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LIFE IN QUEST OF NARRATIVE

Paul Ricoeur

It has always been known and often repeated that life has something to do with narrative; we speak of a life story to characterize the interval between birth and death. And yet assimilating life to a story in this way is not really obvious; it is a commonplace that must first be submitted to critical doubt. This doubt is the work of all the knowledge acquired in the past few decades concerning narrative, a knowledge which appears to distance narrative from lived experience and to confine it to the region of fiction. We are going, first, to pass through this critical zone in an effort to rethink in some other way this oversimplified and too direct relation between history and life, in such a way that fiction contributes to making life, in the biological sense of the word, a human life. I want to apply to the relation between narrative and life Socrates' maxim that an unexamined life is not worth living.

I shall take as my starting-point, as I cross this zone of criticism, the remark of a commentator: stories are recounted and not lived; life is lived and not recounted. To clarify this relation between living and narrating, I suggest that we first examine the act of narrating itself.

The narrative theory I shall now be discussing is at once very recent, since in its developed form it dates from the Russian and Czech formalists in the twenties and thirties and from the French structuralists of the sixties and seventies. But it is also quite ancient, in that it can be seen to be prefigured in Aristotle's Poetics. It is true that Aristotle recognized only three literary genres: epic, tragedy and comedy. But his analysis was already sufficiently general and formal to allow room for modern transpositions. For my part, I have retained from Aristotle's Poetics the central concept of emplotment, which in Greek is μύθος and which signifies both

fable (in the sense of an imaginary story) and plot (in the sense of a well constructed story). It is this second aspect of Aristotle's μύθος that I am taking as my guide; and it is out of this concept of plot that I hope to draw all of the elements capable of helping me later to reformulate the relation between life and narrative.

What Aristotle calls plot is not a static structure but an operation, an integrating process, which, as I shall try to show later, is completed only in the reader or in the spectator, that is to say, in the living receiver of the narrated story. By integrating process I mean the work of composition which gives a dynamic identity to the story recounted: what is recounted is a particular story, one and complete in itself. It is this structuring process of emplotment that I shall put to the test in the first part of my presentation.

EMPLOTMENT

I shall broadly define the operation of emplotment as a synthesis of heterogeneous elements. Synthesis between what elements? First of all, a synthesis between the events or incidents which are multiple and the story which is unified and complete; from this first point of view, the plot serves to make one story out of the multiple incidents or, if you prefer, transforms the many incidents into one story. In this respect, an event is more than an occurrence, I mean more than something that just happens; it is what contributes to the progress of the narrative as well as to its beginning and to its end. Correlatively, the recounted story is always more than the enumeration, in an order that would be merely serial or successive, of the incidents or events that it organizes into an intelligible whole. The plot, however, is also a synthesis from a second point of view: it organizes together components that are as heterogeneous as unintended circumstances, discoveries, those who perform actions and those who suffer them, chance or planned encounters, interactions between actors ranging from conflict to collaboration, means that are well or poorly adjusted to ends, and finally unintended results; gathering all these factors into a single story makes the plot a totality which can be said to be at once concordant and discordant (this is why I shall speak of discordant concordance or of concordant discordance). We obtain an understanding of this composition by means of the act of following a story; following a story is a very complex operation, guided by our expectations concerning the outcome of the story, expectations that we readjust
as the story moves along, until it coincides with the conclusion. I might note in passing that retelling a story best reveals this synthetic activity at work in composition, to the extent that we are less captivated by the unexpected aspects of the story and more attentive to the way in which it leads to its conclusion. Finally, employment is a synthesis of the heterogeneous in an even more profound sense, one that we shall later use to characterize the temporality specific to all narrative compositions. We could say that there are two sorts of time in every story told: on the one hand, a discrete succession that is open and theoretically indefinite, a series of incidents (for we can always pose the question: and then? and then?); on the other hand, the story told presents another temporal aspect characterized by the integration, culmination and closure owing to which the story receives a particular configuration. In this sense, composing a story is, from the temporal point of view, drawing a configuration out of a succession. We can already guess the importance of this manner of characterizing the story from the temporal point of view inasmuch as, for us, time is both what passes and flows away and, on the other hand, what endures and remains. We shall return to this point later. Let us confine ourselves for the moment to characterizing the narrated story as a temporal totality and the poetic act as the creation of a mediation between time as passage and time as duration. If we may speak of the temporal identity of a story, it must be characterized as something that endures and remains across that which passes and flows away.

