematical models and living organisms unifies biology with philosophy via logic. Furthermore, it opens the road to psychology as the locus of both organic processes (governed by the principle of causality) and logical norms (directed by implication).

II. Insights and illusions of philosophy

In this book, originally published in 1965 and republished in 1968 with a postface, the first chapter opens with a "narrative and analysis of a deconversion". I prefer the term "deconversion" to Wolfe Mays' original translation (Piaget 1971) where the French word *déconversion* is rendered in English by "disillusionment". The trouble with the word "disillusionment" is that it misses the de-conversion aspect that is the opposite of a conversion which is essential to Piaget's purpose because he really wanted to emphasize the religious meaning of conversion by using its negative, deconversion, in order to explain the way in which he moved away from metaphysical preoccupation to scientific ones.

1. *Genre*

The literary genre of this essay is a mix of apologetical and polemical discourses; in more than one way, Piaget's purpose is very close to theological apologetics.

2. *Content*

Piaget recounts his life with the specific purpose of explaining the influence of philosophical questions upon his work. Thus, the emphasis is no longer put on the precocious child nor on the young scientist but on the discovery of philosophy through the reading of Bergson's *Creative Evolution* under the impulsion of the childless godfather. The fascination for the opposition between *élan vital*

and inert matter as well as between intelligence (material in essence) and life is shortly but finely described. The conflict between science and faith is now accounted for in terms of family psychology: Jean Piaget was the son of a very religious Protestant mother and a free-thinking father. The father looked scientific, the mother not — thus, the conflict. It is interesting to notice here a lapse into facile psychoanalysis which is highly infrequent in Piaget's autobiographies, but much more frequent in his letters or conversations. Such an explanation serves a reductive function.

The conflict was soon to be resolved by a double movement of symbolization of religious dogmas and an identification of God and Life à la Spinoza, supposedly due to the reading of Bergson that led Piaget towards various forms of immanentism to end up with a form of altruism. The enthusiasm for Bergson's philosophy was going to be stopped by Piaget's professor of philosophy, the logician and historian of sciences Arnold Reymond. The rationalistic criticism of Bergson by Reymond led Piaget to embrace a form of pragmatism (most probably inspired by the reading of Claparède) in which Piaget distinguished between two sorts of logic: the logic of action which is vital like the *élan* and the logic of geometry which is dead. This resulted, in turn, in what Piaget (wrongly) described as a form of holism, that is, his science of *genera* (kinds or types) in which each individual, being a totality, is never totally changed by the environment but, on the contrary, assimilates the milieu to its own structures in a never-ending march towards equilibration. Piaget anticipates his future theory here. From the few documents that we have, since the Essay on *Neo-Pragmatism* has been lost, the situation of Piaget's thinking at the time was not as clear as described in this autobiography.

In the same vein of anachronism, Piaget (1971) proceeded to say that “for me, a zoologist working in the field or in the laboratory” (p. 16), which is only partly correct since Piaget never worked in a laboratory in the contemporary sense of the word. Nevertheless, he claimed that his practice led him to become suspicious of mere philosophical reflection, concluding that philosophy needed some “experimental psychology” (1971, p. 16).

The long and difficult crisis of his early twenties is briefly dismissed: “An interruption of my work and some months spent in the mountain forced me to make some decisions. There was no question to opt for psychology or philosophy but only to choose, for the sake of a serious epistemology, to devote some semesters to the study of psychology” (Piaget 1971, p. 17). Moreover, *Recherche* is only alluded to, although Reymond's critical reading of it is mentioned.

The stay in Zurich appears as a dead-end street, without any further

mention of the reasons why it was so. The year spent in Paris is presented as a conciliation of philosophical interests (working under Lalande and Brunschvicg) and psychological investigations (working in Binet's lab). This is the only place where Piaget mentions that Lalande approved of his early psychological papers.

When A. Reymond moved from the University of Neuchâtel to the University of Lausanne, Piaget took up Reymond's chair in philosophy.

As Piaget himself remarked, all this evidence is marshaled to prove one specific point, namely, that although he liked philosophy up to the thirties at least, a progressive deconversion took place, and it is important for Piaget to analyze the reasons why it took place. He lists at least three of them. First, the risk of self-persuasion without real reasons, that is to say without verification. Therefore, he argues, speculative philosophy leads to wisdom but not to knowledge at an interindividual level of objectivity. Facts should be respected. Second, Piaget was struck by the dependency of philosophical ideas on social and political transformations. Here, Piaget describes the relationship between the national-socialist movements in Europe and a philosophy of the *Geist* condemning experimental psychology to oblivion; in contrast, he holds that only the scientific method of verification by peers leads to objective knowledge. Third, the tendency of philosophers to prescribe norms to science on the basis of their own personal reflections seemed to Piaget an abuse of power and a special case of ignorance and arrogance, since the most valuable parts of philosophy such as psychology, logic, and epistemology had become independent sciences.

Nevertheless, after his appointment at the University of Geneva in 1929, Piaget claimed to have had excellent relations with his colleagues in the department of philosophy. By opposition, he noticed, after World War II, the resurrection of philosophical psychology under the guises of existentialism and phenomenology which were new avatars of the same dependence of philosophy on social and political changes.

He was surprised that the Sorbonne welcomed him as a "psychologist-philosopher" (which was not at all surprising, in fact, since he was Maurice Merleau-Ponty's successor).

Piaget found that the situation of psychology in France was alarming. It virtually did not exist outside of philosophy. According to Piaget, this was due to the social structure of French Academia and he listed three main factors. The determining social role of the "classe de philosophie" (i.e., the senior year in French *lycées*) provided a number of academic positions for philosophers. The

mode of recruiting professors via *concours* that were organized by a gerontocracy of old conservative university professors guaranteed conservatism at every level. The habit for a professor going into retirement to prepare his succession prevented any novelty to happen. For Piaget, these factors led French philosophers to believe that they were on top of every form of knowledge, while in reality preventing the blossoming of experimental psychology. One should notice here that Piaget was describing a situation that was already fading away in 1965 at the moment of the publication of his essay.

After this charge against the French philosophical institution, Piaget addressed the question of the formation of a new science called “genetic epistemology”. Genetic epistemology differs from standard epistemology by the basic question asked. Whereas standard epistemology raises the question of the possibility of knowledge at all, genetic epistemology asks the question of the possibility of knowledge growth. “How does knowledge grow?”, however, is not a philosophical question. It is an empirical question requesting the inter-subjective criterion of experimental verification by the scientific community.

To establish this new science, Piaget requested the financial help of the Rockefeller Foundation to create a center for genetic epistemology that were necessarily to be an interdisciplinary endeavor based on the collaborative efforts of logicians, mathematicians, physicists, cyberneticians, biologists, psychologists, and historians of science. Although, Piaget proudly remarked, he was a bit of all that, he could not do the job alone because “to the extent that one could speak of ‘Piaget’s system’ that would be *the* sign of my failure” (1971, p.44); so great was Piaget’s defiance of any individual production.

At first, he recalled, the Rockefeller Foundation was hesitant. Then, he proposed that the philosopher (note this) Wolfe Mays, of Manchester, visited Geneva and reported to the Foundation. Mays’ report was clever enough to grant Piaget admittance to a second round of discussion during which he was asked the following very practical question: “How could you find people smart enough to collaborate effectively and dumb enough to abandon for one full year their own research in math or logic, etc., and venturesome enough to dialogue with child-watchers?” (Piaget 1971, p.45) Few theoretical questions were asked about “How could you find questions about the epistemology of relativity relating to children’s modes of thinking or about the theory of set and bi-univocal correspondences” (1971, p.46). Apparently, Piaget answered them to the satisfaction of the Committee, since he was awarded the necessary founding to start the *International Center for Genetic Epistemology*.

The beginnings were difficult: psychologists had to find a common language with logicians and mathematicians but, in the end, they managed to work together. The next year, the team of four people composed of two psychologists and two logicians worked on the question of the relationships between synthetic (or empirical) judgments and analytical (or logico-mathematical) judgments, one of the basic dogmas of logical empiricism. It was discovered that contrary to the dictum of logical empiricism, there were all sorts of intermediary positions between strictly synthetic and analytical judgments in the logical sense, but the representative of logical empiricism, the Belgian logician Apostel, tried to save the appearances by proposing a lineal descent from empirical to logical judgments.

The discussion of the work by a group of about 10 guest-discussants during one week set the format of future annual symposia. Piaget was pleased by the overall result, although he feared the reactions of E.W. Beth from Amsterdam, a logician who, at the request of Father Bochenski, a Polish logician at the University of Fribourg, had published a savage criticism of Piaget's *Traité de logique*. All went well, Father Bochenski was the devil whereas Beth was a good and honest person, in Piaget's opinion, and they could collaborate with each other.

After seven years of Rockefeller grants, the Centre was subsidized by the National Science Foundation of Switzerland for the rest of Piaget's life (25 years). Strangely enough, J. Bruner was present at that symposium and Piaget made no comments about him while he listed his name among the participants. Obviously, this autobiography is addressed to an audience unaware of his problems with Bruner. Piaget indicated that the success of the Centre was essentially due to his excellent collaborators: Pierre Gréco, Jean-Blaise Grize, Leo Apostel, and Seymour Papert.

This choice and the way in which they are introduced are interesting. Gréco, a psychologist, is introduced as a *normalien* and an *agrégé* (first of his class at the French national level). This means a positive reference to the French Grandes Écoles and to the *Concours de l'Agrégation*, two institutions Piaget criticized earlier in this autobiography as sterilizing France's young talents.

J.-B. Grize, a Swiss logician and mathematician formed by Belgian experts, is represented as the man whose task is the logical formalization of natural structures of thinking. L. Apostel is hailed as a logical positivist turned genetic epistemologist. S. Papert, a South-African mathematician, is acclaimed for his two doctorates in mathematics, his work at the Institut Poincaré for mathematics in Paris and for his study of cybernetics at Teddington National Laboratories

in England (for Piaget, Laboratory of Physics in London) and, last but not least, his polyvalence. He is also credited with an “almost” chair of logic at Cambridge University, which is a mere figment of Piaget’s imagination. Other collaborators are mentioned for specific contributions: F. Bresson, G.Th. Guilbaud, C. Nowinski, H.E. Gruber, and F. Meyer. There were many guests: W. V. O. Quine, W. Mc Culloch, F. Halbwachs, O. Costa de Beauregard, G.G. Grangier, in addition to J. Bruner, of course.

According to Piaget, the Centre was welcomed by the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Geneva to which it belonged formally. But it was not greeted with the same enthusiasm by the philosophers of the University, all of whom were rabid phenomenologists, who acclaimed the psychological studies of the child conducted by Piaget but did not consider that they had any bearing on knowledge from a philosophical viewpoint, so much so that they created a chair of philosophical psychology “to provide the needed philosophical anthropology” (Piaget 1971, p.56) to Piaget’s researches. Piaget had the chair renamed “History of philosophical psychology”, a discipline which, in Piaget’s mind, belonged already to past history.

The autobiography ends on this last sarcasm.

3. *Commentary*

This text differs from the other two autobiographies along different dimensions: the target-audience, the collaborators, and colleagues mentioned or omitted, the center of gravity of the discussion. As far as the audience is concerned, the target is the general literate public with an inclination towards philosophy, essentially, what the French call *intellectuels* — that is to say, those who have suffered and succeeded under the system lampooned by Piaget. Therefore, the usual name-dropping is circumscribed to a group supposedly known to this readership. Few, if not very few, are psychologists mentioned in the other autobiography. The in-fights with colleagues are thus kept to a bare minimum, especially, when compared to the standard of Piaget’s autobiography as a psychologist.

In the same way, the mention of close collaborators is limited to one psychologist, Pierre Gréco (who resided mostly in Paris), not including the expected Bärbel Inhelder. The others are one mathematician, S. Papert, and two logicians, L. Apostel and J.-B. Grize. When it comes to the second circle of the so-called specific contributors, only two psychologists emerge: H. E. Gruber and F. Bresson.

Compare this with the self portrait of Piaget as a psychologist. There, B. Inhelder, H. Sinclair, and M. Bovet are mentioned with laudatory remarks as well as positive remarks for the rest of the Geneva collaborators. This gives the impression that the role of the Genevan psychologists was specific and secondary: running subjects for Piaget. Their place in history is limited, whereas the place of contributors from a different background seems larger. Indeed, this was reflected in the actual organization of research around Piaget, since the *Centre* came first, and, within the *Centre*, there was a strong division between “theoreticians” and “experimenters”. The first group was essentially composed of non-psychologists and the second one was exclusively made of psychologists.

Fellow psychologists who opposed or discussed Piaget’s theories critically are mentioned, *en passant*, without too much discussion of their theses or arguments. Piaget’s perception of his own status in the field was never clear to him, neither in this nor in his other autobiographies. Piaget tended to underestimate his position, since, for most of his academic life and certainly after 1955, he had only one competitor in terms of citation: Sigmund Freud. When David Elkind replicated his conservation experiments, Piaget was very nervous — as if he were not certain of the outcome in spite of all the experimentation that was going on in Geneva on these matters on a daily basis including several schools a day. This is an aspect of Piaget’s personal make-up that was rarely understood by his fellow scientists. In my memory, only Mc Culloch made a clear remark about Piaget’s insecurity, but Mc Culloch had been trained as a psychiatrist.

The history of Piaget’s relationship with the Rockefeller Foundation is presented in this autobiography as if it started with the project of the Center for Genetic Epistemology. As a matter of fact, this is inaccurate. The Rockefeller Foundation became interested in Piaget’s projects long before the creation of the Center. When Claparède heard that Swiss researchers could apply to the Rockefeller Foundation for grants of a sizable amount, he let it known that a visitor from the Foundation would be welcome at the Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau. So, one came and was a clever person who not only reported that indeed the Institute was very good but also that there was an excellent rising young man to help it grow: Jean Piaget. So before World War II, Piaget had already been subsidized by the Foundation and apparently it is the interruption of the war that stopped the funding. Therefore, when Piaget went back to the Rockefeller Foundation, he already had a slate there and could draw from his past credit.

