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On
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There are three points about stories: if told, they like to be heard; if heard, they like to be taken in; and if taken in, they like to be told.

Ciaran Carson, **Fishing For Amber: A Long Story**¹

There has been much talk as we pass into the third millennium that we have reached the end of the story. I am not just referring to the usual millennial fantasies of apocalypse and anarchy, but to a general sentiment of slackening and senselessness. The old Master Narratives – of Judaeo-Christian redemption, Revolutionary Liberation or Enlightenment Progress – are for many no longer engaging Western imagination and belief. And it is in this climate that we find frequent talk of the ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama), coinciding with pronouncements about the ‘end of ideology’ (Bell) and the ‘end of the story’ (Baudrillard; or from a positivist perspective, Hempel).

By contrast, when someone like Walter Benjamin talked about a radical threat to the power of narrativity in our expanding information age, he did not, I believe, mean the end of storytelling *per se*. He was merely signalling the imminent demise of certain forms of remembrance which presupposed age-old traditions of inherited experience, seamlessly transmitted from one generation to the next. This indeed has come to an end. We can hardly deny that the notion of continuous experience, associated with traditional linear narrative, has been fundamentally challenged by current

technologies of the computer and Internet. Nor can we ignore the evidence of a society where hyper-advanced telecommunications and digital data flows have begun replacing the old mnemonic, epistolary and print modes of expression. Our inherited notions of rooted space and time are being profoundly altered by the emerging megapolis of expanding velocity and immediacy – giving rise to what some regard as an increasingly deterritorialised world.²

None of this can be denied. But we can, I believe, question the verdict of some that we have reached, on that account, the end of the story. Storytelling will never end, for there will always be someone to say ‘Tell me a story’, and somebody else who will respond ‘Once upon a time . . .’. To be sure, the old stories are giving way to new ones, more multi-plotted, multi-vocal and multi-media. And these new stories are often, as we know, truncated or parodied to the point of being called micro-narratives or post-narratives. Some are even told backwards, like Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*; or recounted in several simultaneous storylines, like Mike Figgis’s digitally shot film *Timecode*, where four separate feature-length takes occupy the screen throughout, allowing multiple narratives to overlap and criss-cross. But such innovative experiments are still linked to the extended narrative family, as prodigal sons are linked to forebears (*mythos-mimesis*) who keep some lines of communication, however tenuous, open.

So when a group of *nouveaux-romanciers* began to declare in the 1960s and 1970s that ‘the story as such must be obliterated’, I think that they had a very specific notion of the old classic realist novel in mind. One only has to read their moratorium on narrative to see what a restricted vision of storytelling they were targeting:

all the technical elements of the narrative . . . the unconditional adoption of chronological development, linear plots, a regular graph of the emotions, the way each episode tended towards an end, etc. . . . everything aimed at imposing the image of a stable universe, coherent, continuous, univocal • and wholly decipherable.³

Granted. But we didn’t need Parisian literati to tell us this. The Dubliner James Joyce had told us as much decades earlier when he revolutionised the whole storytelling process with daring new experiments in fictional narration. The simple fact that story-forms mutate from age to age does not mean that they disappear. They just change their ‘habitation and their name’. Indeed, one could even claim that the urge of certain literary obituarists to declare the end of the story is, ironically, a continuing sign of the need for traditional narrative closure (what Kermode calls the ‘sense of an ending’). So when someone like Robbe-Grillet claims that ‘novels that contain characters belong well and truly to the past’, it is more likely to be his novels that belong to the past. Just as when Roland Barthes announces that ‘in narrative no-one speaks’, it is Barthes himself who belies his own statement – in a typical performative contradiction – by inventing a narrative about the end of narrative and signing his own authorial name, qua narrator, to this story. (He also presumably collected his royalties and safeguarded the copyright of this same ‘no-one’.)