From this analysis of the story as the synthesis of the heterogeneous, we can retain three features: the mediation performed by the plot between the multiple incidents and unified story; the primacy of concordance over discordance; and, finally, the competition between succession and configuration.

I should like to supply an epistemological corollary to this thesis concerning employment considered as the synthesis of the heterogeneous. This corollary concerns the kind of intelligibility that should be ascribed to the configuring act. Aristotle did not hesitate to say that every well-told story teaches something; moreover, he said that the story reveals universal aspects of the human condition and that, in this respect, poetry was more philosophical than history, which is too dependent on the anecdotal aspects of life. Whatever may be said about this relation between poetry and history, it is certain that tragedy, epic and comedy, to cite only those genres known to Aristotle, develop a sort of understanding that can be termed narrative understanding and which is much closer to the practical wisdom of moral judgment than to science, or, more generally, to the theoretical use of reason. This can be shown in a very simple way. Ethics as Aristotle conceived it and as it can still be conceived today, speaks abstractly of the relation between virtue and the pursuit of happiness. It is the function of poetry in its narrative and dramatic form, to propose to the imagination and to its mediation various figures that constitute so many thought experiments by which we learn to link the ethical aspects of human conduct and happiness and misfortune. By means of poetry we learn how reversals of fortune result from this or that conduct, as this is constructed by the plot in the narrative. It is due to the familiarity we have with the types of plot received from our culture that we learn to relate virtues, or rather forms of excellence, with happiness or unhappiness. These ‘lessons’ of poetry constitute the ‘universals’ of which Aristotle spoke; but these are universals that are of a lower degree than those of logic and theoretical thought. We must nonetheless speak of understanding but in the sense that Aristotle gave to phronesis (which the latins translated by prudencia). In this sense I am prepared to speak of phrasonic understanding in order to contrast it with theoretical understanding. Narrative belongs to the former and not to the latter.

This epistemological corollary to our analysis of plot has, in its turn, numerous implications for the efforts of contemporary narratology to construct a genuine science of narrative. In my opinion, these enterprises, which are, of course, perfectly legitimate, are themselves justified only to the extent that they simulate a narrative understanding that is always prior to them; by this simulation, they bring to light deep structures unknown to those who recount or follow stories, but which place narratology on the same level of rationality as linguistics and the other sciences of language. To characterize the rationality of contemporary narratology by its power of simulating at a second order of discourse something that we already understood as children, as being a story, is by no means to discredit these modern undertakings, it is simply to situate them precisely in the hierarchy of degrees of knowledge.

I could instead have sought somewhere else than in Aristotle for a more modern model of thought, like that of Kant, for instance, and the relation he establishes in The Critique of Pure
Reason between the schematism and the categories. Just as in Kant the schematism designates the creative center of the categories, and in the categories the principle of the order of the understanding, in the same way employment constitutes the creative center of the narrative and narratology constitutes the rational reconstruction of the rules underlying poetical activity.

In this sense it is a science that includes its own requirements: what it seeks to reconstruct are the logical and semiotic constraints, along with the rules of transformation, which preside over the workings of the narrative. My thesis, therefore, expresses no hostility with respect to narratology; it is limited to saying that narratology is a second-order discourse which is always preceded by a narrative understanding stemming from the creative imagination.

My entire analysis will henceforth be located on the level of this first-order narrative understanding.

Before turning to the question of the relation between the story and life, I should like to consider a second corollary which will set me on the path, precisely, of a reinterpretation of the relation between narrative and life.

There is, I should say, a life of narrative activity which is inscribed in the notion of traditionality characteristic of the narrative schema.