In retrospect, the sorry conclusion is that, in spite of Piaget’s efforts to the contrary, genetic epistemology did not survive the death of its founder, neither

as a specific form of epistemology, nor as an institution. Consequently, the vast apologetical and polemical essay under the form of an autobiography fails to reach its target, since nobody anymore takes the road suggested by Piaget. What remains is a certain bitterness and the memory of a dubious battle for ideas that have not survived in the form of which they were expected.

III. General conclusions

In all of his autobiographies, Piaget is both the same and different. The facts are the same. The anecdotes are similar. But the outcome is entirely different.

The grand autobiography of the *Cahier Vilfredo Pareto* presents a biologist by training whose reading of Bergson led to a conception of human intelligence as the prolongation of organic adaptation in an evolutionary perspective. This is important to notice because Piaget was not a biologist by training but a naturalist interested and trained in the zoological classification of mollusks. His interest in evolution and adaptation essentially grew out of his Bergsonism, that is to say, out of his metaphysical position which led him to reject Darwinism and mutationism altogether, in favor of phenocopy which preserved the active role of individuals in history and evolution.

Conversely, he presented, in this autobiography, his epistemology as an offspring of Bergsonism, whereas it was not. When he read Bergson, he wanted to establish a science of genera based on a general explanatory principle of equilibrium between parts and whole. He blamed psychologists for not understanding what he meant to do, overlooking the glaring fact that he was not doing psychology but epistemology using psychology as a means to an end.

In the autobiography at the beginning of the book *Wisdom and Illusion of Philosophy* there is a third Piaget: the metaphysician turned scientist because of the insufficiencies of philosophy and the vanity of philosophers. Here, we have the figure of the discarded lover. But with a vengeance: “wisdom” is written small on the cover of the book, whereas “illusions” is written large. The introductory chapter is there to show that the only way to tell the truth for an epistemologist is to use psychology as a method for collecting data because it is based on objective facts controlled by the entire intersubjective scientific community (by opposition to the individual systems of “arm chair philosophers”).

What is common to these different narratives? Essentially one childhood memory: the fear of becoming autistic, the need to belong somewhere, the necessity to keep imagination under check at all times. Hence the oppositions

between assimilation and accommodation, autism and socialized thought, subjectivity and objectivity, the distrust of idiosyncrasies, dreams and fantasies, equilibrium between opposites as the final explanation whenever and wherever possible, as well as equilibration as the motor of evolution and development. In the end, the fundamental element of all these identities giving rise to different narratives seems to be the fear of madness in a man of bold imagination and wild ideas. Madness was probably looming behind the formidable figure of his neurotic mother. Piaget's entire theory appears thus as a huge defense mechanism against depression and loss.

Notes

1. *Le langage et la pensée chez l'enfant* (1924); *Le jugement et le raisonnement chez l'enfant* (1924); *La représentation du monde chez l'enfant* (1927); *Le jugement moral chez l'enfant* (1932).
2. *La naissance de l'intelligence chez l'enfant* (1937); *La construction du réel chez l'enfant* (1937); *La formation du symbole chez l'enfant* (1945).

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CHAPTER 11

From the end to the beginning

Retrospective teleology in autobiography

Jens Brockmeier

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.

Macbeth, V, 5, 22–23.

It may be not so difficult to define autobiographical narrative: a story, or a part of it, that refers in one way or another to one's life history. Along these familiar lines, it seems plausible to understand an autobiographical narration as human life as it has taken shape in time. Such definition of the object of autobiography aims to emphasize life as a process, in contrast with views that focus on a more static picture of life, often expressed by categories such as "self-concept", "ego", or "I". In this way, we have brought to the fore the time-sensitive nature of autobiographical narrative and, indeed, it seems to be this feature of narrative that makes it such a forceful way to give human life an order in time. So far, then, we have considered the object — but who or what is the subject of a life narrative? Who is the author, the teller of the story, and who is the self behind or in this discourse? Is there a self, or *one* self, at all? These questions are extensively discussed in autobiographical and narrative theory, and I will be dealing with some central points of this discussion in what follows.

All these questions, as well as every autobiographical narrative itself, imply a wide range of psychological assumptions and philosophical presuppositions about identity, narrative, time, and how they relate. On closer examination, even the very idea of a life as a given entity, taken-for-granted as it is, proves to be precarious; as does the similarly common view that the (auto)biographical gestalt of a life is circumscribed by a natural development from the beginning to the end. These issues will comprise the second focus of the chapter.

The third theme tackled in this essay is the vision of time and temporality that emerges in autobiographical narrative — as, in turn, cultural notions of

time provide a frame for the autobiographical process. I believe that human identity construction can essentially be viewed as the construction of a particular mode of time. I suggest calling it autobiographical time, the time of one's life. Narrative plays a crucial role in this process of construction, and I shall therefore dedicate particular attention to the specifics of "narrative time".

Finally, I should mention right at the beginning that, in order to explain my arguments, I will discuss material that might appear unusual in this context. I am drawing not only on narrative texts in a narrow linguistic sense, but also on iconic, visual texts such as the narrative texture of paintings. More precisely, it is portraiture that I will read as a particular genre of life narratives. In doing so, I would like to point out that the history of art since the Renaissance offers a genre of (auto)biographical painting that allows for new insights not only into the narrative fabric of self-portraits, but also into the nature of the autobiographical process.

Retrospective teleology

To begin with, I would like to examine one of the assumptions that most autobiographies as well as autobiographical theories share. This is the idea that life stories reflect a process in time which, like the biological process of life itself, somehow links a beginning with an end. So far, this might sound like a rather banal statement. Less banal, however, even if equally familiar, is the way in which in this view the beginning and end of an autobiography are to be connected. This connection is almost always based on a story of development. Such a story may be fragmentary, including disparate elements from other stories or discursive contexts, but it usually shares some features of traditional narrative genres, such as the *Bildungsroman*, pilgrimage, adventure story, or tragedy — at least if it comes to natural or everyday forms of autobiographical discourse. This qualification, as we will see, is of particular relevance if one takes into account the constructive forms and stylistic devices used by modernist and post-modernist writers, filmmakers, and other artists in order to "tell" or to "read" a life. Whereas we find here a great variety of attempts to view a life as a diverse, fragmentary, fleeting, and open-ended array of events and non-events, everyday forms of life accounts show a different lay-out. They are generally characterized by closed plots, a standardized repertoire of genres, and other common narrative structures — as if we had a natural tendency to interpret our lives and those of others like *texte lisibile*, readerly texts, as Roland Barthes put it.

Picking up on Barthes' idea, Umberto Eco has emphasized the ambiguous interplay between life and narrative. Life, Eco (1994, pp. 117–18) writes, “is certainly more like *Ulysses* than like *The Three Musketeers* — yet we are all the more inclined to think of it in terms of *The Three Musketeers* than in terms of *Ulysses*”. It seems that a life told in the context of real life first of all has to make sense, that is, conventional sense, and it has to do so even in its failures, defeats, and coincidences. And it makes sense, if, for example, it is told within one of the traditional plot genres, the established patterns of narration that are so ubiquitous in every culture. In the realm of plots we still live today in the age of conventional wisdom, entrenched in stereotyped romances, television soaps, obituaries, comic strips, presentations of persons and events — despite all quantum leaps in the narrative construction of modernist and postmodernist literature, film, theater, music, and other arts.

For Peter Brooks, this does not come as a surprise. He argues that the conception of plot is something in the nature of the logic of narrative discourse, something that he calls the “organizing dynamic of a specific mode of human understanding” (Brooks 1984, p. 7). For all the nonnarrative, plotless, open, and experimental forms of discourse and thought that are highlighted in theoretical discussions in philosophy and the natural and the human sciences, we remain more determined by traditional narrative conventions, as Brooks put it, “than we might wish to believe”. According to Brooks, the plot structure of narrative is the very organizational line of narrative in our culture, the minimal “thread of design that makes stories possible because finite and comprehensible”. He goes on to conclude (1984, pp. 6–7) that “until such a time, as we cease to exchange understandings in the form of stories, we will need to remain dependent on the logic we use to shape and to understand stories, which is to say, dependent on plot”.

In fact, even the story of the “senseless” and “worthless” life of someone who commits suicide follows the plot genres of a “successful life” (based, among others, on a culture's notion of a “good life”), and it does so in a similar way as the idea of the meaningless presupposes an idea of the meaningful. Often enough, the rules of a genre are only to be confirmed through its breaks and violations (Albasi & Brockmeier 1997). For Northrop Frye (1957), these rules are ultimately intrinsic in a set of overarching archetypal genres or narrative *mythoi* that have been created over the ages by human imagination. Such *mythoi* work like cultural plot structures that have shaped not only our literary understanding, but also the way we conceive of the world and ourselves. Indeed, as Frye argued, these organizing narrative patterns have refashioned our entire

material and psychological universe into the human universe of our concerns, desires, predicaments, and angsts.

The closed plots and conventional forms of genre correspond to another compelling characteristic of naturally occurring or spontaneous life narratives: We almost always encounter a self that dwells at the center of the story. It is this “I” around which the narrative revolves and which defines its focus. A different picture emerges if we turn again to twentieth century literary fiction where the self or the narrative I (if there is *one* self or narrative I at all) often appears to be an elusive phenomenon, a peripheral gestalt — particularly if we see it against the background of the anonymous but all-determining structures of power in Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, the linguistic stream of consciousness and its raptures that determine the dynamics of development in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and the unpredictable scenarios in which layers of memory, fantasy, and history mingle in more recent works of narrative like Italo Calvino’s *Cosmicomics*, Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*.

In contrast and as if entirely unconnected with the avant-garde of modern and postmodern century fiction, the self in everyday autobiographical discourse usually is the constructive pivot of the narrative organization. Being the center of the plot and determining the storylines, it appears almost always, as Jerome Bruner (1990, p. 121) puts it, as “a protagonist Self in process of construction: whether active agent, passive experiencer, or vehicle of some ill-defined destiny”. In this process of construction also emerges a certain idea of human life as temporal development. I shall be particularly concerned with this idea and its implicit conception of time, because I suspect that it includes an odd metaphysics.

Bruner, in his essay in this book, goes on to suggest that the protagonist role played by the self might be linked to the entire constellation that we call autobiography. No doubt, there is something curious about this constellation: It is a story that simultaneously is about the past, the present, and the process in which both merge; and it is about the future as well, about the future that starts in the very moment the story is told. So it is also about the simultaneity and, that is, the inter-mingling of all three modes or modalities of human time — a rather complicated scenario, we might assume. Oddly enough, when we read or listen to a life narrative we usually do not realize this tricky construction. Yet even in its most basic forms, autobiography always is an account, given by a narrator in the here and now, about a protagonist bearing his name who existed in the there and then. And this is only how it starts. Usually, when the story terminates (in the present, a present that looks into the future), the protagonist

has fused with the narrator: *I* tell a story about someone who in the course of this story turns out to be *me*, that is, the *I* who has been telling this story all the time. These two positions mark not only two different narrative points of view, but also two different psychological points of reference and temporal frameworks. Oscillating between them, the autobiographical subject is laid out.

Why do most autobiographical stories display this structure? To answer this question, we need to take a closer look at its narrative fabric. In doing so, we can distinguish more clearly the two orders that I have just mentioned, the order of the *narrative event* and of the *narrated event*. Every narration unfolds within these two orders. Evidently, a life story is told in the present, the present of the narrative event (leaving aside that this present can be, again, presented as a past or future event, for example, within a frame narrative). It is the here and now of the narrative speech act, the telling of the story to somebody, that is the point of departure of every story. Yet in the chronological order of most life narratives, this is, at the same time, the end — if only temporarily — of a process, namely, the course of one's life that started sometime in the past. This process is the narrated event or, more precisely, the sequence of narrated events. These events represent the very content of the story.

Again, I do not consider at this point any complication that results from the fact that, in the reality of discourse, narrative event and narrated event are intermingled in manifold ways. I only want to make clear that this constellation is about two main temporal perspectives: One that opens up from the present to the past, yet it does so in a way that, in the end, the present fits coherently in with the other perspective which, in turn, represents the life course as projected along a (more or less) chronological dimension. In this moment, the moment of the end, the narrated event fuses with the narrative event. Consider, for example, an autobiographical sketch like this: "I was born in a city in the grim and dull plains of Northern Germany, whereas now, after many years of *Wanderung* I have ended up in this lovely town in hilly Tuscany to tell you, in this sunny afternoon sitting here in this piazza, how all this has happened". Even this simple narrative comprises both perspectives as well as the moment of their fusion, that is the moment in which the story is told.

One astonishing effect often emerging from such a constellation is that one's life, once shaped and sequentially ordered as a narrative event, appears as a kind of development towards a certain goal — as if the end (that is, the present of the narrative event) were the destination of one's journey, an objective which from the very beginning had to be reached like Odysseus' Ithaca. Just as the here and now of the narrative event follows the narrated

events of the past, the (temporary) end of the narrated life tends to appear as the *telos* of one's life history — as if a sequential order in time becomes a causal or teleological order of events. I shall call this merging of structures of development, narrative, and time *retrospective teleology*. As I have pointed out elsewhere on a more philosophical plane (Brockmeier 1992), the idea of development has become, throughout the history of Western thought, inextricably interwoven with the idea of “telos realisation”. This is particularly evident in notions of human development and life history. Mark Freeman (1993) has made a similar point. Reflecting on both psychological and philosophical models of development, he has noted that it is “extremely difficult to talk about development without positing an endpoint, a telos, in which the process culminates. To the extent that the concept [of development] retains its traditional forward-moving connotations, it is, and must be, *toward* something: a goal, a place on high” (Freeman 1993, p. 13).

