
Introduction

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF NARRATIVE

The word "narrative" comes from the Indo-European root "gna," meaning both "to tell" and "to know."¹ But knowledge today, writes Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, is no longer principally narrative. In traditional cultures, whose social bonds were created and sustained by custom, narratives could define "what [had] the right to be said and done."² And in the more scientific cultures of high modernity, certain "metanarratives," especially the stories of popular emancipation and the speculative unification of all knowledge, continued to furnish legitimacy and social cohesion. By now, however, even these stories have lost credibility.³ What we often perceive as a loss of meaning amounts, then, to the eclipse of narrative knowledge as such, and its replacement by other forms of cognition, especially technical ones. Correspondingly, it was long the case in many fields of study that "to choose not to tell a story [was] to be more modern."⁴ Summing up the *Zeitgeist's* verdict, one authority declares that "traditional narrative is dead."⁵

Could it be, though, that reports of the death of narrative have been "greatly exaggerated"? The previous two decades have witnessed an unparalleled efflorescence in writings about narrative and efforts to integrate it into a variety of disciplines. Sociologist David Maines announces confidently that in his field, at least, "narrative's moment" has arrived.⁶ While it is true that metanarratives on the order of republicanism or Marxism have gone out of fashion for now, narrative seems alive and well on a more modest scale both in the language of everyday life and in relatively formal discourses such as ethnographic studies or philosophical treatises. Indeed, the overwhelming impression one gets from surveying the "narrative turn" in the human sciences today is that, more than ever before, they have assimilated the idiom of literary criticism in which narrative has always played a very big part.⁷ The more radical elements even want to claim that *everything* is a story, including even mathematics and scientific theories.⁸ If such claims are to be believed, narrative knowledge, far

from fading out, bids fair to monopolize *all* other forms of cognition by converting them to forms of storytelling.

The astonishing "comeback" of narrative seems to have diverse and complex causes, the unearthing of which would require an elaborate story in its own right.⁹ But the articles collected in this volume suggest that some of the following factors may have been behind it. First, there has been a disenchantment with theories, especially in psychology, that portray the self as a mere "point" acted upon by external forces. Narrative, by contrast, emphasizes the active, self-shaping quality of human thought, the power of stories to create and refashion personal identity.¹⁰ Narrative seems to offer a way out of the reification that "mechanistic" models of human behavior may unwittingly impose.

Second, many of the perspectives that narrativists attack (or caricature?) owe something to the longstanding social-scientific project of elaborating a body of authoritative knowledge, more or less on the order of that which prevails in the natural sciences. This sort of project strikes quite a few of our contributors as mistaken, even repressive and imperialistic, in presuming that there could be one set of indisputable truths available to an abstractly conceived "subject" of knowledge. In this case narrative appears to reaffirm the plurality of stories that different cultures and subcultures may tell about themselves. The "personal narrative" current 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. Storytelling becomes for its supporters an act of resistance against a dominant "Cartesian" paradigm of rationality.¹¹

Finally, many of the narrative practitioners represented here have complained that traditional methods, particularly quantitative ones, do not allow them to reconstruct social phenomena in their full richness and complexity.¹² Whether one hopes to understand a cockfight in Bali or the verdicts given by American jurors, one may, so they claim, have to trace out the stories that inform the actions and judgments of the people and institutions under study, for the former "connect the mind to the social world."¹³ Leaving stories out of account would mean renouncing the best clues about why people act as they do, since there are no uninterpreted data. Every phenomenon social scientists investigate arises out of a web of communication that, in turn, depends largely on personal or social narratives.

All three inducements for narrative renewal mentioned above probably owe something to the influence of phenomenology and

hermeneutics in shaping an American tradition of “interpretive” social science.¹⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer’s magisterial *Truth and Method* (published in 1960, and translated into English in 1975), especially, reminded practitioners of the human sciences that the latter are “connected to modes of experience that lie outside science: with the experience of philosophy, of art, and of history itself. These are all modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science.”¹⁵

To evaluate the arguments developed by the theorists represented here, we need to work out a preliminary definition of narrative as well as to specify what narrative is not (if indeed there is anything it is not!). But difficulties arise almost immediately. Since the authors define narrative in so many different ways, we run the risk of biasing the entire inquiry for or against some of them in virtue of the definition we choose. The simplest expedient may be to locate the lowest common denominator of all definitions, the features of narrative that most theorists presumably would regard as indispensable to the intelligibility of their topic.