To say that the narrative schema itself has its own history and that this history has all the features of a tradition, is by no means to make an apology for tradition considered as the inert transmission of a lifeless residue. It is, on the contrary, to designate tradition as the living transmission of an innovation which can always be reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic composition. This phenomenon of traditionality is the key to the functioning of narrative models and, consequently, of their identification. The constituting of a tradition indeed depends on the interaction between two factors, innovation and sedimentation. It is to sedimentation that we ascribe the models that constitute, after the fact, the typology of employment which allows us to order the history of literary genres; but we must not lose sight of the fact that these models do not constitute eternal essences but proceed from a sedimented history whose genesis has been obliterated. If sedimentation, however, allows us to identify a work as being, for instance, a tragedy, a novel of education, a social drama or whatever, the identification of a work is never exhausted by that of the models that are sedimented there. It also takes into account the opposite phenomenon of innovation. Why? Because the models, themselves stemming from an earlier innovation, provide a guide for a later experimentation in the narrative domain. The rules change under the pressure of innovation, but they change slowly and even resist change by reason of this process of sedimentation. Innovation thus remains the pole opposite to that of tradition. There is always room for innovation to the extent that what has been produced, and in the ultimate sense in the poiesis of poetry, is always a singular work, this particular work. The rules that constitute a sort of grammar govern the composition of new works, new, that is, before they, in turn, become typical. Each work is an original production, a new being in the realm of discourse. But the opposite is no less true: innovation remains a rule-governed behaviour; the work of imagination does not come out of nowhere. It is tied in one way or another to the models handed down by tradition. But it can enter into a variable relation to these models. The range of solutions is broad indeed between the poles of servile repetition and calculated deviance, passing by way of all the degrees of ordered distortion. Popular tales, myths and traditional narratives in general stick closer to the pole of repetition. This is why they constitute the preferred kingdom for structuralism. But as soon as we go beyond the field of these traditional narratives, deviance wins out over the rule. The contemporary novel, for example, can to a large extent be defined as an anti-novel, for it is the very rules themselves that become the object of new experimentation. Whatever could be said about this or that work, the possibility of deviance is included in the relation between sedimentation and innovation which constitutes tradition. The variations between these poles gives the productive imagination its own historicity and keeps the narrative tradition a living one.

FROM NARRATIVE TO LIFE

We can now attack the paradox we are considering here: stories are recounted, life is lived. An unbridgeable gap seems to separate fiction and life.

To cross this gap, the terms of the paradox must, to my mind, be thoroughly revised.

Let us remain for the moment on the side of the narrative,
hence on that of fiction, and see in what way it leads us back to life. My thesis is here that the process of composition, of configuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader and, under this condition, makes possible the reconfiguration of life by narrative. I should say, more precisely: the sense or the significance of a narrative stems from the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader. The act of reading thus becomes the critical moment of the entire analysis. On it rests the narrative’s capacity to transfigure the experience of the reader.

Allow me to stress the terms I have used here: the world of the reader and the world of the text. To speak of a world of the text is to stress the feature belonging to every literary work of opening before it a horizon of possible experience, a world in which it would be possible to live. A text is not something closed in upon itself, it is the projection of a new universe distinct from that in which we live. To appropriate a work through reading is to unfold the world horizon implicit in it which includes the actions, the characters and the events of the story told. As a result, the reader belongs at once to the work’s horizon of experience in imagination and to that of his or her own real action. The horizon of expectation and the horizon of experience continually confront one another and fuse together. Gadamer speaks in this regard of the ‘fusion of horizons’ essential to the art of understanding a text.