Following the line of argument that I have suggested, we may even go as far as to say that, at least in autobiographical narrative, it is impossible to avoid positing a telos because of the inherent narrative constraints of this genre. This is not to say that I want to ignore or even dismiss the aforementioned attempts of modernist and postmodernist literature to de-substantialize the self, attempts which, almost like a side-effect, tend to dissolve the idea of coherent and linear development. I am, however, wondering to what extent such avant-garde works of art have had an impact on the way people in our culture make sense of their everyday lives. I already mentioned, drawing on Barthes, Eco, and Brooks, that most autobiographical narratives follow more traditional lines of plotting. “Since fiction”, Eco (1994, p. 118) writes, “seems a more comfortable environment than life, we try to read life as if it were a piece of fiction”; and what's more, I might add, we try to read it as if it were a piece of highly conventional and, thus, predictable fiction.

But although there certainly is a gap between the twentieth century literary and artistic avant-garde and the narrative repertoire commonly used in the autobiographical process (and, I believe, even in the autobiographical process of most modern and postmodern writers and artists), it is not difficult to show that every naturally-occurring autobiographical story, in one way or another, draws on literary models. To be sure, the literary culture of the West is only to a small extent characterized by modernist and postmodernist fiction. Most autobiographical storytelling, both natural and fictional, starts in traditional fashion with a concrete frame story or preliminary narrative to bind the story of a life into the present situation, as does every conventional life account that is

told along the lines of literary genres like pilgrimage, *Bildungsroman*, romance, emancipation story, and the like: Something extraordinary has occurred, a turning point in life, success or crisis, an unexpected revelation, self-doubt or catharsis. Now, perhaps in a moment of recovering one's breath, the question arises, triggering the narrative event: How could it all happen, how was it all possible? In so far as the story then tries to give an answer to this question, the narrative event (and the extraordinary situation it is embedded in) usually appears as a sort of result or even consequence of the narrated event. This is exactly what I mean by retrospective teleology: an order of lived time and narrated time in which the present emerges from the past like the famous flux of time. In the process of being narrated the flux of life seems to be transformed into a flux of necessity.

An implicit consequence of this transformation is that autobiographical narrative tends to lose an essential dimension of human life: chance. "Lived time" appears to be a sort of direct and linear linkage between two well-defined moments in time. In this manner, the uncertainty and arbitrariness of life seems to be absorbed, and the plurality of options, realized and not, which is so characteristic of human agency, is inevitably reduced to a simple chain of events. Often, therefore, this teleological construction of linear time endows the autobiographical account with a deterministic tenor. Molded in a tight narrative fabric, the story makes the life appear as a unified whole, "like a sweater woven too densely that does not breathe", as the Italian writer Natalia Ginzburg (1956) put it. In more theoretical terms we can speak of teleological linearization of contingency, an effect that seems to be a natural quality of human development; indeed, it appears as a feature of human nature itself, as something which is existentially given like the fact that the time of life is limited.

The question I am interested in is how this kind of transformation works and how it shapes our ideas of self and identity. I suspect that the particular teleology emerging in this process is an essential ingredient of the secretive metaphysics of what is conceived as development in most autobiographies and life narratives. And although I shall look at it in a rather critical light, it appears to be a pattern of coherence that, in the end, almost unavoidably takes shape whenever we tell history, whether it be the *histoires* of historiography, the narrations of myths and other forms of cultural memory, or the stories of our individual lives.

“Lived life” in autobiography and portraiture

To investigate this strange teleological transformation I want to follow the question: Who is he or she who tells the story? To whom are we listening, whose text are we reading, whose photos or film are we viewing when the narrative of a life is laid out? Of course, the familiar notion of autobiography already suggests a certain answer: Autobiography is about a self-fashioned biography or, as we read in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “the story of one’s life written by himself”. Although I am dealing here with how the story of one’s life is written, I use the term “writing” in a manner different from the common usage on which the *Oxford English Dictionary* draws. I shall refer to writing not as opposed to oral language but in its broader semiotic and philosophical meaning. In this sense, writing means both a practice to inscribe (that is, to materialize) a meaningful text (that is, a system of signs) and the result of this practices: a meaningful constellation of signs that is to be read and interpreted. In this view, writing comes close to what Wittgenstein referred to as language game, though, it is a particular language game.

Let me return for a moment to the common understanding of autobiography. The accent here is unambiguously set by the meaning of the Greek part of the compound auto-biography: *Auto* means “self, one’s own, by oneself, independent(ly)”, again according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This emphasis on the self as an independent and, therefore, authentic source of the writing of a life is echoed by most traditional definitions of autobiography. These definitions are to be found both implicitly, in fictional and documentary genres of prose and in everyday discourse, and explicitly, in autobiographical theory. Philippe Lejeune (1989), one of the foremost theorists of autobiography, has emphasized three aspects which define the genre. First, the autobiographical view is taken from a retrospective vantage point; second, it focuses on the individual life; and third, it is concerned with one’s own existence, that is, it refers to an empirically lived (and thus ontologically given) life course. According to Lejeune, both the teller or writer and the listener or reader of an autobiography subscribe, as it were, to a contract by which they agree on these three essentials. They make what Lejeune calls an “autobiographical pact”. This understanding of autobiography has, in one way or another, long held a prominent place in Western culture. I would like to argue that it is part of the same cultural-historical trajectory as the idea of a teleological order of life.

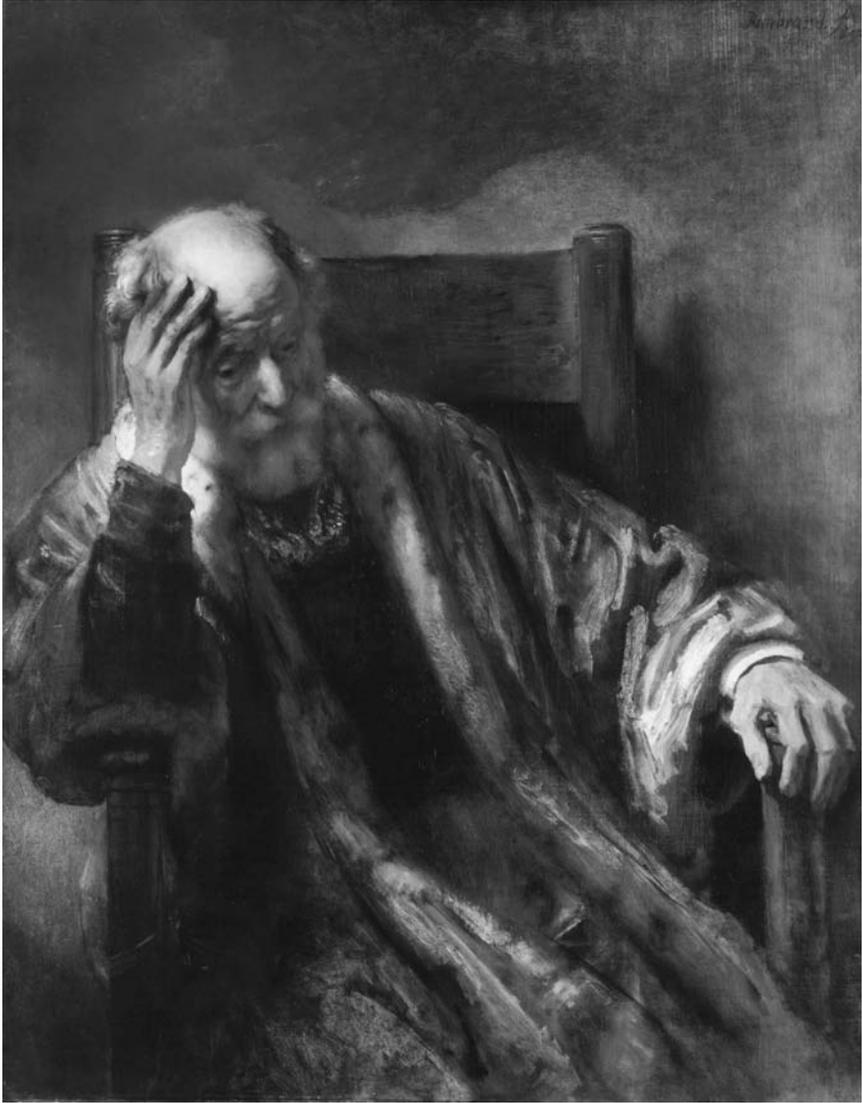
To make this claim more evident and to show how these two views of the autobiographical process are entangled with each other, I shall describe it in a

more visual way. More precisely, I will discuss some visual or pictorial examples: pictures of life, so to speak. There are two reasons why I would like to include pictorial narratives in the corpus of narrative texts that I shall examine. One reason is thematic; it is based on the assumption that modern portraiture (and self-portraiture, in particular) has been, from its beginning, a most sophisticated genre of life writing — I shall flesh out this assumption in a moment. The other reason has to do with an understanding of narrative not primarily as a linguistic entity but, in a more general sense, as the ability or capacity “to tell a story”, as Mieke Bal (1997) put it. A narrative text, in this view, is a text in which one or more agents tell a story in a particular medium. The medium can be language as well as imagery, sound, spatial construction, or a combination thereof. This understanding of narrative finds many advocates in recent narrative theory and semiotics. I shall be dealing with it in more detail (also providing some more theoretical arguments) because I believe that it is particularly revealing to look at portraiture as a visual form of life writing.

But how can a life narrative become an iconic artifact? What are visual images of one’s life history? Consider an example. If we think of the particular autobiographical view that I have just outlined, a vision that may come to mind is the picture of someone who may be in his or her old age and now looks back at the “life lived” — perhaps to take stock, trying to figure out what has been important, what was right or wrong, and what did it all mean. One might find here an iconic archetype, a *déjà vu* that is hard to localize because it has become a part of our collective visual memory. One source of this pictorial dimension of our cultural memory is a long and rich iconological tradition in portrait painting, both shaping and illustrating this vision. I shall address this tradition of “autobiographical portraiture” not only because it offers a case in point to discuss the traditional view of autobiography, but also to outline, in contrast, the approach to life narratives I wish to suggest.

In the light of this suggestion, I hope the claim will become plausible that there is no contradiction between the fact that painting is primarily an iconic symbol system and the primarily narrative (and that is, linguistic) nature of the autobiographical process. My argument is that pictures and words, imagery and narrativity are interwoven in one and the same semiotic fabric of meaning. They are overlapping trajectories within the same symbolic space, a space of meaning in which our experience takes place and in which we try to make sense of the world.

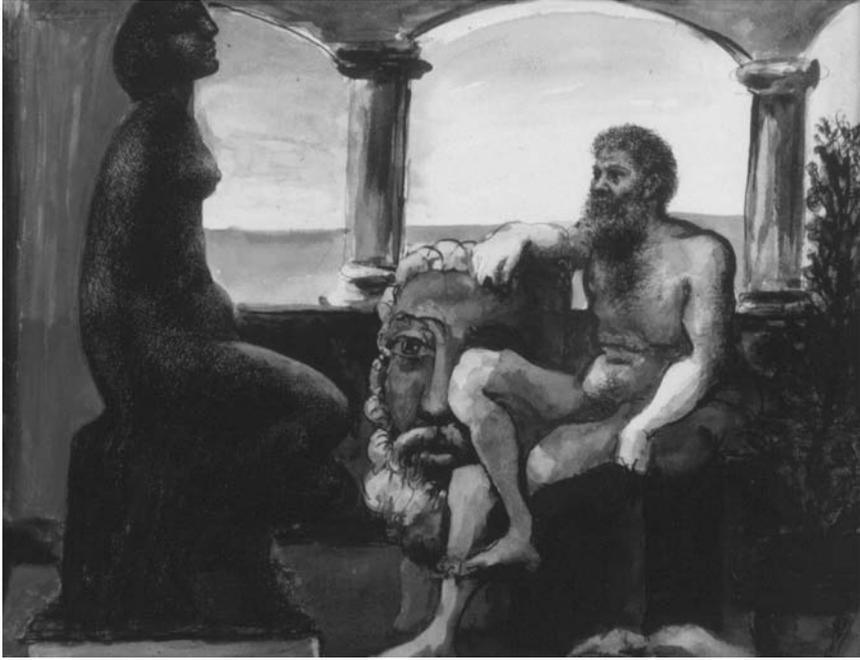
Since the rise of portraiture as an independent genre in the Renaissance, countless representations of men and women in a self-contemplating pose



Rembrandt: *An Old Man in an Armchair* (National Gallery, London)

appear to confirm the putatively typical autobiographical view “from the end to the beginning”.

Rembrandt’s portrait *An old man in an armchair*, housed in the National Gallery in London, can be read as a compelling representation of this view: an image of that phenomenological gestalt that Goethe called “Rückzug aus der



Picasso: *The Sculptor and his Statue*
(Neue Nationalgalerie, The Berggruen Collection, Berlin)

Erscheinung”, the “withdrawal from the world of appearance”. The portrait shows an old man who, although his coat indicates his affluence and important social status, seems to have become uninterested in mundane self-presentation. But despite his tired and absentminded posture, we feel that he has seen life and its vicissitudes. Where else would his view be directed to if not to the past, or in any case away from the present? So we may take Rembrandt’s life portrait as a model, an almost archetypical representation of the autobiographical stance “from the end to the beginning”.

In his withdrawal from the present to the past of his “lived life”, as we might say along the lines of Goethe’s expression, the autobiographical subject is not necessarily alone, as we can see in another picture. Picasso’s variation on this theme, *The Sculptor and his Statue*, depicts not only an old man, in this case an artist, but also a second person: a young woman to whom the old man looks up.

Obviously this image does not only represent the theme of old age and youth, lived life and future life, but also the theme of the artist and his statue — which is, in fact, the title of the picture that belongs to the Berggruen Collection of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. The artist sitting in a posture similar to

Rembrandt's old man in his armchair is viewing his sculpture, the product of his work and life, while he rests his arm on another sculpture beside him that appears to be a self-portrait. His creations, embodying the youth and himself, are materialized in stone, a substance that survives him. So his view into the past simultaneously opens up to a view into the future, the future of his work as an artist whose life continues even after his death. Accordingly, the whole ensemble is set against a bright blue sky and the open horizon of the sea. This is the same sea — as one might think, following the hints of an antique Mediterranean scenery — on which Odysseus must already have sailed.