One such feature of narratives—or stories, as we may also call them—identifies them as forms of discourse that place events in a sequential order with a clear beginning, middle and end.¹⁶ In other words, a narrative is not just a list, nor is it even a series of case studies or vignettes. Moreover, though here one might encounter a demurrer or two, the sequence must “add up” to something; the units so ordered must have an intrinsic, meaningful connection to one another. By this criterion annals and chronicles would not count as full-fledged narratives (or, as Donald Spence terms them, “significant” as opposed to “plain” narratives),¹⁷ because they only tell “what happened” across a stretch of time, without showing the continuities among the events depicted. At least the stronger versions of narrative theory take the next step, claiming that narratives can actually explain, and not merely describe, although the type of explanation they offer would differ from the deductive models standard in natural science.¹⁸

Accordingly, most narrativists do distinguish between theories and narratives, and some (e.g., Philip Abbott) explore the productive tensions between the two. They usually conceive of theories as attempts to capture and elaborate some timeless, essential reality “behind” the world of human events, whereas narratives undertake the more modest task of organizing and rendering meaningful the experiences of the narrator in that world.¹⁹ Another way to approach the issue would be by specifying the “location” of the thinking self. In

theories, the mind is somehow outside of the phenomena to be examined, and is often pictured as solitary. In narrative, there has to be a teller of the story and an audience to hear it, even if the audience should be only the self considered as addressee.²⁰

Finally, narrativists recognize that stories do not simply mirror reality; storytelling inevitably involves selectivity, rearranging of elements, redescription, and simplification. So proponents have struggled to find terms adequate to express the way narratives convey what is true about the world. Some equate them with "paradigms"; another prefers to call them "capsule views of reality"; a third, "interpretive devices"; a fourth, "world views."²¹ The list of similar terms could be extended. In all of them the common thread is the notion that narrative somehow mediates between self and world, either evoking or simply creating order and meaning. What the world or experience might be like "before" narratives construct and order it, i.e. "in itself," proves to be one of the more controversial issues in the literature on narrative, one to which we shall return shortly. But narrativists concur that stories are more than merely idiosyncratic or purely private ruminations. Narratives have transsubjective truth value, however fuzzily defined it might be. In sum, we propose that narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience, and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it.

To locate narratives on a continuum would perhaps suggest the following picture (borrowed loosely from Stephen Crites' article in this volume). Below the threshold of narrative, we have "immediacy" of whatever kind: bare sensations, particular images, disconnected slices of life, "spots of time," all that seems relatively unformed by the active imagination. We might also add literary and historical genres that do not aim to tell a story, but only to offer thematic reflections. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* has been suggested as an example of this sort of writing.²² Beyond narrative would range all those forms of thought that try to identify regularities and patterns in the stories we tell about ourselves. Structuralism and (as noted) mainstream social science both treat narrative accounts as only the first stage in the elaboration of an underlying non-narrative reality.²³

In a sense, then, the narrative approach begins and ends with everyday life: the experiences, speech, purposes, and expectations of agents as they express them in their stories about themselves. Narrative dwells on the "surface" of human affairs, but its proponents

believe that that surface is far more interesting and mysterious than its detractors imagine. Nevertheless, the suspicion remains: can narrative really tell us anything we do not already know? Should we really take seriously the stories people tell, when the latter so often appear self-serving, thoughtless, and shallow? The articles collected in this book may offer some concrete evidence to dispel or confirm such doubts. We have arranged them into three categories, identity, memory, and community, based on the following scheme.

Personal identity, the answer to the riddle of "who" people are, takes shape in the stories we tell about ourselves. Such stories may not necessarily be the ones we tell to others or to the public at large; they are the narratives that we construct as we orient our present choices and actions in light of our imagined futures and the version of our own pasts that fits with these projects. These narratives of identity, which we may entitle "first-order narratives,"²⁴ have particularly interested psychologists and some philosophers, as the specialists most attuned to the phenomena of individual consciousness.

But the narrative approach has stimulated controversy on a different level: the reconstruction of the past, mainly by historians. Traditionally, the writing of history resulted in stories that depicted the adventures of a definite, often collective "subject" (France, the Middle Ages, the Civil War) over a span of time. Again following Carr, we may call these "second-order narratives," since they involve reflections by a (usually) uninvolved spectator upon the doings and stories of participants in the events themselves. Here, as in the first case, we shall find proponents of narrative trying to defend the claim that life—or history—without narrative proves to be chaotic or meaningless.

Finally, narrative has become a favored concept among many practitioners of the human sciences who study collectivities. Individual narratives, and even the historical tales woven by second-order storytellers, figure in the more encompassing process of community-formation and maintenance. The stories that individuals create often strike variations upon a repertoire of socially available narratives that, in turn, legitimize the community and guarantee its continued existence. It is this self-legitimizing and unifying function of narrative which Lyotard invoked in his argument, noted earlier, that knowledge today is no longer principally narrative. We live in an age, he claimed, in which science and social science pretend to renounce storytelling in favor of theory, yet covertly still rely on venerable, discredited meta-narratives that legitimize what they do. Nevertheless, the contributors to our section on community would insist that social solidarity still

requires *some* kind of narratives, even if they are less encompassing than the *grands recits* discussed by Lyotard.

