

Narrative and life

The universality of narrative

When we think of narrative, we usually think of it as art, however modest. We think of it as novels or sagas or folk tales or, at the least, as anecdotes. We speak of a gift for telling stories. But as true as it is that narrative can be an art and that art thrives on narrative, narrative is also something we all engage in, artists and non-artists alike. We make narratives many times a day, every day of our lives. And we start doing so almost from the moment we begin putting words together. As soon as we follow a subject with a verb, there is a good chance we are engaged in narrative discourse. “I fell down,” the child cries, and in the process tells her mother a little narrative, just as I have told in this still unfinished sentence a different, somewhat longer narrative that includes the action of the child’s telling (“‘I fell down,’ the child cries”).

Given the presence of narrative in almost all human discourse, there is little wonder that there are theorists who place it next to language itself as *the* distinctive human trait. Fredric Jameson, for example, writes about the “all-informing process of *narrative*,” which he describes as “the central function or instance of the human mind.”¹ Jean-François Lyotard calls narration “the quintessential form of customary knowledge.”² Whether or not such assertions stand up under scrutiny, it is still the case that we engage in narrative so often and with such unconscious ease that the gift for it would seem to be everyone’s birthright. Perhaps the fullest statement regarding the universality of narrative among humans is the opening to Roland Barthes’s landmark essay on narrative (1966). It is worth quoting at length:

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s *Saint Ursula*), stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms,

narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.³

Barthes is right. There are, of course, narrative *genres* (literary kinds) – the novel, the epic poem, the short story, the saga, the tragedy, the comedy, the farce, the ballad, the western, and so on – in which narrative provides the overall structure. We call them narratives and expect them to tell a story. But if you look at any of the so-called non-narrative genres, like, say, the lyric poem, which is frequently featured as pre-eminently a static form – that is, dominated not by a story line but by a single feeling – you will still find narrative. “Drink to me, onely, with thine eyes,” wrote Ben Jonson in the first line of his “Song: To Celia,” and already we have a micro-narrative brewing – “look at me” – overlaid by another micro-narrative which acts as a metaphor – “drink to me.”

Drink to me, onely, with thine eyes,

And I will pledge with mine;

Or leave a kisse but in the cup,

And Ile not looke for wine.

The thirst, that from the soule doth rise,

Doth aske a drinke diuine:

But might I of IOVE’S Nectar sup,

I would not change for thine.

I sent thee, late, a rosie wreath,

Not so much honoring thee,

As giuing it a hope, that there

It could not withered bee.

But thou thereon didst onely breathe,

And sent’st it backe to mee:

Since when it growes, and smells, I swear,

Not of itself, but thee.

Here you have a poem dedicated to the expression of a powerful feeling, erotic love (threaded with irony and good humor), but the poem as a whole is structured by two narrative situations. The first is a series of micro-narratives, in the conditional mode, involving looking, kissing, and drinking. The second, beginning midway through, tells a more elaborate story of flowers that were sent, breathed on, returned, and now flourish, smelling of his beloved.

Narrative capability shows up in infants some time in their third or fourth year, when they start putting verbs together with nouns.⁴ Its appearance coincides, roughly, with the first memories that are retained by adults of

their infancy, a conjunction that has led some to propose that memory itself is dependent on the capacity for narrative. In other words, we do not have any mental record of who we are until narrative is present as a kind of armature, giving shape to that record. If this is so, then “|o|ur very definition as human beings,” as Peter Brooks has written, “is very much bound up with the stories we tell about our own lives and the world in which we live. We cannot, in our dreams, our daydreams, our ambitious fantasies, avoid the imaginative imposition of form on life.”⁵ The gift of narrative is so pervasive and universal that there are those who strongly suggest that narrative is a “deep structure,” a human capacity genetically hard-wired into our minds in the same way as our capacity for grammar (according to some linguists) is something we are born with.⁶ The novelist Paul Auster once wrote that “A child’s need for stories is as fundamental as his need for food.”⁷ For anyone who has read to a child or taken a child to the movies and watched her rapt attention, it is hard to believe that the appetite for narrative is something we learn rather than something that is built into us through our genes.

Narrative and time

Whatever the final word may be regarding the source of this gift for narrative – whether from nature or from nurture or from some complex combination of the two – the question remains: what does narrative do for us? And the first answer is that it does many things for us, some of which we will go into in later chapters. But if we had to choose one answer above all others, the likeliest is that *narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time*. This would seem to be the fundamental gift of narrative with the greatest range of benefits. And it certainly makes evolutionary sense. As we are the only species on earth with both language and a conscious awareness of the passage of time, it stands to reason that we would have a mechanism for expressing this awareness.