Admittedly, this too is a cautious reading of a picture that does comprise more than one person and several temporal levels of meaning. Together they create a dense composition of time: a mingling of various layers of natural and historical time and the timeless. These layers also embrace the modalities of past, present, and future; the specific time of the artist and his creative process; and, interwoven with them all, the layers of a life from youth to old age. To be sure, this scenario would allow for a more sophisticated analysis of temporality. However, even then we would not really overstep the horizon of *one* life and its time horizons, as many as there may be. Picasso himself set the stage: The focus is on the artist (even if this is a generalized singular) and his work, as the picture's title states. As long as we follow the track drawn by the traditional interpretive lines of the retrospective vantage point, the focus on an individual life, and on the given existence of a "lived life", we can easily extend the narrative strokes sketched in Picasso's image to a truly *autobiographical* story. But that is to say, we would always be moving, along these lines, within the format of an *individual self* telling his or her life story. In this case we would be all the more ready to do so because we know that almost all of Picasso's works are in one way or another related to the artist's life and self, and his attempts to make sense of it.

Portraiture as life writing

Let us turn to another portrait that will make this traditional way of viewing a life and his representation more difficult. This is a half-length portrait ascribed to Albrecht Dürer. Taking a close look at it will lead us to an aside into the intricacies of (auto)biographical portraiture, before we will come back to the issues of retrospective teleology and time in autobiography .

Dürer's portrait from 1497, in the National Gallery in London, also shows



Dürer: *Portrait*, 1497 (National Gallery, London)

a man of mature age. Since we know that the image captures him at the age of 70, we can even say that this is a very old man, taking into account the low average expectation of life at the end of the fifteenth century when the picture was painted.

Nevertheless, looking at this portrait one is inclined to think less of an venerable old man than of a vigorous person in his full maturity. Self-conscious and self-assured, physically and mentally determined, he gazes sharply, and perhaps even a little challengingly, at the viewer. But who, then, is the observer? Who scrutinizing, who is assessing whom? This question brings a new perspective into play, or more exactly, a number of new perspectives. There are at least three possible ways of positioning for such an assessment, three possible narrative points of view or, shall we say, voices: the portrayed man, the viewer, and the painter. So who is telling the story? And to whom?

In the image of this man, Dürer dispensed completely with embellishment and decoration. No reference or hint reveals the profession, social position or public ranking of the portrayed man. No underlying moral symbolisms or religious messages are added to the depiction. This is all the more surprising as in the Renaissance, and not only then, these “paratexts”, to adopt Gérard Genette’s (1987) notion, were considered to be an essential part of a portrait as well as of the social and personal definition of a person. Portraiture was meant to situate an individual, or a group, within a web of well-defined symbolic meanings, outlining an often hidden system of reference to the social, religious, and intellectual culture the person belonged to or wanted to be seen as belonging to. This was a way, as Stephen Greenblatt (1980) pointed out, of “textualizing” one’s life: to transform a life story into a visual text that was readable by others.

In contrast, in this painting Dürer obviously disregarded all canonical rules of the genre. While the face of the portrayed is shown with inquiring precision, painted with a thin brush in a pencil-like technique, the sitter’s clothing is hardly more than sketched. It seems, like the rest of the picture, created without any artistic ambition. In fact, several art historians believe that the painting is incomplete, or even not Dürer’s work at all. In my reading of this portrait, however, this putatively unbalanced relation between figure and ground does not necessarily demonstrate that the picture is fragmentary; rather, it may even enhance its composition, for we may suspect — after all we know about the technical perfection already achieved by the young painter — that it would not have taken him much to complete the decorative details of clothing and background. It seems more likely that Dürer in this case was not interested at all in drawing the attention to the context and to the social “textualizing” of his model. What he wanted to depict in exclusively focussing on the face and the posture of this man was the personality he saw in him. Thus we immediately feel the very personal, intimate tone of the portrait.

To fully understand this kind of intimacy, it is necessary to take into

account the cultural context of the genre of the individual portrait. While at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century portraiture was a well established art form all over Renaissance Europe, the rise of the portrait as an independent genre had been a relatively recent development. Like most trends in Renaissance culture, it was encouraged by the example of antiquity. Fifteenth century portraits make this quite clear: They were usually cut short below the shoulders as if they were equivalents of classical marble busts, and they were mostly painted in profile as if imitating the heads of emperors on Roman coins. It was only around the year 1500 that artists like Leonardo, Raphael, Bellini, and Dürer — who, while he was in Venice in 1505–1506, had contact with Bellini — emancipated themselves from this convention to produce works without classical precedents.

Such was Dürer's picture which, painted in 1497, was indeed one of the earliest portraits. However, from the very beginning Dürer developed an unusually personal style of portraiture. While Italian artists — and the dominant Venetian school, in particular — tended to use standardized conventions for figures, landscapes, and compositions, Dürer was fascinated by the particular and distinctive. No Venetian artist up to his time had ever endowed a portrait with so much individuality and informality, as we find it in Dürer's works (see Aikema & Brown 1999). Like his Italian colleagues, Dürer believed that the basis of all great art, ancient and contemporary, was proportion. But most of his figures were far more strongly individualized and personalized than the Venetians considered appropriate, especially, for depictions of saints and the Madonna, which they thus criticized as not being sufficiently antique. "No Venetian artist", writes art historian Charles Hope (1999, p.12), "shared Dürer's passion for the observation of nature and none could match his ability to record what he saw, in drawings of unparalleled fluency and vigor". Whereas the Venetians favored smooth surfaces, entirely static poses, elegant decorations, regular lighting, and a lucid spatial organization, Dürer avoided all this. "Incapable of idealization", as Hope (1999, p. 13) asserts, he emphasized the transient expression of a face, the slight asymmetry of the mouth, the lively curls that seem to have just fallen over the cheek.

Only if we bear in mind the dominant artistic conventions of portraiture, the "historical semantics" of its lay-out as a way of social self-textualization, can we imagine the extraordinary personal approach of Dürer's picture (see Koerner 1993). We might even go as far as to call this a psychological portrait but we must be aware of the danger of projecting a modern iconological and narratological category onto a cultural epoch embedded in a historically quite different

semantic. Dürer, to be sure, did not think in terms of psychological analysis. Yet this does not mean that we cannot interpret the aesthetic principles underlying his portraiture in this light. Keeping this important difference in mind, we encounter here one of the Renaissance workshops of subjectivity. What artists like Dürer seem to explore is the human being as a self-determining and self-reflective individual, which has often been described as one of the great themes of Renaissance culture. And indeed, it also is one of the main themes of Dürer's life. "Artists always end up portraying themselves", warned Leonardo da Vinci, stern taskmaster to many Renaissance artists. Leonardo worried that an artist's creative and self-inquiring soul is so potent that it risks creeping into all his work, until every figure he paints comes to feel, even look, like him.

In fact, Dürer was by no means the first artist to be concerned with what we might call a visual psychology of the self, including the self of the artist. We can understand many pictorial forms of high and later Middle Ages as expressions, as well as intrinsic elements, of an emerging novel "culture of the self". Since we witness here the very historical origin of what would become, in Foucault's (1972) terms, the Western episteme of the self, it is worthwhile taking a brief look at the beginnings of this culture. The historians of the French *Annales* school, and many others who have followed them, have widely used pictorial and iconographic narrative sources to reconstruct the specific psychological *mentalité* in the centuries preceding the Renaissance. The Parisian Medievalist Jean Claude Schmitt, for example, claimed that from eleventh to the fourteenth century the culture of the "imago" — as documented in paintings, frescos, illustrations of manuscripts and books, sculptures, and narratives about visions, dreams, and fantasies — offers the most informative objects to study the development of the idea of an individual self. For the first time we find accounts of one's own personal experiences, written down in words, pictures, or other textual forms. As an aside, it may be interesting to note that it was above all the account of dreams, visions, and nightmares — Schmitt (1984; 1985) and Kruger (1992) examined many of such narratives as written down in monasteries since the eleventh century — which served as an early laboratory of self-experience.

In this way, some centuries before the famous Renaissance individual appeared, the question arose of how the self presents himself or herself to others. How are self-narratives to be told? In dealing with this question, the Christian Middle Ages could pick up on an even earlier model that would soon become canonical: the memoirs of St. Augustine (Stock 1996; Olney 1998). But while the medieval pictorial and narrative sources of a sense of self mostly had been

rather elementary, not last in their artistic technique and craftsmanship, Dürer and his generation set new standards. Dürer himself, for example, insisted on complete mastery in every aspect of realist portrait technique. However, merely depicting the external view of a person was not the ultimate objective of the creative process; in the end, it even was of secondary importance to him. What he wanted to capture was a “character” — which, in a way, comes close to what we today would call the defining features of one’s identity. Yet Dürer’s character was not only a particular individual but also a generalized type, a face in the present and a present “*imago*” reflecting the life history of the face. Dürer sought to paint a portrait of a personality he had in his mind’s eye, an image shaped by the distinctive traits of one’s character as developed over his life.

In this sense, Dürer was one of the first in a tradition of Renaissance artists who conceived of the human portrait as both an aesthetic and psychological genre. In this tradition, the representation of a person did not only aim at external mimesis but at a higher and psychologically deeper degree of verisimilitude, of truth. For Dürer, a portrait did not simply represent reality but was to re-create the very “idea”, the mental image or *eidos* of a person and his or her life: “*imago ad vivam effigiem deliniata*”, as he wrote — an image to create a work true to life (see Preimesberger 1999). Apart from artistic and technical abilities, the painter thus was expected to understand the very nature of the portrayed person, to judge and to depict the essential qualities of a personality and the life that shaped it. The painted face of a man or a woman was read like the psychological landscape of a life lived, reflecting the successes and failures, convictions and beliefs, hopes and fears that had emerged through all that. In this way the art of portraiture became the art of understanding a life.

The idea of a portrait that textualizes a person’s life in summarizing his life history is realized in Dürer’s painting in an outstanding fashion. As if the painter had known the model and his life history very well so that he could preserve in the image of the old man some of the energy and self-determination which might have characterized the young man. And in fact, Dürer knew this man very well; the picture shows his father.

Dialogue portraiture

The relation between autobiography and the construction of identity has always been a topic in literature and literary criticism. Recently, it also has become an issue in psychology, sociology, history, and other human sciences. A new

literature has emerged that is in three respects interesting for the issue with which we are dealing. First, the genre of autobiography is no longer exclusively associated with *written* texts (in the traditional sense of the word) by authors of literature, memoirs, and historical and otherwise documentary life accounts. Instead, autobiography is viewed as also embracing many forms of oral discourse, including fragmentary and occasional remarks. Second, such autobiographical accounts are no longer conceived of as monological utterances of one speaker or writer; rather, there is no “teller” whose story would exist without a “told”. In consequence, the “teller”, the “told”, and their interactions are being studied as interrelated elements of discourse, bound into conversational and other forms of language use. In this view, autobiographical life stories (or fragments of them) are organized like speech acts, directed to specific addressees and fulfilling social functions. They are, like all conversations, jointly organized activities.

This leads to the third claim of the new literature on autobiography, a point which makes things even more complicated. Neither the teller nor the told are necessarily concrete empirical persons but can also take shape as narrative figures, for example as *points of view* or *voices*. Such discursive positions can be distributed among several participants of a conversation, or even of several spatio-temporally distinct conversations. We do not have to analyze here the often complex structure of such multivoiced discourse, a structure to which we have become more sensitive through Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984) inquiries into the fundamentally dialogical nature of all human language, including that of putatively monological genres such as autobiographical narration (see, for example, Fischer 1994, on the various distinct voices involved in autobiographical discourse). The important point for us is that the psychological order of autobiographical identity construction can only be understood as an aspect of the communicative and otherwise social function of this discourse. In short, what these three claims state is that autobiographical identity construction is all but an individual enterprise.

I want to argue that these points not only shed new light on the underlying discursive structure of autobiographical texts, but are also true for (auto)biography in general, including (self-)portraiture. To point this out in detail, we now could choose to examine the various interpretive activities, the interplay of narrative points of view, voices, and perspectives, inherent in Dürer’s painting. Yet to make things less complicated, let me suggest another way. This is to focus only on one layer of this discursive scenario, the layer of time and the structure of temporality laid out in this symbolic space of interaction and communication.

However, even here we are confronted with a puzzling number of different temporal perspectives. One of these perspectives has already been mentioned: the particular twofold vision of a life span simultaneously taken from the different vantage points of two generations. The young painter views the old model, and he views him not only with camera-like precision but also with respectful sensitivity. Moreover, his view also captures the old as he views the young. That is to say, there are two protagonists present in this picture, each, as we may suspect, representing a distinct stance in respect of human life time. How can we describe these stances? On the one hand, life is emphasized as future, as a field of possible options, expectations and intentions; on the other hand, life is viewed as past, as time lived and experienced. These two temporal scenarios come with different forms of moral positioning; they outline distinct orders of meaning, duties, and values of personal importance. Furthermore, they also include mutual “comments” on the respective other order.

So far we have taken this portrait as depicting an old man seen by a young man. But does not the artistic (and psychological) quality of the painting and the intellectual profile of the painter — Dürer has often been characterized as one of the most outstanding painter-philosophers of the Renaissance — suggest that this canvas shows still another picture: a study about the way the old views the young? Should Leonardo be right even in this dialectical sense of what dialogue means?