We caution that the groupings we suggest—identity, memory, and community—overlap at many points. The authors whose writings are included here (plus many others not included) recognize that these dimensions of narrative mutually influence and reinforce each other. Thus, their inquiries frequently move from first- to second-order narratives and from thence to the communal, collective aspect of story-making. Nevertheless, each of these facets of narrative has its own peculiar problems and debates, which we shall try to highlight briefly.

MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND COMMUNITY

The philosophy and psychology of narrative identity owe much to semiotics, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and postmodernism in every field.²⁵ The traditional view of the self, which we might conveniently trace back to Descartes, classed the ego as a *res cogitans*, a substance endowed with the power to think and above all to represent a reality different from itself, namely, the *res extensa*, or extended substance, which soon became the domain of the new physics. The Cartesian dichotomy always harbored instability, for it could easily be pushed in either of two directions. One could simply dispense with the ego as a distinctive substance and reduce it to the same “kind of thing” as the remainder of physical reality, treating it as the focal point of external forces acting in lawlike, predictable ways (as in behavioral psychology). Or, one could despair of the power of this thinking substance to represent or “mirror” anything outside of its own categories, and lapse into solipsism. The theorists represented here have hoped to escape from this dilemma altogether by treating personal identity as that which emerges in and through narratives. As Kerby remarks: “the self is not a *thing* in the metaphysical sense of being a substance, residing beneath experience. It is rather . . . a being of semiosis, a sign or symbol functioning within a given semiotic field.”²⁶

On this interpretation of identity, we continuously create and reinforce our sense of self by linking our present plans, actions, and states to both the future (as “project”) and the past, as the already articulated story of our lives to that point. Take, for example, a day in the life of a priest. He may say a Mass, visit the sick, write a letter to his bishop, and conclude his duties by hearing confession. How could any of these activities be rendered meaningful, indeed intelligible, without tacit yet constant reference to the unfolding story of his life, and the much grander story of the Catholic Church? As the Gergens comment,

"one's view of self in a given moment is fundamentally nonsensical unless it can be linked in some fashion with his or her past."²⁷

From the viewpoint of psychology and other activist, interventionist disciplines, narrative theories of identity have the virtue of making the self seem a "work in progress" that can be "revised" as circumstances require. Such theories put the individual in the position of being author of his or her own story, an active shaper of outcomes, rather than a passive object acted upon by external or internal forces. Of course, the process of narrative therapy is never easy or automatic; it requires the gradual shifting away from self-destructive and harmful stories to ones that build on an individual's happier, more confident and competent experiences. In this regard, the narrative approach has considerable attraction for feminists like Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea, who seek to "offer a . . . conception of empowerment which explicitly includes development of self . . . We view the process of overcoming dependency as 'reclaiming one's story.'"²⁸ Some feminists, especially in the "personal narrative" movement referred to previously, also have saluted the narrative approach for its challenge to mainstream epistemology, which privileges "statistical significance, universality, and logical deduction" over "experiential" ways of knowing that are democratically available to all people.²⁹ By the same token, the narrative approach appeals to sociologists such as Gareth Williams, who wish to illuminate the interplay between experience and story by showing how we "reconstruct" our autobiographies under the influence of deeply disruptive events.

Within the "narrative identity" school, we can distinguish two currents of thought, tokens of unresolved philosophical difficulties that also continue to afflict other narrative categories. To oversimplify a bit, the problem is essentially as follows. When we spin narratives that form our personal identity, are we creating order out of chaos, i.e. out of a manifold of disordered impressions, sensations, memories, and inner states? Or does the narrative self somehow correspond to, or perhaps develop and articulate, a pre-narrative identity that is already there "in itself," antecedent to the narrative that constructs it? This obviously Kantian dilemma splits narrativists down the middle. Many of the founders of the narrative movement, such as Frank Kermode, Hayden White and Louis Mink, have defended the first, "weaker" alternative, as does David Novitz, who claims that identities are constructed like works of art. I must, Novitz continues, "organize in a sequential, developmental, and meaningful way what I take to be the brute data of my life."³⁰ He assumes, of

course, that the “brute data” are *not* inherently sequential, developmental, or meaningful.³¹

Other philosophers of narrative identity—for example, Paul Ricoeur, Jerome Bruner, and Anthony Kerby—would admit that the stories we imagine and tell about ourselves are indeed constructed; we do not just “find” them ready-made. But Kerby insists that life itself has an implicit narrative structure. Or, more precisely, it is a pre- or quasi-narrative, rooted in temporality. The individual, in the course of fashioning an identity, elaborates and develops the temporality of experience into a narrative, rather than *imposing* it upon some chaotic, recalcitrant material: “if life has this implicit narrative structure, so too must the understanding of human lives.”³² We may call this the “strong” theory of narrative identity, insofar as its exponents find narrativity to be anchored in the way the world really is, an expression, if not a mirror, of the way human beings *must* experience themselves (i.e., as temporal). The section on identity thus leaves unresolved the query: is self-narrative nothing but an elaborate, wholly contingent creation of the self, or does it manifest the underlying character of the object (human experience *qua* temporality) that it strives to encompass?