Of course, there are other ways to organize time and to express it. In our own age, the commonest of these is the mechanical timepiece: the clock or watch. But mechanical clocks have been around only since the Middle Ages. Before that, the measurement of time was more proximate than exact. Still, there were then (as there are now and always will be) dependable non-narrative ways of organizing time: the passage of the sun, the phases of the moon, the succession of seasons, and the season cycles that we call years. Like the clock, these modes of organizing time are abstract in the sense that they provide a grid of regular intervals within which we can locate events. Narrative, by contrast, turns this process inside out, *allowing events themselves*

to create the order of time. "I fell down," cries the child and in so doing gives shape to what in clock time would be roughly a second. In effect, the child carves out a piece of time, spanning her collapse and fall to the ground. This is the way time, to quote Paul Ricoeur, becomes "human time": "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence."⁸

If we extend our example just a bit, we can show how much we rely on the free exercise of narrative to shape time according to human priorities:

The child fell down. After a while she got up and ran, until at last, seeing her mother, she burst into tears: "I fell down," she cried. "There, there," said her mother. "That must have hurt."

Here time is comprised of a succession of events that appear as links in a chain: the fall, the getting up, the running, the seeing of her mother, the bursting into tears, what she said, and what her mother said. If one tries to imagine this sequence underscored by integers of clock time (–), one might come up with something like this:

The Child fell down.

After a while she got up and ran,

until at last, seeing her

mother, she burst into tears: "I fell down," she cried.

there," said her mother. "That must have hurt."

The juxtaposition of the two kinds of time makes the difference clear. Clock time, like other forms of abstract or regular time, always relates to itself, so that one speaks in terms of numbers of seconds or their multiples (minutes,

hours) and fractions (nanoseconds). Narrative time, in contrast, relates to events or incidents. And while clock time is necessarily marked off by regular intervals of a certain length, narrative time is not necessarily any length at all. In the short narrative above, for example, we could slow this whole sequence down simply by adding details, and in the process, we would have expanded time.

The child fell down. She sat where she had fallen, her eyes frightened, her lower lip trembling. She rubbed her knee. Was it bleeding? No, but the skin was scraped. Where was her mother? Carefully, she got to her feet and started running . . .

We have not added clock time to what happened. But we have added narrative time. We have added time in the sense that we have added greater complexity of narrative shape to its passage. This complexity is a matter of the accumulation of incident. It is as if we went inside the phrase "After a while she got up and ran" and lingered there to observe a fabric of micro-events. Conversely, we can make narrative time go like the wind:

"There, there," said her mother, "that must have hurt." In the following months, the child fell often. But slowly she acquired confidence and eventually stopped falling altogether. Indeed, as a young woman, the assurance of her gait would command attention whenever she entered a roomful of people – people who would have found it hard to imagine that this was once a little girl who fell down all the time.

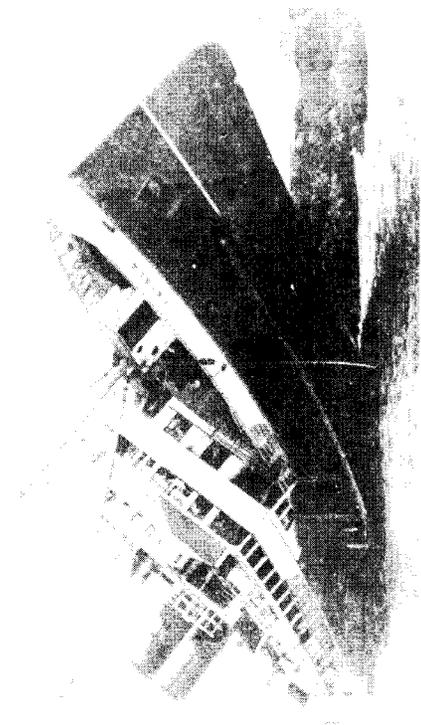
Here a new narrative structure comes into place, stretching over years. Time becomes a sequential reduction of falls and the acquirement of balanced poise, while all the numerous incidents that must have marked the daily life of this child/woman are screened from view. With a few broad strokes time is now structured as the history of an acquired capability.

This gives some idea of how fluid narrative time is. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that this way of expressing time, though in a way the opposite of the many modes of regular, or abstract, time, is rarely kept in strict isolation from regular time. Notice, in the example above, that I used the phrase "In the following months," invoking the thirty-day interval with which we are all familiar. In narrative, then, though it is the incidents that give shape and that dominate our sense of time, the regularity of abstract time, which is also an integral part of all our lives, unavoidably adds its own counterpoint to the time structured by incidents.