I am well aware that literary criticism is careful to maintain the distinction between the inside of the text and its outside. It considers any exploration of the linguistic universe as outside its range. The analysis of the text extends, then, to the frontiers of the text and forbids any attempt to step outside the text. Here, it seems to me, the distinction between the inside and the outside is a product of the very method of the analysis of texts and does not correspond to the reader’s experience. This opposition results from extending to literature the properties characteristic of the sort of units with which linguistics works: phonemes, lexemes, words; for linguistics, the real world is extra-linguistic. Reality is contained neither in the dictionary nor in grammar. It is precisely this extrapolation from linguistics to poetics that appears to me to invite criticism: the methodological decision, proper to structural analysis, of treating literature in linguistic categories which impose the distinction between inside and outside. From a hermeneutical point of view, that is to say from the point of view of the interpretation of literary experience, a text has an entirely different meaning than the one recognized by structural analysis in its borrowings from linguistics. It is a mediation between man and the world, between man and man, between man and himself; the mediation between man and the world is what we call referentiality; the mediation between men, communicability; the mediation between man and himself, self-understanding. A literary work contains these three dimensions: referentiality, communicability and self-understanding. The hermeneutical problem begins, then, where linguistics leaves off. It attempts to discover new features of referentiality which are not descriptive, features of communicability which are not utilitarian, and features of reflexivity which are not narcissistic, as these are engendered by the literary work. In a word, hermeneutics is placed at the point of intersection of the (internal) configuration of the work and the (external) refiguration of life. In my opinion, all that was stated above concerning the dynamics of configuration proper to literary creation is but a long preparation for understanding the true problem, that of the dynamics of transfiguration proper to the work. In this respect, employment is the common work of the text and the reader. We must follow, accompany configuration and actualize its capacity for being followed if the work is to have, even within the boundaries that are its own, a configuration. Following a narrative is reactualizing the configuring act which gives it its form. It is also the act of reading that accompanies the play between innovation and sedimentation, the play with narrative constraints, with the possibilities of deviation, even the struggle between the novel and the anti-novel. Finally, it is the act of reading which completes the work, transforming it into a guide for reading, with its zones of indeterminacy, its latent wealth of interpretation, its power of being reinterpreted in new ways in new historical contexts.

At this stage of the analysis, we are already able to glimpse how narrative and life can be reconciled with one another, for reading is itself already a way of living in the fictive universe of the work; in this sense, we can already say that stories are recounted but they are also lived in the mode of the imaginary.

We must now readjust the other term of this opposition, what we call life. We must question the erroneous self-evidence according to which life is lived not told.

To this end, I should like to stress the pre-narrative capacity of what we call life. What has to be questioned is the overly simple equation made between life and experience. A life is no more than...
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a biological phenomenon as long as it has not been interpreted. And in interpretation, fiction plays a mediating role. To open the way for this new phase of the analysis, we must underscore the mixture of acting and suffering which constitutes the very fabric of a life. It is this mixture which the narrative attempts to imitate in a creative way. In speaking of Aristotle, we indeed omitted the very definition he gives of the narrative; it is, he says, 'the imitation of an action' mimesis praxeos. We therefore have to look for the points of support that the narrative can find in the living experience of acting and suffering; and that which, in this experience, demands the assistance of narrative and expresses the need for it.

The first point of anchorage that we find for narrative understanding in living experience consists in the very structure of human acting and suffering. In this respect, human life differs widely from animal life, and, with all the more reason, from mineral existence. We understand what action and passion are through our competence to use in a meaningful way the entire network of expressions and concepts that are offered to us by natural languages in order to distinguish between action and mere physical movement and psychophysiological behaviour. In this way, we understand what is signified by project, aim, means, circumstances, and so on. All of these notions taken together constitute the network of what we could term the semantics of action. In this network we find all the components of the synthesis of the heterogeneous. In this respect, our familiarity with the conceptual network of human acting is of the same order as the familiarity we have with the plots of stories that are known to us; it is the same phrnetic understanding which presides over the understanding of action (and of passion) and over that of narrative.

The second point of anchorage that the narrative finds in practical understanding lies in the symbolic resources of the practical field. This feature will decide which aspects of doing, of being-able to do, and of knowing-how-to-do belong to poetic transposition.

If indeed action can be recounted, this is because it is already articulated in signs, rules and norms; it is always symbolically mediated. This feature of action has been heavily underscored by cultural anthropology.

If I speak more specifically of symbolic mediation, this is in order to distinguish among the symbols of a cultural nature those which underline action to the point of constituting its primary meaning, before the autonomous ensembles belonging to speech and writing are separated off from the level of practice. We find these when we discuss the question of ideology and utopia. Today, I shall confine my remarks to what could be termed the implicit or immanent symbolism in opposition to that explicit or autonomous symbolism.