Presumably, the actual painting took at least some days, if not some weeks. Sometimes a portrait needed months or even years to be completed. During this time both men were watching each other in great concentration. Perhaps, then, the picture also represents how the young would have liked to be judged by the old? In fact, it is most likely that Albrecht Dürer conceived of his father as a knowledgeable judge and master *inter pares*, for the old Dürer was an artist himself. A respected Nürnberg goldsmith, he ran a workshop in which young Albrecht began his training as a draughtsman. Thus should we not suspect that there is still another layer of meaning and joint meaning construction underlying these different symbolic orders: a layer that adds to the dialogue between painter and the painted, young and old, apprentice and master a dialogue between father and son?

This leads us back to our problem: Who is the subject of such biographical and autobiographical discourse? Who tells the story of a life, be it an oral, written, or painted narrative? To envisage this elusive autobiographical subject means to follow several social orders of meaning construction that overlap in this painting. Patently, these are bound into contexts of meaning which extend

far into the world beyond the canvas. They all reveal that we are confronted not only with the image of an individual which, in my reading, is a kind of allegory of the retrospective view of this individual's "lived life". But we also should face the fact that the story of this life, as it is summarized in the portrait of the old, is ultimately a story told by the portrait painter. To be sure, this story may even claim to be told with an authentic voice, for the painter knows the painted as only a son knows his father. Thus we could attribute to this dialectical relationship all three essentials defining the rules of the game that Lejeune called the "autobiographical pact": The autobiographical view is taken from a retrospective vantage point, it focuses on one individual life, and it refers to an empirically lived and ontologically given life course.

There are, however, some important aspects of this (auto)biographical constellation which Lejeune's "pact" does not capture. First of all, there is not only the retrospective view but also, as we saw, a prospective vision, and it actually is this projective order in which the "view back" is embedded. Second, although there certainly is the focus on an individual life, this focus itself is all but individually set. What we have been dealing with is not a monologue but how painter and model, old and young, master and apprentice, father and son saw each other or wanted to be seen. Put differently, we have been witnessing a particular "conversation of lives", a conversation that, as Bruner (1993, p. 47) remarks, is so prominent a part of human discourse. Again, this conversation takes place according to rules and norms defined by the Renaissance canon. Like all conversations, it has a historical semantic. Using a Wittgensteinian term we might say, even a painted conversation of lives is regulated by a specific cultural grammar.

Nevertheless, it seems that such grammar is more open and flexible than Lejeune's conception allows. And what's more, Lejeune fails to capture that the canonical forms in which a life story is to be told are themselves not entirely determined by the culture. They are no causal laws. Rather, they are amazingly malleable, negotiable, and adaptable to the conditions under which each individual life is lived. Especially in Western cultures this flexibility and openness can be seen as a general characteristic of life narratives.

What is the real life story of Dürer's father?

Inevitably, at this point the problem of authenticity arises. To create the impression of first-hand authenticity and to make the story convincing is what

all autobiographical narratives are about. Yet there is probably no first-person life story that would not sooner or later encounter the question of how authentic, how “real” it is. How “true” is the representation of a life?

Considering the various perspectives, voices, and narrative points of view that we have identified in our portrait dialogue, it is not surprising that we face not only the question who is telling the story of this life, but now — connected to the question of truth — also another one: What sort of entity is “the life” of Dürer’s father. According to Lejeune’s third criterion, the autobiographical pact presupposes that the life in question is a given reality. At this point, however, even this assumption becomes problematic. For — as we have seen — not only the “narrative event” is determined by the dynamics of the dialogue between the painter and his model, but also the “narrated event” (that is, the given reality of the life of Dürer’s father) appears to be inextricably entangled into this dynamic. The portrait seems to have encapsulated these puzzling twists and turns of the dialogue, but only to set them free again, the longer we are watching it.

Let us look at the problem from a somewhat different angle. While asking for the autobiographical subject, we have taken for granted so far that there is an unambiguous object, a reference of autobiographical discourse. Now, however, it turns out that this “conversation of lives” is not about the given reality of a “lived life”, but about an interplay of reflections and meta-reflections, a mutual reading of the mind of the other. What, then, makes us believe that what a life is, or what it is supposed to be, could be determined outside the narrative fabric that is woven in these discursive interactions? What justifies the assumption that there is such thing as a life, *one* life, lived out there in the world, a life “as such” that exists outside the stories in which we give shape to what counts as a life? As is the case in all discourse, there is a dialogical principle at work in these stories, a principle of communication that does not have an ultimate layer of original meaning; nor does it need such a foundational layer (Brockmeier 1999).

What is at stake in this conversation of lives — a life-long conversation, we might assume, of which this painting captures just one moment — is, to be sure, no such thing as the account of an authentically given life. Whatever it shows, the portrait of the father does not depict the putative reality of his life history, irrespective of what the painter Dürer himself might have thought about portraiture in general and this image in particular.

Of course, the problem we are addressing is much more general. That a life is simply there, that it has a distinct gestalt because it has been lived over a well-

defined period of chronological time is a belief deeply ingrained in the understanding of life stories dominant in our culture. A conception like Lejeune's is just a theoretical reflection of it. This understanding of human life is part of what I earlier referred to as a secretive metaphysics of autobiography: a way of understanding life, identity, and time in ontological terms of material things and substantial entities, rather than in terms of meaning construction, that is, of the actual making of a life story.

Again, a case in point to demonstrate this ontological projection is the way in which we refer to time in autobiographical accounts. In using a wide spectrum of metaphors, idioms, proverbs, grammatical structures, and narrative schemes, we create, as it were, a "reality genre" — a discursive mode that seems to directly represent reality, including the "reality" of time. This is what Lejeune's third assumption is based on. The idea of time evoked by this genre is that of a primary matter: as if time were something that is as naturally as the cycles of the stars and planets and the periodicities of biological life (Brockmeier 1995a). However, this makes us easily forget that the notion of life as well as its autobiographical lay-out is all but a natural affair. It is a highly cultural construction of meaning; and this is also true for the fact that this construction may take shape through metaphors of natural processes that suggest quite the contrary. Just consider two traditional metaphors of aging and old age that refer to the semantic of organic growth. On the one hand we depict old age as decline and decay, like flowers in the autumn and winter that are wilting and losing their beauty. On the other hand, we use metaphors like maturity, ripeness, and harvest of a life to highlight the strength, experience, and wisdom of age. In either case, though, we draw on what we believe is natural evidence.

Likewise, Renaissance portraiture suggests a particular cultural vision of human life, of the life of a "character". But even if we understand portraiture as a narrative form, as a way to make the image of a character tell the story of his or her life, a theoretical frame as suggested by Lejeune does not help us. At least it does not help us if we want to read Dürer's portrait of his father in the way I have suggested: as a dialogical exploration of a life and as a dialogue about a life portrait, and that is, about the genre itself. If we go even one step further and recall the historical semantics of Renaissance portraiture sketched earlier, then we may expound Dürer's picture as a "character" itself, a character of the discursive structure of portraiture and of life history in general.

Against the backdrop of this portrait narrative, let me summarize the chief arguments against the traditional view of autobiography so far. My claim was that these arguments apply both to verbal and pictorial life narratives. In trying

to read Dürer's portrait in the light of Lejeune's three criteria of autobiography, we have encountered a number of difficulties in identifying any of them. What about autobiography as retrospection — Lejeune's first point — when this putative view in hindsight is simultaneously embedded in a prospective view, a view that is taken from the vantage point of the present? What about the individual focus — the second point — as we find the painter and the painted inextricably involved in several dialogic discourses, like several voices in a conversation? And finally, what about the ontology of a "lived life" — the third point — when the painter's aim is not (and could never be) that of representational accuracy but of depicting his interpretation of an individual's character?

Like all life stories, portraits allow for multiple readings. They are certainly not the most suitable cases in point for the notion of an individual, autonomous, and stable self. Moreover, they question the commonsensical view that the (auto)biographical outline of a life is circumscribed by a natural development from the beginning to the end. And there is still another reason for including portraiture in our considerations. I believe that a picture like Dürer's portrait of his father invites us all the more to think critically about the traditional conception of autobiography because its dialogical structure and the corresponding multiple layers of reference and meaning oblige us to view it as an open gestalt, as an fleeting element of conversations which are part of a wider, cultural discourse.

The story and the plot of a life

To more closely investigate this (auto)biographical gestalt of a life, let us look at the two central coordinates of autobiographical texts which mutually refer to the beginning and the end. I suspect that these two perspectives and their underlying temporal trajectories are crucial for the teleological order of development that seems to determine all life narratives.

As already observed, this retrospective teleology is closely connected with the three traditional assumptions of what autobiography is about. According to these assumptions, a life is a time-evolving event; more precisely, it is laid out as a step-by-step development in chronological time. This lay-out is, narratologically speaking, the story or *fabula*, to use a concept introduced into narratology by the Russian Formalists. How do we know what makes up the fabula of a life? Commonly it is thought of as being based on the documented life course. This course is based on two kinds of evidence, one is manifested in historical,

public sources like documents and certificates of baptism, marriage, police records; the other one is stored in individual autobiographical memory. The telling or writing of an autobiographical narrative unfolds the life course as a retrospective reconstruction, that is, a recollection of the historical order of life events. In representing this raw material, a life story takes form.

To be sure, all this does not have very much to do with advanced autobiographical theorizing (as we find it, for example, in Folkenflik 1993; Swindells 1995; Olney 1998; Eakin 1999); rather, it is good commonsensical truth. But commonsense does not fall from heaven. From early on, children are integrated in various practices of co-narrating with adults (Miller 1994; Nelson 1996; Wang & Leichtman 2000). In learning how to tell a story they are also guided to follow in their narratives the “real order” in which things are meant to happen. In this way, they become familiar with modes of narratively aligning actions and events into a linear and chronological order — which is, as often has been argued, a highly Westernized form of imagining temporal coherence, closely linked to the Newtonian arrow of time (Brockmeier 1995b). This idea of temporal coherence seems to be particularly obligatory when children start to tell autobiographically significant episodes about their own lives and link them to each other. Later on, they will learn that there are even stricter conventions of how to fashion an entire life account, for instance, in the form of a *Curriculum Vitae*. Most of these models of life writing are based on the discourse type of making a list, such as a list of data, places, degrees, salaries, and so forth.

Although the canonical constraints of this discourse type are strong (not least because of their anchorage in professional, administrative, and legal discourses), this picture changes entirely when it comes to the way people try to make sense of their lives and understand their life histories in terms of meaning and intentionality. Here the autobiographical process merges with the project of identity construction. From the very beginning, this project fulfils a different function than representing the chronological facts of a life. As has been pointed out by several authors (Bruner 1993, and in this volume; Neisser & Fivush 1994; Rubin 1996; Sehulster, this volume), in this construction, the putative facts of the documented life course and all concerns about objectivity and truth of their representation are only of secondary importance. When people talk about what “really mattered” in their lives, the chronological story mostly does not even serve as an unanimated skeleton for their narrative. Sometimes, the fabula appears to be entirely disconnected from the fabric of meaning that keeps an identity together — at least for a certain period of time. This is not only true for the way autobiographically important episodes of a life are selected and turned

into “autobiographems” — a selection that cannot but pick a few episodes out of hundreds and thousands of possible candidates. It also holds for the way autobiographems are linked together and linearized, irrespective of the temporal sequence in which they might have occurred originally.

Patently, in this process of meaning construction — the literary theorist would speak of “plotting” — the Newtonian framework of time does not play any significant role. Most autobiographical narratives, both natural and fictional, are not primarily told to provide a fabula, the linear story of a life’s events, but a *sjuzet*, a particular narrative composition of the fabula. Only the *sjuzet*, which is often translated into “plot”, fills the story with life. In contrast with the fabula, the *sjuzet* is defined not in terms of chronological time but of narrative time, the peculiar time that is created in the act of narrating. The notion of narrative time was elaborated in great detail in Paul Ricoeur’s (1984; 1985; 1991) philosophical theory of the narrative fabric of temporality. Drawing on Ricoeur’s conception, I understand narrative time as the temporal order of meaning that emerges in the narrative process.

Why are the concepts of story and plot important for our issue? I want to offer the idea that it is the temporal structure of the plot that defines the very time order of the autobiographical process, and that is, the time order of identity construction. Obviously, this order establishes a more complicated trajectory than the chronological listing of events in the story. However, we are in a strange, intuitive fashion familiar with the intricacies of the analytically often hard-to-grasp time scenarios of the plot. Consider the following example from the novel *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas* by the Brazilian writer Machado de Assis. This autobiography is presented as a narration that could only have been written by the narrator, Bras Cubas, from the grave, and yet it sounds quite plausible:

For some time I debated whether I should start these memoirs at the beginning or at the end, that is, whether I should put my birth or my death in first place. Since common usage would call for beginning with birth, two considerations led me to adopt a different method: The first is that I am not exactly a writer who is dead but a dead man who is a writer, for whom the grave was a second cradle...

Although the picture of a grave as a second cradle suggests a literary tenor, the explicit merging of the narrative points of view of the beginning and the end is not restricted to fiction but also widespread in naturally occurring life stories. There is hardly any autobiography that does not use narrative techniques like flashback and connections of flashback and flashforward, such as in this simple

sequence that I heard this morning on the subway: “Well, had I known how difficult our marriage would have become after that, I’m sure I wouldn’t have married him. Now, I’m afraid that I’ve to go through all this trouble with the separation...” What happens here, linguistically? A flashforward is embedded into a flashback, the view goes back and forth again. In addition, both time shifts are subjunctive constructions, that is, they are assumptions about hypothetical events in a hypothetical time. Even more, the entire construction serves as a backdrop for another subjunctive flashforward to the future (a future that is expected to bring trouble). If described in such analytical terms, it becomes clear that this temporal scenario is all but simple. In everyday discourse, its complexity only escapes our attention because it is unfolded within narrative plots that are overly familiar.