Both of these kinds of time have been with us as far back as history can trace. We have always been aware of the recurring cycles of the sun, moon, and seasons, and at the same time we have always been shaping and reshaping time as a succession of events, that is, as narrative.

Narrative perception

Narrative is so much a part of the way we apprehend the world in time that it is virtually built in to the way we see. Filmmaker Brian De Palma put this idea even more strongly: “People don’t see the world before their eyes until it’s put in a narrative mode.”¹⁰ Even when we look at something as static and completely spatial as a picture, narrative consciousness comes into play. Is it possible, when “reading” the following picture, to resist some kind of narrative structuring?



We may not see a full, clear story in abundant detail (a storm arises, a ship founders and runs aground). But we do see more than a ship; we see a ship *wreck*. In other words, included in the present time of the picture is a shadowy sense of time preceding it, and specifically of narrative time — that is, time comprised of a succession of necessary events that leads up to, and accounts for, what we see.

This human tendency to insert narrative time into static, immobile scenes seems almost automatic, like a reflex action. We want to know not just what is there, but also what happened. Artists have often capitalized on this tendency. In the renaissance, it was common to depict a moment in a well-known story from mythology or the Bible. In the painting on page 7 by Rembrandt, we see action in progress. The painting draws on the Old Testament story of Belshazzar’s feast, told in the Book of Daniel (Chapter 5). Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon, arranged a great feast and ordered that the golden vessels be set out and filled with wine. At the height of the feast, when his princes and wives and concubines were drinking from the holy vessels, a divine hand suddenly appeared and wrote on the wall mysterious

words in Hebrew (“Mene mene tekel upharsin”). Belshazzar was struck with fear. Eventually, Daniel was called for to interpret the words, which he did: “Thou art weighed in the balance, and found wanting.” That very night, Babylon fell to Darius, and Belshazzar was slain. In his painting, Rembrandt has caught the climax of the narrative: the moment when Belshazzar, with less than twenty-four hours to live, sees the handwriting on the wall. Everything appears to be in motion, from Belshazzar’s horrified gaze to the wine pouring from the golden vessels as his concubines also gape at the words. We grasp it all in the context of a story in progress.



Rembrandt, *Belshazzar’s Feast*. National Gallery, London.

But even when we don’t already know the specific story depicted in a painting, we can still be tempted to look for a story. We have many narrative templates in our minds and, knowing this, an artist can activate one or another. Looking at the painting below by Michel Garnier, is it even necessary to prompt ourselves to ask what is happening? It would appear, in fact, that we begin right away, in the act of perception itself, to answer this question. We may never know who is being depicted or what specific story they may be a part of. But we do, nonetheless, have narrative formulas stored in our memory that quickly fill in certain elements of the story so

far. That the young woman was playing her instrument is indicated by the fact that she still holds the bow in her right hand. Indeed, that she still holds it tells us that things are happening fast. And we have a very good sense of how the young man, now pulling hard on her dress and looking imploringly, must have been feeling a few moments ago during her performance. We also have an expectation of how the story will develop. But here we have a range of possibilities, just as we do in the middle of any good story. She could successfully fend him off. She might even hit him with her bow and he, ashamed, come to his senses. Then again, she might succumb, either willingly or unwillingly. It is this uncertainty that in part gives the painting so much of its energy.



Michel Garnier, *La douce résistance* (1793). Private collection.

It is also this propensity to narrativize what we see that allows painters to achieve some of their most amusing and most troubling effects. Part (if not all) of the impact of Andrew Wyeth's "Dr. Syn" depends on our immediate effort to situate what we see not just in space but in time as well. Can you put together a narrative here that sufficiently accounts for the picture's anomalies? What, for example, happened to the figure's socks and his trousers? There are no vestiges of them on the floor. Was he not fully

dressed when he sat down? And if not, why not? Or are we dealing with an entity that never went through the process of decay? Is this, rather, the picture of an animated skeleton? And who is Dr. Syn? Certainly much of the effect of this painting lies in the way it arouses and then refuses to satisfy our narrative perceptions. You might call this "narrative jamming."