While debates over identity have been dominated by metaphysical and empirical models of the self, memory has always been the “home” of narrative. To be sure, events have sometimes been memorialized in other ways—for example, as annals or chronicles—but unquestionably, history as we know it in the West has been narrative history until fairly recently. Yet, ironically, as the narrative approach has gained ground in many of the human sciences, it has been on the defensive on its home terrain, under siege by the “new” history. To grasp the situation of narrative for memory, we need to ask two distinct questions. First, why did it seem “natural” to write about human events as stories in the first place? Second, what factors have conspired to make the story model of rendering events less plausible today than it used to be?

Both Steven Crites and David Carr argue that “the formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative . . . Consciousness grasps its objects in an inherently temporal way . . . Without memory . . . experience would have no coherence at all.”³³ These writers thus adopt the strong version of narrative identity discussed above. Memory, in other words, does not falsify or distort that which is recollected; it merely casts it into the story pattern that its inherent structure warrants. Carr sets about proving that proposition by means of rebuttals of the contrary positions that various narrativists have presented.

Crites, on the other hand, takes the reader back to the experiences of the members of traditional societies. They always recognized two kinds of stories: sacred tales, the "dwelling places" of consciousness that could not be directly related at all, and mundane tales, which took soundings in the sacred tales and imparted to them, so far as possible, an objective form (we would include here myths, epics, scripture, and so forth). Thus, narrative turns out to pervade the experience and self-understanding even of peoples who do not yet write history in the Western sense. We might hypothesize that the discipline of history proper emerged at a time when mundane stories gained a degree of independence from their sacred prototypes.³⁴

Lance Bennett suggests a different way of exhibiting the connection between memory and narrative. His article on the function of storytelling among jurors argues that the latter, lacking formal training in legal procedures and reasoning, resort to stories as interpretive devices. Through storytelling we can "translate our impressions of a distant event into a form that will allow a listener in an immediate situation to grasp its significance."³⁵ Specifically, stories deploy the familiar narrative elements of scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose to reconstruct the past in such a way that jurors can choose the most plausible among several different proposed versions of what happened. So, we might suggest, storytelling is the common person's logic, a practical vademecum in a domain of complex and arcane legal principles. Narrative, as Jerome Bruner has put it, is "ancient and universal"; the "capacity to tell and understand stories," Donald Polkinghorne adds, appears at "an early stage of individual and cultural development."³⁶ In highly differentiated, specialized spheres such as science and law, narrative may indeed be in decline, but it seems to have survived virtually unscathed in the world of everyday life as a way to represent and organize memory.

History, for which time and memory have long been paramount, thus seems far more than a contingent, arbitrary construction. It has in the background deep-seated cognitive principles: the perception of sacred time and its "translation" into mundane stories that we find in many traditional societies, and the interpretation of the past, in practical-political contexts, by means of alternative narratives. In the latter case, we find an explicit link between the writing of history and the procedures for investigating a crime and generating hypotheses about who did what and why. R. G. Collingwood, in *The Idea of History*, studied just such a connection, proposing that historians acted in much the same way as criminologists do (or, we would add, like

Bennett's jurors), arranging and organizing the past in alternative scenarios, choosing the most likely one as the best explanation.³⁷

Gertrude Himmelfarb's influential essay on historiography (reprinted here) would classify the kind of history Collingwood had in mind as the "old history," essentially political in subject matter and narrative in form. It is precisely this older, narrative history that has come under attack from several different quarters, including psychohistory as well as the *Annales* school founded by Fernand Braudel. These currents of "new" history have in common a penchant for analytic studies and a high regard for the contributions that the social sciences, especially psychology, demography, and economics, can make to the study of the past. Himmelfarb insinuates that they also share a "horror of the event": an aversion to treating the past as in some sense the product of conscious, purposive action, the outcome of collective efforts to achieve some identifiable goal such as liberty, constitutional government, or whatever.³⁸ Instead, they want to move beyond the apparently purposive level of events to the underlying causes that have shaped the past—ones that narratives supposedly cannot touch.