In order to understand how the underlying temporal order of a life story works, and why it usually works so smoothly, we must bear in mind that it is construed along two temporal axes. One axis is linked to a coordinate directed from the present to the past, the other one links to a coordinate from the past to the present. To mark the respective points of departure, I have suggested situating them within the two contexts of the narrative event and the narrated event. How do these contexts relate to the concepts of story and plot? Whereas the time of the story roughly refers to the same level as the time of the narrated event (or the sequence of the narrated events), there is, however, no analogous correspondence between the time of the plot and the time of the narrative event. While the temporal scenario of the plot is laid out in the (linguistically, iconically, or otherwise semiotically manifested) text, narrative time embraces still another time: the time of the actual presentation of the text. This is the time of the narrative event as it unfolds in a particular discursive situation.

Thus we face three distinct temporal orders of autobiographical narrative. How do they combine? Again, let me explain the particular fusion that takes place here by looking at a painting.

The telos of the present

Tintoretto’s double portrait *The Old Man and the Boy*, housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, brings together all three temporal orders, even if it does so in a rather enigmatic way. To begin with, I shall examine how the perspectives of the story and the plot are crossed. While Dürer’s father looks straightforward at the painter, the view of Tintoretto’s old man is — as in



Tintoretto: *The Old Man and the Boy* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

Rembrandt's portrait — diagonally directed out of the picture to an unspecific distance. Here, in Tintoretto's painting, it is the young boy who directly looks at the painter. This dual perspectival focus is reflected in several details of the composition: from the different postures and skin colors of the two figures to the different brush techniques by which they are painted. The bright and clear

face of the boy augments his attentive gaze. No doubt, he is not only the model, he vigilantly observes the painter while working on the painting. And what's more, the boy also seems to watch the viewer, that is us, watching the painting. This is the third order.

There is something odd about face-to-face portraits. They create a simple but striking effect. Whenever we, the viewers, look at this face, we do it now and here, in "our time" — and so does the boy who is looking at us. In this very moment, his world is ours. It is the world of the here and now of our dialogue with the figures on the canvas, with the painter and his time, and with ourselves. Now we are in narrative time, the time of the narrative event as it takes place in this very moment.

Having said that, another thought comes to mind. Perhaps, then, we do not view just two figures, two human beings in Tintoretto's portrait but two stages of life, of one life. Perhaps we face two different outlooks upon one development, two perspectives that are inherent in life at every single moment. And we move back and forth between these different visions of time as if they were moments of *our* lives.

We thus have to understand the time(s) of the plot as once again being embedded in another temporal framework, namely, within the order of narrative time. This order also embraces the present of the discursive event itself. Eco (1994) suggested calling this the level of "discourse", adding in this way to story and plot a third category of analysis. On the level of discourse, all narrative and temporal points of view, both on the canvas and in front of it, become integrated in one and the same order of perspectives and times. I suspect that it is in this order where the various temporal orders fuse and the teleological view of development emerges. In this moment, the orders of story, plot, and discourse blend in a way that the past becomes aligned in the light of the present, and the present of whoever looks back at the past appears as the goal of life's development, as the *telos* of what I have called retrospective teleology.

Again, Augustine's confessions can be seen as a classic example of this mutual projection of the past onto the present and of the present onto the past. Indeed, as Bruner has noted (in his chapter in this volume), this narrative construction is the very point of Augustine's autobiographical account. In retrospectively summarizing his life, the present narrator, the thoughtful St. Augustine, must bring the protagonist of the past — the callow pear-stealing boy who he was some decades ago — into the present. And he must do so in such a way that both the past and the present protagonist of the story eventually fuse with the narrator and "become one person with a shared consciousness".

In stories of this kind, writes Bruner (in this volume, p. 28), “it is not amiss to say that the old adage is turned around. If initially the child was the father to the man, now (in autobiography) the man reclaims the role of being father to the child — but this time recapturing the child for the culture by the use of the culture’s theories and stories”. In the view I have suggested, it is the autobiographical discourse where this “shared consciousness” emerges and a culture’s theories and autobiographical genres come to fruition. The term discourse, as I use it here, thus refers not only to a unit of language, but also to the present cultural constellation, the “cultural scene”, as Donal Carbaugh (1996) puts it, in which the narrative event with its various interplays of teller and listener takes place.

Retrospective teleology, I have argued, is a central feature of the autobiographical process. Yet it is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp this kind of teleology without taking into account the fusion of the various temporal orders in which the narrative event takes place. To look at this fusion still from another angle, let me consider for a moment the approach to narrative analysis suggested by the language and film theorist Seymour Chatman (1978, 1981). Chatman’s point of departure is Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) idea of narrative as a particular form of diachronic linearization or, as they call it, “sequencing”. That is to say, narrative is a way of ordering actions and events in a linear temporal succession. For Chatman, sequencing is an universal property of narrative. He identifies two essentials of this time structuring. First, all narratives, in whatever medium, combine the time sequence of events (what Chatman calls “story-time”) with the time of the presentation of those events (in his terms “discourse-time”). And second, it is equally fundamental to narrative, regardless of medium, that these two time orders remain independent. As he writes: “In realistic narratives, the time of the story is fixed, following the ordinary course of a life: a person is born, grows from childhood to maturity and old age, and then dies. But the discourse-time order may be completely different: it may start with the persons deathbed, then ‘flashback’ to childhood; or it may start with childhood, ‘flashforward’ to death, then end with adult life. This independence of discourse-time is precisely and only possible because of the subsumed story-time” (Chatman 1981, p. 118).

Obviously, Chatman’s “story-time” and “discourse-time” refer to what I have discussed as the two time orders of the narrated event, the time of the story and that of the plot. There is, however, a problem with Chatman’s dual narratological picture. It fails to capture the time(s) of the narrative event, that is, the actual scene-setting in which a narrative is told. This is all the more momentous

because it is only here that “story-time” and “discourse-time” are brought into a common (and circular) perspective. As I have suggested, it is actually in the autobiographical discourse where this combined vision takes shape. From this perspective, Chatman can only claim that his two orders of time remain independent in all narrative because his conception of narrative does not take into account the particular genre of narrative with which I have been concerned: the genre of life and identity narrative.

However we conceive of Chatman’s “story-time” and “discourse-time”, in the process of autobiographical narration the two orders are neither independent from each other, nor from the temporal order of the narrative event. Wherever a life story starts — at present life (as in St. Augustine’s account), at old age (as in Rembrandt’s portrait of an “old man in an armchair”), or at birth (as in my own life account which started in the grim and dull plains of Northern Germany) — the narrative is always told in the exact present of the narrative discourse, even if the life told in this discourse is the life of a dead narrator, as Bras Cubas, Machado de Assis’s autobiographical hero, held. Autobiographical discourse, as all language in use, is always positioned “at this moment in time” (Harré 1996). It is in this afternoon, in this sunny place in Tuscany that I tell you about the plains of the North which are — in order to make this plot work — of course, always grim and dull.

This, then, is the moment of fusion of all time orders that I have addressed in my discussion of autobiographical narrative: the time of the story and of the plot which together constitute the order of narrated time that finally blends with the discourse order of narrative time. The result of this fusion is *autobiographical time*, the time of one’s life history. Only if we bear in mind this multivocal texture of time (and its inherent oscillations between various temporal constellations), do we understand what it means that the past of a life becomes ordered in the light of the present, an ordering which I have called retrospective teleology.

Conclusions

Human life as it is shaped by words and pictures, in verbal and iconic narrative texts, has been the issue of this essay. In my discussion, I have not given particular attention to the differences in the narrative techniques that characterize verbal and pictorial life narratives. This is not to deny these important differences. But more interesting for the question I have been dealing with are

the fundamental qualities that both sign systems share. It is these qualities, I believe, that justify my “parallel investigation” of life narrative in linguistic and visual media.

A main assumption underlying my study was that both media are entities with semiotically comparable narrative functions. I have drawn on an argument that has been most convincingly expounded in Mieke Bal’s (1991) splendid inquiry into the narrative and symbolic weave of Rembrandt’s paintings. In her book *Reading “Rembrandt”: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, Bal demonstrates that a culture in which works of art and literature emerge “does not impose a strict distinction between the verbal and the visual domain” (p.5). Rather, as she goes on, “in cultural life” — and we might add that our thoughts and imagination of course are part of this life — “the two domains are constantly intertwined. In order to assess what a work means for the culture in which it circulates, we therefore need to overcome the artificial boundaries that form the basis of academic disciplines” (p.5).

Both words and images share the options of what Ricœur (1981) called a “narrative function”. Both are texts that can tell a story, including a story as complicated as that of one’s life. Moreover, one quality of the narrative textures of autobiographies, be it in linguistic or visual media, is to create a fabric of cohesion and plausibility that is usually taken to be the immediate reflection of a person’s life. However, in suggesting a “real representation”, both kinds of text not just depict, express, or reflect reality, but evoke reality — a new reality that, among others, gives form to the peculiar idea of autobiographical development that I have examined. This is the idea of the here and now being not only the outcome, but also the telos of a life lived. As we have seen, both media are capable of confirming, and of constituting, the secretive metaphysics of autobiography that I mentioned at the beginning.

What makes autobiographical narrative, in either media, such a powerful symbolic form of our experiences is the same narrative process of meaning construction that evokes the teleological order of our lives. Autobiography, I suspect, is a genre of identity construction whose inherent narrative constraints make it impossible to avoid suggesting such a telos. As Freeman (1993, p. 108) puts the matter, further developing a thought by Lukacher (1986), the implication here is to admit a double or “metaleptic” logic in which the same elements appear both as causes of effects and effects of effects: “that which is seen to lead to a specific outcome (...) can only be posited after the outcome is known and is thus cause — in the sense of origin — and effect — in the sense of product of narrative refection — at once”. This means not only that in narrating our

previous experiences are transformed into elements of a new configuration of meaning. It also implies a new meaning of “origin” and “cause”. The reason for this is, Freeman (1993, p. 108) writes, that “the very idea of an origin or a cause partakes not of one dimension of temporality but two, backward and forward, at once: now and then becoming compatriots in the articulation of a story, able to make sense simultaneously of both”.

One effect — shall we say, side-effect — of this teleological linearization of life is what I have described as the absorption of contingency. Literature and the arts may try to escape this consequence. But this, I believe, is not the psychological and philosophical function of autobiographical narrating in everyday life. Rather, it seems that the uncertainty and arbitrariness that prevail in our real lives first of all demand structured and closed narrative forms. Life needs plots — or, as Brooks (1984) has argued it, it is dependent on plots — that do not make it more precarious and problematic, but more bearable, perhaps even easier to live. There are limits to the truth we can bear, said Nietzsche; and no doubt, his own life projects provide abundant material to prove this claim (Nehmas, 1985).

If telling a life is giving a teleological and, that is, unifying form to it, we may assume that it is for this reason that autobiographical stories play such a central role in human identity construction; in other words, it is not despite, but because of their implicit retrospective teleology.

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Concluding Commentary

CHAPTER 12

From substance to story

Narrative, identity, and the reconstruction of the self

Mark Freeman

What I wish to do in this final chapter is identify a number of basic categories and questions that have grown out of the preceding chapters and, ultimately, chart a direction for future explorations into the relationship between narrative and identity. I do so with some measure of trepidation, for it is no simple task to bring together coherently the very rich and very varied works included herein. But I shall try.

Before beginning, it may be worth noting that, judging by virtually all of the chapters contained in the present volume, narrative inquiry has reached what might be called a “post-polemical” phase. By this, I mean that most of those who have been working in the area of narrative for some time are generally less concerned to indict the status quo, particularly in its positivistic form, than was once the case. Moreover, they are less concerned to defend their own work, to argue for its right to exist or its superiority over traditional social science approaches. Rather than *proposing* to do the desired work or proclaiming the need for such work, it is simply being done, constructively and vigorously. In part, this is because the cause of critique, important though it surely is, can sometimes get old; there is just so much time and energy to be devoted essentially to negation. More positively, many have come to find in narrative inquiry a remarkably fertile arena for reflection and exploration; and the lure of what is out there, in the world, has come to seem more significant and valuable than the internecine battles that go on in this or that academic field.

Having said this, it may nevertheless be useful at this point to offer but the briefest “reminder” about the great potential of narrative inquiry, especially in relation to the issue of identity, to humanize and deepen work in the various social sciences, to bring it into closer contact with human beings, seeking to give

form and meaning to experience. This matter is not to be construed in merely methodological terms. For what is at stake, finally, is how we are to think about *people* and about what sorts of images and metaphors are most appropriate to understanding them. Over the course of more than a century, there have been countless efforts to identify the proper “object” of social scientific inquiry and, in turn, the proper method for studying such an object. Many of these efforts have yielded questionable outcomes: Whatever their desire to be faithful to the data of human experience, the resultant portraits have often been all but unrecognizable. The work carried out here, in its very movement beyond polemics and into the stuff of human lives, provides some much-needed clues for how to go about things a bit differently. Let me now turn to some of the basic dimensions involved in explicating the relationship between narrative and identity. For the sake of simplicity (and ease at arriving at appropriate sub-headings), I will refer to the *historical*, *cultural*, *rhetorical*, and *experiential* dimensions of the relationship at hand. The last dimension, I might note, could also be referred to as the *poetic* dimension. If all goes according to plan, the reason for this will become clear later on.

The historical dimension

There are a number of different ways in which the historical dimension of the relationship between narrative and identity has been addressed in the present volume. In the chapters by Brockmeier, Bruner, and Freeman and Brockmeier, among others, there is the idea that personal identity along with the narrativization of experience become reconfigured in distinct ways across the course of history. Whereas earlier conceptions of “self” — such as they were — may have been framed in terms of cyclical patterns or processes of growth and decay or what have you, later conceptions come to be understood in more fully historical terms, as a sequence of unique, unrepeatable events. We also see transformations across history in the plot structures of narratives, the kinds of narratives that tend to be told, and the forms of life they display. The idea of history, as we have come to know it — conceptualized in terms of irreversible sequence, linear time, and so on — thus emerges *in* history and embodies what appears to be an entirely different order of time than has existed in certain other cultures. The very relationship between personal identity and narrative — particularly insofar as narrative is thought of in “autobiographical” terms — is itself the product of distinct, and indeed monumental, transformations in history.