What, for an anthropologist in fact, characterizes the symbolism implicit in action is that it constitutes a context of description for particular actions. In other words, it is in relation to... a given symbolic convention that we can interpret a particular gesture as signifying this or that: the same gesture of raising one's arm can, depending on the context, be understood as a way of saying hello, of hailing a taxi, or of voting. Before they are submitted to interpretation, symbols are the internal interpreters of action. In this way symbolism gives an initial readability to action. It makes action a quasi-text for which symbols provide the rules of signification in terms of which a given conduct can be interpreted.

The third point of anchorage of the narrative in life consists in what could be called the pre-narrative quality of human experience. It is due to this that we are justified in speaking of life as a story in its nascent state, and so of life as an activity and a passion in search of a narrative. The comprehension of action is not restricted to a familiarity with the conceptual network of action, and with its symbolic mediations, it even extends as far as recognizing in the action temporal features which call for narration. It is not by chance or by mistake that we commonly speak of stories that happen to us or of stories in which we are caught up, or simply of the story of a life.

It may well be objected here that our analysis rests on a vicious circle. If all human experience is already mediated by all sorts of symbolic systems, it is also mediated by all sorts of stories that we have heard. How can we then speak of the narrative quality of experience and of a human life as a story in the nascent state, since we have no access to the temporal drama of existence outside of stories recounted about this by people other than ourselves?

To this objection I shall reply with a series of situations, which, in my opinion, compel us to grant to experience as such a virtual narrativity which stems, not from the projection of literature onto life, but which constitutes a genuine demand for narrative. The expression introduced above of pre-narrative structure of experience will serve to characterize these situations.
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Without leaving the sphere of everyday experience, are we not inclined to see in a given chain of episodes in our own life something like stories that have not yet been told, stories that demand to be told, stories that offer points of anchorage for the narrative? Once again, are not stories recounted by definition? This is indisputable when we are speaking of actual stories. But is the notion of a potential story unacceptable?

I shall stop to consider two less common situations in which the expression ‘a story not yet told’ forces itself upon us with surprising strength. The patient who addresses the psychoanalyst brings him the scattered fragments of lived stories, dreams, ‘primal scenes’, conflictual episodes. One can legitimately say with respect to analytical sessions that their aim and their effect is to allow the analysand to draw out of these story-fragments a narrative which would be at once more bearable and more intelligible. This narrative interpretation of psychoanalytic theory implies that the story of a life grows out of stories that have not been recounted and that have been repressed in the direction of actual stories which the subject could take charge of and consider to be constitutive of his personal identity. It is the quest of personal identity which assures the continuity between the potential or virtual story and the explicit story for which we assume responsibility.

There is another situation for which the notion of an untold story seems to be well suited. This is the case of a judge who attempts to understand a defendant by unravelling the skein of plots in which the suspect is entangled. The individual can be said to be ‘tangled up in stories’ which happen to him before any story is recounted. This entanglement then appears as the pre-history of the story told, the beginning of which is chosen by the narrator. The pre-history of the story is what connects it up to a vaster whole and gives it a background. This background is made up of the living imbrication of all lived stories. The stories that are told must then be made to emerge out of this background. And as they emerge, the implied subject also emerges. We can then say: the story answers to the man. The main consequence of this existential analysis of man as being entangled in stories is that narrating is a secondary process grafted on our ‘being-entangled in stories’. Recounting, following, understanding stories is then simply the continuation of these unspoken stories.

From this double analysis, it follows that fiction, in particular narrative fiction, is an irreducible dimension of self-understanding. If it is true that fiction is only completed in life and that life can be understood only through the stories that we tell about it, then an examined life, in the sense of the word as we have borrowed it from Socrates, is a life recounted.