In light of what has already been said about identity, we are clearly confronting a new version of the previous claim that human life is not "really" narrative at all, that stories only impose a factitious order and sense on data that cannot, in themselves, support any such meaning. And again in response, the proponent of a "strong" narrative theory would want to insist on the isonomy of first- and second-order narratives. If people experience their lives as stories, then why shouldn't historians, or anyone who hopes to memorialize human affairs, adapt their methods to the kind of object they are studying? Himmelfarb, Roth, and other proponents of the narrative approach argue that narrative history does not abandon the scientific desideratum of explanation; its explanations are simply different from those that prevail in the nomological sciences. Indeed, even that may not be a bold enough claim. Misia Landau, another contributor to this volume, argues that certain natural sciences, like geology and biology, must perforce adopt something like a narrative understanding of their fields, since they display a temporal, sequential structure analogous to (human) history.³⁹

In any case, the narrative theory of memory adds a dimension to our inquiry that needs especially to be emphasized. As historians, social scientists, or (for that matter) prophets and bards weave narratives of the second order—stories that connect the individual mind to the social world—they create artifacts that soon take on a life of their own.

These stories, told and retold, furnish the stock from which individual life narratives can be constructed. In other words, the story of an individual life usually plays off of one or more historically and socially transmitted narratives, which serve as prototypes for the elaboration of personal identity. Narrative theory is thus always implicitly a theory of how communities are formed and maintained, and how individuals are drafted into available social roles.

It would be easy to infer from this communitarian side of narrative theory that it has a bias toward tradition, that it tacitly short-circuits the critical distance that is required for a person to "see through" subtle forms of social control entailed by such stories. And, in fact, some pro-narrative arguments do come close to describing the individual's appropriation of narratives as an uncritical assimilation of self to story. For example, the psychologist Jerome Bruner remarks that "in the end we become the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives . . . We become variants of the culture's canonical forms."⁴⁰ Another narrator, Miller Mair, asserts that stories are "habitations" which so dominate our thinking that we have no other way of knowing the world than through them.⁴¹

The prevailing view, however, among the writers chosen for our community section is quite different. All of them recognize that people have other ways of knowing than through narrative, and that stories themselves, even the "grand," culturally determining ones, invite debate, contestation, and constant reevaluation in light of new facts and experiences. Certainly, narrative theories of community usually describe social bonds in ways that make them seem more profound and pervasive than would, say, utilitarianism or liberal social contract doctrine. But, as will shortly become apparent, narrative social theory does not much resemble the idea of *Gemeinschaft* common in classical German sociology, or even Durkheim's notion of *conscience collective*. In the section on community, the authors included try to display both the power of narrative to generate a sense of common identity and its potential as a critical, emancipatory instrument.

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre advocates a "strong" theory of narrative on both of the levels we have hitherto explored. Narrative is, in his view, constitutive of human identity, not imposed *a posteriori* on a non-narrative thing-in-itself: "stories are lived before being told." Moreover, MacIntyre argues that "narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions."⁴² These two components, identity and memory, interlock in MacIntyre's theory of community. The story

of one's individual life depends on the larger stories of the community to which one belongs. That community, in turn, crystallizes around a stock of common memories revived in stories. To be sure, one could in principle refuse all of these stories and cast oneself in the role of a "citizen of nowhere," though in practice it is not clear that one could ever really achieve freedom from all available narratives and "invent" oneself from scratch. But, in any case, MacIntyre would find any such freely invented identity to be shallow and empty. People "deform" their present relationships by trying to escape the burdens and opportunities of culturally transmitted stories. A young German who declined all responsibility for the Holocaust, or an American who saw no connection between his or her life and the country's history of slavery, would simply overlook the moral significance of their choices for at least some audiences. The point is that our roles in ongoing stories are not always self-chosen. We are recruited into them by virtue of our membership in the community, and we ignore them at our—and others'—peril.

Nevertheless, the narrative traditions that underlie most communities have enough ambiguity and flexibility that they do not limit members to simply acting out preordained roles. One can always contest and argue about the meaning of stories, and try to reinterpret them so as to change policies and behavior.⁴³ MacIntyre explicitly rejects the Burkean idea of traditions as fonts of accumulated wisdom somehow superior to abstract reasoning. People probably always think from within some narrative tradition, but that embeddedness in narratives does not preclude reasoning about what they mean and what ought to be done next, as the conflict-laden history of American Constitutional law clearly shows.

Edward Bruner's article on ethnography offers a case in point about how and why narratives change. Within a few generations the story told by anthropologists about Native Americans evolved dramatically: their past, present, and future were all reinterpreted as tales of cultural resistance and renewal rather than tragedies of cultural decline and eventual assimilation. The facts did not precipitate this shift; rather, one might say, it involved a moral debate about a traditional narrative and its consequences for the lives of Native Americans. The dominant story of assimilation had left behind a residue of experiences that did not quite fit; ethnographers gradually worked up those experiences into an alternative story, one that inserted the situation of indigenous peoples into larger American themes of social justice, community identity, and cultural pluralism.