We might nevertheless ask at this point: Is there some dimension of narrativity involved in human life as such? Acknowledging, in other words, the vast differences in conceptions of identity, selfhood, and life itself that have obtained across the course of history, and acknowledging as well the relatively recent emergence of autobiographical narrative (at least in its “post-confessional” phase, where the individual ego takes center stage rather than God), are there any features of the relationship between narrative and identity that are *trans*-historical, that is, universal? Universalizing modes of theorizing are hardly the rage at this particular historical juncture (hence the social construction of constructionist thinking), so I approach this set of issues cautiously. But there are perhaps some “verities” worth considering here. Human lives begin and end. There are, it would appear, certain inevitable rhythms to life and, perhaps, certain experiential dynamics that are simply part of being human. And there is surely a sense in which the historical nature of human life, however much it may have been under-emphasized or under-articulated in times past, may be regarded as an intrinsic feature of temporal existence. As Eliade (1954) has pointed out in this context, even for those cultures who conceive of human life largely in mythical terms and for whom the circle rather than the line is the prevailing temporal frame, the historical dimension remains available. It may in fact have to be defended against, and strenuously, because of what it suggests about the ephemeral nature of existence, the terror of an unpredictable world, and, of course, the indubitable reality of death.

None of what is being said should be taken to imply that the project of discovering cultural or historical variability is without value or that, in the end, we are all “basically the same”. Exploring other cultures, across space and time, can be extremely valuable for alerting us to the vastly different ways there are of being human, and they can help cast our own ways in a new light. There nevertheless remains the very interesting and quite real possibility that, even amidst these significant differences, we can learn something “ontologically essential”, we might say, about the narrative/identity relationship. It can of course be argued that it is anachronistic, if not completely wrongheaded, to even raise this possibility; not only would the very terminology being employed in this volume be utterly alien to many peoples, so too would the entire array of interests and ideas being pursued. But might there not still be certain common elements among the multiple ways of being in time?

There is another, somewhat different way of considering the historical dimension of the relationship between narrative and identity, one having more to do with the individual and cognitive plane than the cultural plane. Brockmeier’s

idea of “retrospective teleology”, and the important distinction between the *narrative event* and the *narrated event* (see Carbaugh’s and Langellier’s chapters as well), may be helpful in fleshing out this set of issues. As Brockmeier notes, “life stories are told in the present, the present of the narrative event... It is the here and now of the narrative speech act — the telling of the story to somebody” — including oneself — “that is the point of departure of every story. Yet in the chronological order of most life narratives”, he goes on to say, “this is, at the same time, the end — if only temporarily — of a process, namely the course of one’s life that started sometime in the past. This process is the narrated event or, more precisely, the sequence of narrated events.” And these, Brockmeier (this volume, p.251) maintains, “represent the very content of the story.” Bruner’s working definition of autobiography may also be helpful here. In an autobiography, he writes, “a narrator, in the here and now, takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name. He must by convention bring that protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the protagonist and the narrator eventually fuse and become one person with a shared consciousness” (this volume, p. 27).

There is a tendency, on the part of some, to think of the historical dimension as the data, the “real stuff” of the past. So it is that Spence (1982), for instance — and, to some degree, Schulster, in his chapter on Wagner — wishes to separate historical truth and narrative truth; the former, it would seem, is unadorned and objective, the latter adorned and subjective. To the extent that the idea of the historical is equated with “what was”, with the “past presents” that had once been, this is perfectly justifiable. But as Brockmeier as well as Bruner suggest in their respective discussions of the temporality involved in autobiographical narrative, historical recollection — insofar as it involves not the dispassionate recounting of past presents (would that it were possible) but the *telling* of the past — cannot be separated from narrative in this way. There is no history apart from the narrative event in which it is told; and in a distinct sense, there is no past outside of the present and the questions it poses regarding the meaning of one’s life. This second way of considering the historical dimension of the relationship between narrative and identity is thus fundamentally about the distinctive temporality that emerges for the person who, by virtue of the aforementioned historical developments, has become interested in making sense of his or her own unique past and who tries to discern how it may have culminated in what exists now. In short, then, what might be called *autobiographical consciousness* — wherein one finds via personal history the

pathway to identity — emerges in tandem with more fundamental changes in historical consciousness. It is but a short step from here, the historical dimension, to the cultural dimension of the narrative/identity relationship.

The cultural dimension

Judging from the chapters in the present volume as well as the considerable amount of work presently being carried out on the relationship between narrative and identity, the cultural dimension to which I have just referred has become central: The self, and narratives about the self, are culturally and discursively “situated”; and it is this very situatedness, as Bruner and others have emphasized, that serves to ensure that we do not fall prey to a kind of autobiographical autism. Simply put, “my story” can never be wholly mine, alone, because I define and articulate my existence with and among others, through the various narrative models — including literary genres, plot structures, metaphorical themes, and so on — my culture provides. Feldman’s chapter is particularly valuable in this context, for what it shows are the deep connections between cultural stories, personal stories, and, ultimately, the interpretive fabric of thought itself. Now, as Feldman points out, the fact of this connection ought not lead us to assume that personal stories are mere artifacts or epiphenomena of cultural or group stories. *That* our personal stories are profoundly conditioned by our cultural worlds goes without saying at this point. *How* they are so conditioned is not nearly so straightforward. The fact is, within the literary region circumscribed by the folk-psychological “canon” that inheres in a given culture, there is often considerable variation in genre, plot structure, theme, and all the rest. By all indications, therefore, there is a good measure of narrative freedom even amidst the constraints that are inevitably posed by culture.

But how much? In what sense, and to what degree, is one “bound” to extant cultural models and to the spirit of the time and place in which they emerge? A corollary question follows. To what extent can one write — and live — *new* narratives, ones that transform or even replace current ones? It should be noted that this last question itself bespeaks a distinctly modern, Western emphasis, one in which change and dynamism in personal life come to be regarded as exemplary and are accorded special value. As such, even the most creative lives, characterized by exactly those elements of change and dynamism just referred to, may nevertheless be seen as exemplars of prevailing cultural models. To take but one example, Piaget is considered by many to be among the most original thinkers

of the century, his genetic epistemology often being deemed nothing short of revolutionary. Following some of what Vonèche has to say, however, it would also appear that Piaget's theoretical framework along with the developmental history that gave rise to this framework are thoroughly enmeshed within a specifiable structure of beliefs, values, and expectations regarding issues ranging from the nature of adolescent *Sturm und Drang* all the way to the ostensible *teloi* of rational thought. As Brockmeier and I suggest in our own chapter, there is thus no separating either the theory or the life in question from the folk-psychological canon. Indeed, even the most revolutionary thinking, even the most revolutionary *living*, maintains a connection not only to the expected and expectable but to prevailing ideas about what good lives are all about.

And yet, changes, often very significant changes, do in fact happen. The classic Western, Feldman tells us, despite its strength and resilience, becomes dispersed into other stories and is in large measure rejected during the Vietnam era. There is also Langellier's story of Rhea and her tattoo, which embodies "not only a personal transformation but also a social and political story of transgression" (Langellier, in this volume, p. 171). And there is the more general fact that what is "canonical" at one time may become decidedly less so in the future. Again, then, how are we to understand the work of the narrative imagination? What are its limits and possibilities? Although we are, without question, "carriers" for the cultural status quo, there clearly remains some room to move. How?

Bruner's chapter is particularly valuable in working through some of these basic questions. "Not only must a narrative be about a sequence of events over time, structured comprehensibly in terms of cultural canonicity", he offers, "it must also contain something that endows it with *exceptionality*" (p.29). In order for the story to be understood, in other words, it must make significant contact with what is already familiar. In order to be interesting, however, it must somehow move beyond the familiar and run counter to expectancy. But not too far: Even in the process of violating expectancy, the need for comprehension remains. "That is to say", writes Bruner, "it must be a violation of the folk-psychologically canonical that is itself canonical" (p. 30). There is a certain conservatism to this perspective. In a sense, Bruner implies, one can stretch the boundaries of the folk-psychological canon but never fully break or exceed them; the gravitational pull of cultural norms, elastic though they may be, is simply too great. Strictly speaking, he is probably right about this. It may nevertheless be worth pushing the issue a bit farther. Might there not be truly non-canonical stories? Is it not the case that there sometimes emerge narratives that exceed those boundaries previously in existence?

I do not wish to make too strong a case for the wholesale invention of new literary forms; the wholly invented is the wholly incomprehensible. Nor is this the time or place for a spirited defense of narrative free will. What I wish to suggest instead, in the form of a possibility rather than a certainty, is that the narrative imagination may in fact be sufficiently “enterprising” as to be able effectively to transcend its cultural moorings. The reason is not particularly mysterious. Within limits, there exists the possibility of “naming” the profound ways in which we, and our stories, are culturally constituted; we ourselves can sometimes identify the very cultural myths, plot structures, and metaphors we live by. And in this very process of identification the space of narrative expression can expand. Jill Ker Conway’s story is a fine example of just this kind of expansion: By virtue of her having become cognizant of the ways in which certain traditional cultural expectations had permeated her existence, the groundwork had been laid for the emergence of “a new, more open and flexible conception of the self as well as a new challenge to the telling of its story” (Freeman & Brockmeier, in this volume, p.91). The reconstruction of the self may thus become an integral moment in the reconstruction of culture.

The rhetorical dimension

Earlier in this chapter, I called attention, via Brockmeier and Bruner especially, to the distinctive temporality involved in autobiographical consciousness and narration: Even as it can plausibly be said that the past gives rise to the present, so too can it be said that present gives rise to the past. “If initially the child was father to the man”, Bruner writes, “now (in autobiography) the man reclaims the role of being father to the child — but this time recapturing the child for the culture by the use of the culture’s theories and stories” (p.28). Of pivotal importance in this context, you will recall, is the distinction between the narrative event and the narrated event, the former belonging to the present, the latter to the past. As Bruner goes on to note, “Most of the ‘present-tense’ aspect of autobiography”, i.e., that aspect which may be tied to the narrative event, “has to do with what students of narrative structure call ‘evaluation’ — the task of placing ... sequential events in terms of a meaningful context” (p.29). And this process of evaluation, he continues, is inseparable from the *rhetorical* dimension of the narrative/identity relationship. “‘What makes the telling justifiable’ is ... a commitment to a certain set of presuppositions about oneself, one’s relation to others, one’s view of the world and one’s place in it” (p.35).

In a very basic sense, the rhetorical dimension is about what is being *done* through narrative, what its function or functions might be, particularly in regard to the relevant “target-audience”, as Vonèche puts it, whether it consists of others or oneself or, most likely, both. So it is that Langellier, for instance, speaks of the “narrative performance” of identity and of “the theoretical significance of approaching identity as a performative struggle over the meanings of experience as discourses navigate the body and the body anchors discourse” (p. 147). Narrative as a “situated performance event”, she goes on to say, “is particularized, embodied, and material” (p. 151); the question of identity, in turn, becomes inseparable from the discrete, socially-situated events within which the performative struggle occurs. For Carbaugh as well, the aim is to treat narrative “as a performance event, as a text produced by a speaker upon a particular occasion” (p. 107). More generally, Carbaugh maintains, “considerations of narrative require cultural and communicative sensibilities... To hear stories, in the first place, is to be situated with a teller in a particular way. To understand the stories being told to us is to know something of the local world the story is about, and which it reconstructs” (p. 123).

With these ideas in mind, it becomes apparent that identity is not only inseparable from local discursive conditions; it is produced, and re-produced anew, via communicative interaction. Turning once more to Bruner, the idea here is that, rather than viewing the self as “locked up inside one person’s subjectivity, as hermetically sealed”, it is more appropriately viewed as “inter-subjective or ‘distributed’ in the same way that one’s knowledge is distributed beyond one’s head to include the friends and colleagues to whom one has access, the notes one has filed, the books one has on one’s shelves” (pp. 34-35). As Harré adds, “each person has a repertoire of autobiographies appropriate for different cultural settings, and most people are skilled at constructing new autobiographies” — and, perhaps, new identities — “for novel occasions” (p. 62). Given this multiplicity, he continues, it follows that “singularity ... of persons ... is not a brute fact about human life, but the result of locally enforced norms” (p. 63). Harré’s notion of the “relational” aspect of identity attributes is relevant here as well.

It is precisely at this point that things can become rather thorny. Locally enforced norms regarding our ostensible singularity notwithstanding, are we irreducibly multiple, such that our identities are as various as our audiences, our psychological needs, our tellings and their rhetorical demands? Or, is there a kind of “larger”, more synoptic narrative that somehow gathers together and encompasses all of the different stories we might tell — a Narrative of narratives,

and an Identity of identities? There is, of course, more. If in fact there is no narration apart from the rhetorical dimension — *something* is being done in the telling — how, if at all, are we think of the issue of truth? Once we recognize the multiple nature of one's repertoire of autobiographies, Harré acknowledges, we also open up “the disparity between what one believes about oneself ... and what is true about oneself, including those beliefs” (p.62). But how are we to discern what is true about oneself? Is it even possible? And how do we begin to identify the rhetorical function(s) of a given act of narration?