What is life recounted? It is a life in which we find all the basic structures of the narrative mentioned in the first part, and in particular the play between concordance and discordance, which appeared to us to characterize the narrative. This conclusion is in no way paradoxical or surprising. If we open St Augustine's Confessions to Book XI, we discover a description of human time which corresponds entirely to the structure of discordant concordance which Aristotle had discerned several centuries before in poetic composition. Augustine, in this famous treatise on time, sees time as born out of the incessant dissociation between the three aspects of the present—expectation, which he calls the present of the future, memory which he calls the present of the past, and attention which is the present of the present. From this comes the instability of time; and, even more so, its continual dissociation. In this way, Augustine defines time as a distention of the soul, distantio animi. It consists in the permanent contrast between the unstable nature of the human present and the stability of the divine present which includes past, present and future in the unity of a gaze and a creative action.

In this way we are led to place side-by-side and to confront with each other Aristotle's definition of plot and Augustine's definition of time. One could say that in Augustine discordance wins out over concordance: whence the misery of the human condition. And that in Aristotle, concordance wins out over discordance, whence the inestimable value of narrative for putting our temporal experience into order. This opposition, however, should not be pushed too far, since, for Augustine himself, there would be no discordance if we were not stretching, tending towards a unity of intention, as is shown in the simple example he gives of reciting a poem: when I am about to recite the poem, it is wholly present in my mind, then, as I recite it, its parts pass one after the other from the future to the past, transiting by way of the present until, the future having been exhausted, the poet has moved entirely into the past. A totalizing intention must, therefore, preside over the investigation if we are to feel the cruel bite of time, which never ceases to disperse the soul by placing in discordance expectation, memory and attention. So, if in the living experience of
time discordance wins out over concordance, the latter still remains the permanent object of our desire. The opposite can be said about Aristotle. We stated that the narrative is a synthesis of the heterogeneous. But concordance is never found without discordance. Tragedy is a good example in this respect. There is no tragedy without 

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ea, strokes of fate, terrifying and pitiful events, a profound error, hamartia, made up of ignorance and of disdain rather than of meanness. If concordance wins out, then, over discordance, what constitutes narrative is indeed the struggle between them.

Let us apply to ourselves this analysis of the discordant concordance of narrative and the concordant discordance of time. Our life, when then embraced in a single glance, appears to us as the field of a constructive activity, borrowed from narrative understanding, by which we attempt to discover and not simply to impose from outside the narrative identity which constitutes us. I am stressing the expression 'narrative identity' for what we call subjectivity is neither an incoherent series of events nor an immutable substantiality, impervious to evolution. This is precisely the sort of identity which narrative composition alone can create through its dynamism.

This definition of subjectivity in terms of narrative identity has numerous implications. To begin with, it is possible to apply to our self-understanding the play of sedimentation and innovation which we saw at work in every tradition. In the same way, we never cease to reinterpret the narrative identity that constitutes us, in the light of the narratives proposed to us by our culture. In this sense, our self-understanding presents the same features of traditionality as the understanding of a literary work. It is in this way that we learn to become the narrator and the hero of our own story, without actually becoming the author of our own life. We can apply to ourselves the concept of narrative voices which constitute the symphony of great works such as epics, tragedies, dramas and novels. The difference is that, in all these works, it is the author who is disguised as the narrator and who wears the mask of the various characters and, among all of these, the mask of the dominant narrative voice that tells the story we read. We can become our own narrator, in imitation of these narrative voices, without being able to become the author. This is the great difference between life and fiction. In this sense, it is true that life is lived and that stories are told. An unbridgeable difference does remain, but this difference is partially abolished by our power of applying to ourselves the plots that we have received from our culture and of trying on the different roles assumed by the favourite characters of the stories most dear to us. It is therefore by means of the imaginative variations of our own ego that we attempt to obtain a narrative understanding of ourselves, the only kind that escapes the apparent choice between sheer change and absolute identity. Between the two lies narrative identity.

In conclusion, allow me to say that what we call the subject is never given at the start. Or, if it is, it is in danger of being reduced to the narcissistic, egoistic and stingy ego, from which literature, precisely, can free us.

So, what we lose on the side of narcissism, we win back on the side of narrative.

In place of an ego enamoured of itself arises a self instructed by cultural symbols, the first among which are the narratives handed down in our literary tradition. And these narratives give us a unity which is not substantial but narrative.