In turn, the new story about Native Americans has helped usher in a renaissance of Indian cultures, languages, and lore.

Walter Fisher and Phillip Abbott also explicitly reject the dominant dichotomy of reason/individualism versus tradition/community. Fisher, a scholar of speech and communications, recognizes the powerful role stories can play in forging social bonds: "communities are co-constituted through communication transactions in which participants co-author a story that has coherence and fidelity for the life that one would lead."⁴⁴ But he introduces the notion of "narrative rationality" to counter the easy assumption that one story is as good as another, and that choosing among stories—and thus the sources of communal identity—is a matter of subjective preference. We can debate and negotiate narratives on rational and moral grounds as readily as we can, say, formal theories of justice or utility.⁴⁵

Abbott's article, which examines the uses of narrative in various political theories, suggests that the latter often fall back on narrative to illustrate or clarify their meaning. Some poststructuralists might object that stories do far more than merely "illustrate" theories, that they in fact embody an alternative, non-"Archimedean" or non-foundationalist mode of thought.⁴⁶ Although Abbott seems at first to subordinate stories to theories, he too elaborates the various ways in which narratives may work at cross purposes to the intended "point" of the theories. Narrative is not the handmaiden of theory; it may as easily become its foe, since stories are rooted in our everyday life experiences in a way that most theories are not.⁴⁷ A "bad" narrative can undermine a theory that at first appears convincing by making us reject the theory or inducing us to attach a different sense to it than the author desired.

In its most radical form, narrative theory is made to seem capable of completely reconstructing communities, putting them on a new foundation. Environmental philosopher Jim Cheney advances such an argument in regard to "bioregionalism." We have come very far from any sort of conservative, common law-guided notion of community here! Narrative is presented as a revolutionary tool capable of reinventing our whole relationship to the land and our place in it. Cheney's article forces us, in fact, to confront directly a question implicit in nearly all of the essays on narrative assembled here, and a good many others as well: does the narrative approach have any inherent political or ethical content? Does it commit us to certain attitudes vis-à-vis the state, social justice, moral obligation and other such themes that go beyond its ostensible aims? We shall try to answer that question next.

THE POLITICS OF NARRATIVE

Until rather recently, narrative theory has been mainly the province of historians and literary critics. And some of the most distinguished among them believe that narrative does indeed carry ethical and political baggage. Hayden White, for example, insists that "every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats."⁴⁸ He seems to think that moralizing reality involves several distinct moves: imparting meaning to happenings that lack it "in themselves"; postulating an underlying subject, the "social system," that continues over time and accumulates experience; giving "closure" to a series of happenings (we avoid the loaded term "event" here)⁴⁹ as though they were acts in a drama; and generally providing a foundation for law, legality, legitimacy, and authority. By comparing annals and chronicles to narrative history, White can demonstrate that the latter imports into the reconstruction of the past a penchant for order, coherence, and meaning that those other forms of historiography lacked. Narrative history moralizes the past by presenting it as the unfolding story of a subject (a culture, an institution, an idea) that acts and is acted upon. As White reads it, narrative ties in nicely with the modern liberal state and its moral-legal system of authority.

Although its filiations with narrative theory have been complex (more on this to follow), postmodernism's leading intellectuals often seem to share White's doubts about it. Literary critic Robert Scholes, summarizing what he takes to be the postmodernist view, notes that "from this standpoint, traditional narrative structures are perceived as part of a system of psychosocial *dependencies* that inhibit both individual human growth and significant social change . . . Narrativity itself, as we have known it, must be seen as an *opiate* to be renounced in the name of the improvements to come."⁵⁰ David Carr, in the essay included here, confirms that one version of the postmodernist stance toward narrative (associated, for example, with Hayden White) has indeed taken a "dark" and "suspicious" turn, accusing narrativity of offering false consolations and "diversions" from reality, and thus ally itself with power and manipulation.⁵¹

Perhaps this debate over the politics of narrative has taken the course we have described partly because it has focused on the writing of history rather than on the other human sciences. Gertrude Himmel-farb, who clearly wishes to defend the value of the "old," narrative history, agrees with many of the characterizations of it advanced by White. She claims that it is and ought to be predominantly "political,"

that it should connect a series of events chronologically so as to make them tell a story, and that it should have dramatic movement and literary grace. It is quite proper, she believes, for narrative histories to try to capture the meaning of political events, for history does in fact display "reason"; it is the forum in which freedom is achieved, in which people act autonomously to shape their own destinies.⁵²

If narrative history really does have such close affinities with the dominant ideas of reason and freedom in the West, then scholars who reject those ideas have good grounds for mistrusting narrative history as well. Anti-narrativists such as White and Lyotard suspect that narrative history shares many defects with theory (particularly a naive belief in objective knowing and its counterpart, the Cartesian ego)⁵³ but conceals that complicity by virtue of its supposed immediacy and fidelity to lived experience.