Let us consider what Schulster has to say about Wagner in order to flesh out this set of issues. Schulster's main concern is with some notable discrepancies in Wagner's autobiographical accounts, particularly in regard to an alleged vision. Upon examining the relevant narrated events, i.e., what seems to have gone on then and there, at the time of the experiences in question, “we must conclude”, he writes, “that sickness, exhaustion, and loneliness were the primary components of Wagner's La Spezia journey, not some wonderful creative vision as described in *Mein Leben*” (p. 194). The weight of evidence is against the historical truth of the vision, Schulster offers, in favor of narrative truth. The most basic question, then, is: Why did Wagner apparently concoct this transformative vision? Or, to frame the matter in terms of rhetoric, what was being done through this ostensibly fanciful version of his life? Wagner's reading of Schopenhauer undoubtedly factors into the equation, perhaps provoking him to rewrite the earlier experience, to confer new meanings onto the past. Were this all that was going on, there would not be any problem at all. To confer new meanings onto the past is not necessarily to falsify it, but only to situate it within a broader interpretive scheme, one that may have been unavailable at the time of experience. But *inventing* a portion of the past — in this case, the vision of La Spezia — is another matter altogether. Other factors were apparently at work as well. “Wagner invented the vision of La Spezia”, Schulster continues, “to supply evidence to himself and to the world of his emerging identity of Genius/Artist and Master, which were elaborations of his identity of composer, an identity already fairly well in place” (p.211). And then there was Emilie Ritter, the young admirer of the older Master. All of these factors conspired to produce the vision; “it was the sort of creative experience a Master *ought* to have; it was *evidence* of his identity” (p.214).

Schulster's ultimate interpretation of the entire scenario is consistent with what was said earlier regarding the performative aspect of narrative as well as the “distributed” and “relational” nature of self and identity. As he points out, Wagner related different aspects of himself in the contents of his letters in the

service of his different relationships with other persons, be they family, friends, or followers. It is not a question here of Wager's *true* identity, Schulster argues; he, as we, had many. Rather it is a question of which identity is supported by another's relationship with Wagner, which identity or role does Wagner endeavor to present to that person, and what evidence does Wagner provide to support the identity. Now, insofar as the notion of a true identity connotes some sort of absolute selfsameness or perfect "self-coincidence", it makes good sense to reject it. As William James stated long ago (1890/1950), in what remains, for this reader, among the clearest and most compelling renditions of the problem at hand, identity is but a "loosely construed thing", a rough sketch of what might be held in common among the many different things we are. As suggested earlier, it also makes good sense to reject the idea of historical truth — at least if it is taken to refer to the possibility of somehow re-presenting the past "as it was". But don't we learn something significant about Wagner — and, of course, his culture, with its valorization of the creative imagination, its interest in positing "Masters", etc. — through his various self-presentations? As such, might there not still be a place, *some* place, for thinking about who Wagner really was — his "Identity of identities", as I put it earlier? And might there not be some delimited set of interpretive frameworks able to account for the coming-into-being of this identity?

Now that I have raised this problematic set of questions, let me qualify them by turning again briefly to Vonèche's chapter on Piaget. Vonèche's main aim in his chapter is "to show how people use their autobiographies as a form of self-presentation (*Selbstdarstellung*) that varies according to the *target audience* in function of which they organize and re-organize the *plot* of their lives" (p. 220). So far so good: Schulster and Vonèche would seem to be of a piece. As for Vonèche's treatment of Piaget (Piagets?), it is surely in keeping with his aim; for he does well to show how different target-audiences, different relationships to collaborators and colleagues, and so on lead to quite different renditions of Piaget's life and identity. There is, of course, one significant difference between the case of Wagner and that of Piaget. Whereas in the former case there seems to have been a bit of a *lie* involved (which, as an aside, might lead one to speak of historical falsity rather than narrative truth), in the latter case there is no such thing. "In all of his autobiographies", Vonèche notes, "Piaget is both the same and different. The facts are the same. The anecdotes are similar. But the outcome is entirely different" (p.243). At base, in any case, Schulster and Vonèche would still appear to be of a piece in their main lines of argument.

It is in Vonèche's final paragraph that they part company in a big way. By his account, however different Piaget's autobiographies are, there is something highly significant — if not entirely visible — underlying them: "the fear of becoming autistic, the need to belong somewhere, the necessity to keep imagination under check at all times." More to the point still, there is but one conclusion to be reached: "In the end", Vonèche writes, "the fundamental element of all these identities giving rise to different narratives seems to be the fear of madness in a man of bold imagination and wild ideas. Madness was probably looming behind the formidable figure of his neurotic mother. Piaget's entire theory appears thus as a huge defense mechanism against depression and loss" (pp.243-44). So much for the "rhetorical dimension"! And so much for the irreducible multiplicity of narratives and identities. If Vonèche is right, there is one of each; and a psychoanalyst might know them both well. But *is* Vonèche right? Given the account provided, it is difficult to say. We must proceed with caution on this sort of terrain. It could be that Wagner's identity is less plural than Schulster suggests. And it could be that Piaget's identity is more plural than Vonèche suggests. To make matters more difficult still, it should be noted that these very "could be" possibilities are themselves tied to the supposition that we can in fact arrive at some sort of valid answer to the question of how plural identity is. But can we? Is there a reason to even try? Or are these kinds of questions merely the relics of metaphysical dreams?

A good deal of ground has been covered in the present section of this chapter. From Langellier and Carbaugh to Schulster and Vonèche (with help from several others as well), we have moved from the performative moment of narrative all the way to questions about the singularity and unity of identity and narrative alike. What is important to emphasize, however, is that these two problematics are in fact highly related to one another. Just as the notion of narrative performance seeks to move beyond "acts of a self with a fixed, unified, stable, or final essence" (Langellier, p. 151), the emphasis on multiple autobiographical texts seeks to move beyond the presumption that there are singular identities with singular stories to be told about them. As Vonèche has indicated, there *may be* such narratives and identities. But for many of those interested in exploring the rhetorical dimension, it is simply less of a concern. What is important, instead, is to explore what might be called the *conditions of production* — and, one could add, *reception* — within which narratives and identities take shape. This emphasis not only serves to remind us about the intersubjective, communicative, and relational aspects of the narrative/identity pair; it acts as a kind of brake on the desire (frequently my own, I should confess) always to

return from the Many to the One — from multiplicity to singularity, plurality to unity, difference to identity. The rhetorical dimension has thus been of great value in attuning us to the particularities of the relationship between narrative and identity and, in doing so, rooting us more securely in the stuff of experience.

The experiential dimension

The most fundamental challenge at hand, as I see it at any rate, is tied to what I am here calling the *experiential* dimension of the relationship between narrative and identity. The question at hand is straightforward enough: What is psychological experience — we might simply call it *life* — like?

There is a tendency, beginning in strong form in Sartre and continuing on into the work of theorists as different as Michel Foucault and Hayden White, to think of narrative as a kind of imposition — a “fictive” imposition, as it is often put — upon the alleged formlessness and flux and chaos of “life” itself. “We do not live stories”, White (1978) has written, “even if we give our lives meaning by retrospectively casting them in the form of stories” (p. 90). Rather, the suggestion here is that, *really*, we just keep on, now this way, now that. Narratives, from this point of view, therefore, are not only unfaithful to life itself, but they may very well be defensive, fictional strategies for convincing ourselves that our lives do indeed have some semblance of meaning. We must nevertheless ask, again: What do we mean when we speak of “life”? Is it simply a string of experiences — this and then that — or, to return to a set of questions posed earlier, is life itself organized and experienced *narratively*, perhaps in virtue of certain inherent features of being human, living in and through time?

One important qualification is in order in this context. The modern self, MacIntyre (1981) has suggested, may be thought of as a largely “emotivist” self. Simply put, people often do what turns them on at any given moment or period of their lives — hopefully, of course, without doing too much damage to others in the process. Moral commitments are in fact made by the emotivist self, MacIntyre notes, but they are often groundless. As a result, there may be no visible links, no connections, between one state of moral commitment and another and hence no overall pattern. And so the modern self, for quite disturbing reasons, may in fact appear to be little more than a succession of moments, fundamentally unrelated to one another. Consider as well Feldman’s reflections on the “rejection of the national mythic story” in the wake of Vietnam and, how, as a consequence, Americans were in a distinct sense left

“narrativeless”, essentially devoid of that sort of mythopoeic connective tissue without which humans seem to suffer (see Freeman 1998a). Those who call attention to life’s supposed formlessness may therefore be quite right in their proclamations, at least on some level: It can hardly be denied that there are plenty of formless, and relatively pointless, lives. The problem is in presuming that this is the “real” order of things.

When Carbaugh presents his ideas on Blackfoot narrative, it is difficult to avoid concluding that the distinction often made between life and art may be a function of the fact that our lives themselves are rather less art-ful than they could be. “Life” is the realm of the mundane and profane, “art” is the realm of the exceptional and sacred, and, as such, there is for many no plausible bridge to be built between them. One fundamental question that remains to be explored more deeply thus concerns how embedded in narrative life itself is. This is largely the concern of my own chapter on “narrative integrity” with Jens Brockmeier, and it provides only the barest outlines of what is at stake in working through the relevant issues.

Now, alongside the idea that narrative imposes unity and meaning on life, there is also the familiar — and, I believe, problematic — idea that the identity of the self is a function of “linkages” that somehow get made between the discrete episodes of experience: Identity, it is often said, is constructed, out of difference. What this implies, of course, is that the identity of the self is *also* to be regarded as a fictive imposition. The alleged flux and formlessness of experience are thus correlative with the alleged heterogeneity and multiplicity of selfhood; and identity, like narrative, becomes relegated to the status of an imaginary creation, designed essentially to stem the tide our own irreducible otherness.

But might there not be other ways to think about these phenomena? The critique of substantialistic conceptions of identity is well-taken. Strictly speaking, it would appear that there *is* no identity to the self, no condition of permanent selfsameness — not, at least, without bringing something like the *soul* into the picture. And yet, as Harré points out in his chapter, there is nevertheless no denying the singularity of persons: “The norms of our world require that there be one person per body, neither more nor less” (p. 63). Notice the tension here. On the one hand, there are unquestionably problems with the idea of identity, at least if it is taken to imply some sort of substantial permanence. Or, to put the matter in more positive terms, there has emerged the recognition that personal identity is *changeable* — across time, across space, and, more generally, across the various discursive contexts within which identity is negotiated and, on some level, produced. On the other hand, however, with the exception of certain

pathological conditions, there nevertheless remains a sense in which our own singularity is operative. How — if at all — are we to reconcile these two ideas? Can we? Need we? It could be that the “tension” referred to above is here to stay.

According to Flanagan (1996), “the conditions governing personal sameness require not strict identity or absolute sameness but rather that certain relations of psychological continuity and connectedness obtain.” As such, Flanagan continues, “we require that there be narrative connectedness from the first-person point of view, that I be able to tell some sort of coherent story about my life” (p. 65). What we see, therefore, is that narrative, specifically the condition of “narrative connectedness”, paves the way toward a new vision of what is meant by the idea of identity. The relationship at hand is dialectical through and through. Referring again to Flanagan, “the narrative connectedness that obtains is caused in part by active *authorial work* on the agent’s part: by working at integration and working at making one’s plans and projects materialize” (1996, p. 66). Along these rather traditional lines, the author/agent is the source of narrative; it is his or her integrative “work” that binds together what would otherwise be irretrievably dispersed. More radically, however, what we also see is that, on some level, *narrative is itself the source of the self’s identity*. Indeed, might we not see the identity of the self as the unique style that is embodied throughout our stories? Taking this idea one step farther, might we not also see life and literary art as one?

Life and literature

Let me offer some qualifications. I am certainly not suggesting here that life, as most of us live it, is exactly like the books we read. It is most assuredly not like those well-formed works with tidy beginnings, middles, and ends. And even in the case of decidedly messier works, such as those found in much of post-modern literature, authors nevertheless know, to a greater or lesser extent, how their stories will end. We do not. Furthermore, following Carbaugh, Feldman, and others, it is clear that we ourselves draw upon stories, upon prominent cultural narratives or myths, and, consciously or unconsciously, apply them to our own autobiographies. In this sense, we can rightly say that “life imitates art”. But it is no less true, I suggest, that art — in the form of a certain “literariness” — is in a distinct sense built into the fabric of life (Freeman 1998b). Stephen Crites (1971) sums up this issue nicely in a piece called “The Narrative Quality of Experience”. He writes, “life is not, after all, a work of art. An artistic

drama has a coherence and a fullness of articulation that are never reached by our rudimentary drama. But the drama of experience is the crude original of all high drama” (p. 303). Life imitates art, but art grows out of life.

“The way of thinking that narrative cognition invites is *interpretive*”, Feldman reminds us. “It is a form of thought that assigns meaning to particular experiences or events *by placing them in a narrative pattern*” (p. 133). As such, there is no question here whatsoever of explanatory completeness or exhaustiveness, no possibility of a total account. Nor, as Bruner notes, are we speaking here of testable propositions, able to be subjected to discrete procedures of verification. Narrative cognition, Feldman and Bruner suggest, is not to be equated with that sort of cognition which finds its way into science, as ordinarily conceived. Rather, narrative cognition is *poetic* — i.e., characterized by *poiesis*, by the creation of meaning — through and through. We might in fact speak of the poetic dimension not only of the narrative construction of identity, as it takes place in autobiographies and the like, but of experience itself.

In moving into the poetic realm as manifested in the relationship between narrative and identity, we begin to use categories of appraisal that, traditionally, have been less readily tied to social science inquiry. Following Bruner, the relevant categories when considering narrative depictions of identity are those such as “verisimilitude” and “lifelikeness”. We might also add such categories as “capacity to express depth of human feeling” or “ability to convey the utterly contradictory nature of human existence”. In moving into the poetic realm, therefore, we will have opened the way toward a more expansive and serviceable conception of truth as well as a more humane conception of human lives and how they might be approached by those of us who seek to understand them.

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Chapter 8. Kristin Langellier, "You're marked": Breast cancer, tattoo, and the narrative performance of identity". *Deena Metzger as photographed by Hella Hammid*. Copies of the poster and information may be obtained by writing TREE, P.O.Box 186, Topanga, CA 90290.

Chapter 11. Jens Brockmeier, "From the end to the beginning: Retrospective teleology in autobiography". Rembrandt, *An Old Man in an Armchair*, National Gallery, London. Pablo Picasso, *The Sculptor and his Statue*, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Albrecht Dürer, *The Painter's Father*, National Gallery, London. Tintoretto, *Old Man and Boy*. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

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