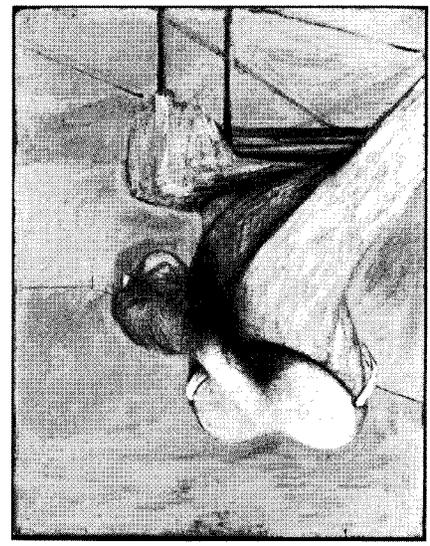
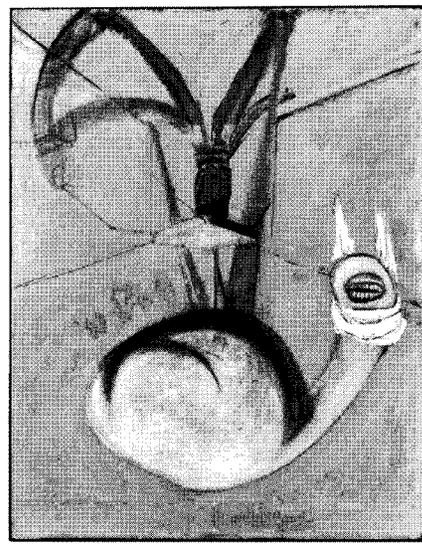
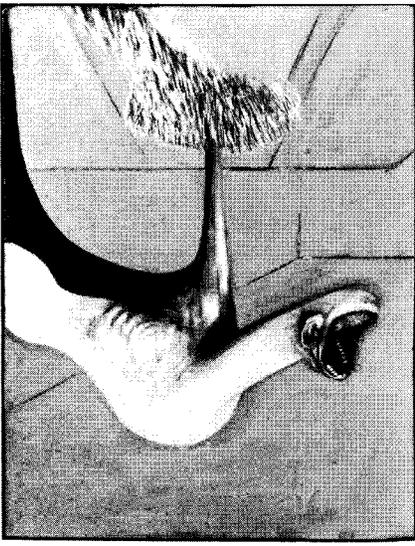
Andrew Wyeth *Dr. Syn* (1981) tempera on panel. Collection of Andrew and Betsy Wyeth © Andrew Wyeth.

More disturbing in the way they jam our narrative response are paintings like Francis Bacon's "Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion" (1944). If we explore how our minds react as we look at these, one of the things we become aware of is the way certain narrative questions arise without leading to any clear understanding of what is going on. There are, for example, clear signs of great pain, but no clear indication of the

causes of the pain or the reasons for it. What tortures are in progress? Are these people (and are they people?) being punished? What did they do? And what are the tables being used for? What is the function of the cloth? Is it a bandage or a blindfold? However shocking the truth may be, we still want to know what on earth is going on. We reflexively try to comprehend the scene by fitting it within a narrative in progress. At the same time, part of the great power of the painting comes from its refusal to satisfy the narrative desire that it arouses. The experience of indeterminacy, of wanting to know and not being allowed to know, is itself a kind of pain and dimly echoes the terrible pain that the pictures express.

To sum up, wherever we look in this world, we seek to grasp what we see not just in space but in time as well. Narrative gives us this understanding; it gives us what could be called the shape of time. Accordingly, our narrative perception stands ready to be activated in order to give us a frame or context for even the most static and uneventful scenes. And without understanding the narrative, we often feel we don't understand what we see. We cannot find the meaning. Meaning and narrative understanding are very closely connected, a point that is paradoxically driven home by both the Wyeth and the Bacon paintings. By jamming our narrative response, they frustrate our desire to get to the meaning of the pictures.

But the connections between narrative and meaning are many, and they will occupy us frequently during the course of this book. Hayden White pointed out in his book *The Content of the Form* that the word "narrative" goes back to the ancient Sanskrit "gna," a root term that means "know," and that it comes down to us through Latin words for both "knowing" ("gnarus") and "telling" ("narro").¹⁰ This etymology catches the two sides of narrative. It is a universal tool for knowing as well as telling, for absorbing knowledge as well as expressing it. This knowledge, moreover, is not necessarily static. Narrative can be, and often is, an instrument that provokes active thinking and helps us work through problems, even as we tell about them or hear them being told. But, finally, it is also important to note that narrative can be used to deliver false information; it can be used to keep us in darkness and even encourage us to do things we should not do. This too must be kept in mind.



Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944). Courtesy of the Tate Gallery and Art Resources, New York.