However, some poststructuralist writers, including Lisa Disch, Jim Cheney, Barbara Rowland-Serdar, and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, would prefer to emphasize the affinities between narrativity and certain aspects of postmodernism. Cheney, for example, reads the import of much postmodern thought as an invitation to eschew "totalizing," "essentializing" language and its ontological complement, the Cartesian self, in favor of a "situated" and "contextualized" story of particular human communities in particular geographic locales. Even many writers who do not specifically identify themselves as postmodernist have been attracted to narrative theory precisely because of its potentially liberating implications for human conduct. David Novitz, for one, depicts an entire "politics of narrative identity" in which various players, especially the state, vie for control of the stories that tend to produce or reinforce our sense of self and thus affect our ideas about what authority is legitimate. Undermining regimes such as those of Nazi Germany or South Africa under apartheid necessarily required a challenge to the stories that sustained them.

The point is that narrative theory, viewed across disciplines in the way we have tried to present it here, has political relevance, but no unambiguous partisan or ideological allegiances. Nevertheless, as we have already adumbrated, the narrative approach to social and psychological reality appeals especially to those who want to stress the efficacy of human agency, the potential for self-transformation, and the embeddedness of human experience in memory, situation, and tradition, however loosely defined. The anti-narrativists prove to be a diverse lot: behavioral psychologists, Annales historians, psycho-historians, logical positivists, and some postmodernists. They seem to share a certain skepticism about human autonomy; that is, they want

to treat thought, stories, narrative identity as in a sense epiphenomenal or illusory.⁵⁴ For many of them—and we must be cautious about sweeping generalizations—the practitioner of the human sciences either ought to be looking for deeper causes of the things people do (operant conditioning, demographic trends, or whatever), constructing normative theories that keep ethical/political obligation sharply distinct from empirical research into behavior, or else ought to be unmasking the subtle forms of power involved even in allegedly critical, “oppositional” forms of thought, like narrative.

By contrast, narrative theory seems at home in the world of “practical” affairs as Aristotle understood that term.⁵⁵ Theory, for both Plato and Aristotle, required that thinkers distance themselves from the world of human events, taking up a neutral, detached standpoint from which the object of inquiry could be viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*. The theorist’s goal was to grasp the unchanging principles that animated and ordered the social world, the sphere in which mutability, opinion, and interests held sway. But the practical person, the citizen or “statesman,” needed a way to understand and negotiate his social environment that would be less exact than theory, yet more reliable than guesswork or caprice. The prudent citizen would undoubtedly have drawn on narratives in the course of his deliberations—stories such as the ones told by Homer and the tragic dramatists, histories like Thucydides’ work on the Peloponnesian War, and the political speeches that the historian memorializes. Lance Bennett’s essay on the uses of narrative in the courts captures something of the practical, action-guiding quality of stories that we wish to emphasize here.

We note that narratives do not fit very well into the dichotomy of “is” and “ought,” science and ethics, that many of the antinarrativists seem to presuppose.⁵⁶ People tell stories because they need to know who they are and how to behave in a world that is complex and often dangerous. They want to know whom to trust and who is trying to deceive them, why things are done one way and not another. As Gene Outka has pointed out, “our moral lives require narration.”⁵⁷ Grand theories frequently offer little help in immediate, practical matters, especially when (as in the case of something like Annales historiography) they do not even take human autonomy and agency seriously.

In any case, we have descried a subtle, but important split in the ranks of narrativists that has a significant bearing on politics in the widest sense. One wing of the narrative movement follows the postmodern trend in mistrusting any sort of “totalization,” any effort to shape one’s life, identity, or social circumstances into a meaningful

whole. We have already mentioned White, Cheney, and Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea in this context. We might add the names of Laurel Richardson, George Howard, and Hans Kellner to that list of what could perhaps be called anti-foundationalists or pluralists. To them, narrative appeals precisely because it depicts social reality (even the ego) as a collage of stories, perspectives, and values.

A second group, including Kerby, Carr, Crites, MacIntyre, and Edward Bruner, has not abandoned the aspiration toward integral selfhood and community.⁵⁸ As Kerby remarks, there is in many of us a "legitimate though often unconscious desire for unification; it is basic to the human project for generating a meaningful co-existence with others."⁵⁹ This faction worries about the fragmentation and incoherence of contemporary discourse, and discerns in the narrative approach one means of repairing, or at least better understanding, those ruptures in tradition. The postmodern party tends to take a weak or "antifoundationalist" attitude toward the possible objectivity of narrative, while its more traditional opponents tend to adopt a strong, quasi-essentialist view. In short, the narrative approach still lacks the precision and elegance that would be necessary to bridge the political and cultural fissures of our time; but to imagine that it could ever have done so would probably have been utopian.

Nevertheless, there is something encouraging about the collection of articles here. One finds eminent figures from many disciplines, who could be expected to disagree vehemently about conventional political topics, groping their way toward a common language, a shared story of what it is they are doing. If this anthology can hasten the process, it will have more than served its purpose.

NOTES

1. H. White 1984:1; Mancuso and Sarbin 1986:236. Full citations for this and all subsequent notes are supplied in the bibliography at the end of the book.

2. Lyotard 1984:23.

3. Lyotard 1984:37.

4. Kellner 1987:1; Novak 1975:175.

5. Brown 1980:545.

6. Maines 1993:17.

7. Randall 1984:1; Geertz 1973, 1980; Martin 1986:7; Rosaldo 1989:37; Maines 1993; Sewell 1992; Steinmetz 1992.

8. For example, see Howard 1991:190 and Landau 1984:262.

9. Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992:2,5; Geertz 1980:239; Randall 1984; L. Stone 1981:79–91; Mishler 1995:87–88.

10. Mancuso and Sarbin 1986:241–42.

11. Personal narratives loom large in the work of many social scientists, including Davis and Kennedy 1989; M. Gergen 1990; Vizenour 1986; Cuoto 1993; Rosaldo 1989; Personal Narratives Group 1989; Abrams 1991; Bellah et al. 1985; Buker 1987; Scheppele 1989; Haraway 1988; Massaro 1989; Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea 1991; and Wagner-Martin 1994.

12. Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992:2; L. Stone 1981:79; Maines 1993.

13. Bennett 1978:6; Geertz 1973; L. Stone 1981:85.

14. Rabinow and Sullivan 1979.

15. Gadamer 1993:xxii.

16. Novitz 1989:61; J. Bruner 1991; Mancuso and Sarbin 1986:246; Himmelfarb 1987:89; Dray 1986:33; Landau 1984:262; Brockelman 1992:102; Hauerwas et al. 1977:28; L. Stone 1981:74; E. Bruner 1986:141.

17. Spence 1982:291.

18. Roth 1989:449–56; Kellner 1987:15; Kaplan 1986:770; Robinson and Hawpe 1986:115; Ricoeur 1984.

19. Rorty 1989:101–7; Novak 1975:175; Mair 1988:133; J. Bruner 1987:17; Mink 1970.

20. Gergen and Gergen 1984:185.

21. See, respectively, Fisher 1992; Bennett 1978; E. Bruner 1986; Kellner 1987.

22. White 1984:2.

23. Ricoeur 1981:281–82.

24. Carr 1986a:131.

25. Kerby 1986:210. Bear in mind, however, that many postmodernists, especially those influenced by Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan, “reject the fundamental need for the individual to adopt a unified, integrated self-identity”; the “self-identical identity” of persons is illusory, if “all meaning is a ceaseless play of difference” (Moi 1985: 7, 9). See also Rudelic 1993.

26. Kerby 1986:216.
27. Gergen and Gergen 1983:255.
28. Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea 1991:607,612.
29. Abrams 1989:976; Scheppele 1989:2084.
30. Novitz 1989:57.
31. See also Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992:5 and Martin 1986:43.
32. Kerby 1988:236.
33. Crites 1971:294,298.
34. Brooks 1984:xi.
35. Bennett 1978:3.
36. J. Bruner 1987:16; Polkinghorne 1988:112,114.
37. Collingwood 1946:294,298; Bennett and Feldman 1981:41.
38. Himmelfarb 1987:46.
39. See also Harré 1990 and Myers 1990.
40. J. Bruner 1987:15.
41. Mair 1988:125.
42. MacIntyre 1981:197,194.
43. Outka 1980:115.
44. Fisher 1992:214.
45. Hauerwas et al. 1977:30.
46. Disch 1994.
47. See also Mair 1988:133.
48. Mitchell 1981:14.
49. See Mink 1978:147.
50. Cited in Mitchell 1981:206–7.
51. Carr 1986a:120.
52. Himmelfarb 1987:9, 32–33.

53. Disch 1994.
54. Scott 1989:691.
55. Carr 1986a:126–27.
56. Hauerwas et al. 1977:25,30.
57. Outka 1980:114.
58. See Brooks 1984:xii; Novak 1975:175.
59. Kerby 1986:219.