I do not wish to be facetious, merely to issue a wager that storytelling will survive the suspicions cast upon it by apocalyptic anti-humanists, no less than by positivists like Carl Hempel or structuralists of the *Annales* school who believe that the historical sciences should divest themselves of all narrative

functions in deference to objective norms and codes. The stubborn resistance to narrativity in the name of reductive models of scientism will, I am convinced, soon yield to the awareness that historical truth is as much the property of 'narrative knowledge' as it is of so-called 'objective knowledge'. There is more to the science of history than the methods of empirico-metrics and structural logics ever dreamed of.

In terms of recent controversies, I personally endorse the affirmative view of narrativity advanced by theorists like Ricoeur, Taylor, Rorty, MacIntyre or Nussbaum. Or indeed by more popular authors like Christopher Vogler, author of *The Writer's Journey*, who argues that the advent of cyber-culture should be seen not as a threat to storytelling but as a catalyst for new possibilities of interactive, non-linear narration. The fact is that no matter how much technologies transform our modes of storytelling, people will always 'enjoy going into a story trance and allowing themselves to be led through a tale by a masterful story weaver'.⁴

In this concluding part, then, I would like to throw down the gauntlet and champion the irrepressible art of the story. I propose to do so under five summary headings, each deriving from the earliest attempt by Western philosophy to formulate a model for narrative, namely, Aristotelian poetics. The five headings are as follows: plot (*mythos*), re-creation (*mimesis*), release (*catharsis*), wisdom (*phronesis*), and ethics (*ethos*). I shall take each in turn with a view to retrieving and rethinking these enduring functions of storytelling in the light of contemporary hermeneutic readings. So doing, I shall endeavour to bring the most ancient of theories into critical dialogue with their most cutting-edge counterparts today.

ONE: PLOT (*MYTHOS*)

Every human existence is a life in search of a narrative. This is not simply because it strives to discover a pattern to cope with the experience of chaos and confusion. It is also because each human life is *always already* an implicit story. Our very finitude constitutes us as beings who, to put it baldly, are born at the beginning and die at the end. And this gives a temporal structure to our lives which seek some kind of *significance* in terms of referrals back to our past (memory) and forward to our future (projection). So that we might say that our lives are constantly interpreting themselves – pre-reflectively and pre-consciously – in terms of beginnings, middles and ends (though not necessarily in that order). In short, our existence is already to some extent pre-plotted before we ever consciously seek out a narrative in which to reinscribe our life as life-history.

Aristotle was one of the first philosophers to identify this pre-narrative pattern to the extent that he realised that human existence is a life of 'action' and that action is always conducted *in view of some end* – even if that end is itself. In other words, as human agents we are always prefiguring our world in terms of an inter-active life with others. The work of *mythos*, as defined in the *Poetics*, gives a specific grammar to this life of action by transposing it into (1) a telling; (2) a fable or fantasy; and (3) a crafted structure. All three meanings of *mythos* convey the common function of narrative as *poiesis*: that is, a way of *making* our lives into life-stories. This is always already at work in our everyday existence, but it only becomes explicit when transposed into the poetic genres of tragedy, epic or comedy (the three recognised by Aristotle).

Augustine internalised this narrative structure as an interplay of dispersal and integration within the soul itself. The

former he called *distentio animi*, attributing it to our fallen nature evinced in the scattering of the self over past, present and future. The latter integrating function he ascribed to the countervailing movement of the psyche towards identity over time (*intentio animi*). The resulting drama between these two tendencies results in a tension between discordance and concordance that makes each life a temporal plot in search of an ultimate author – for Augustine, God.

Picking up on this proto-existential description of human plotment and temporality, twentieth-century phenomenologists found different ways of reformulating this narrative drama: Husserl called it the internal time-consciousness of retention and protention; Heidegger the temporal circle of retrieval (*Wiederholung*) and project (*Entwurf*) in the light of our ‘being towards an end’ – namely, our ‘being-towards-death’; Gadamer called it the ‘anticipation of completion’ that organises my existence as a whole; and Ricoeur, the prefigurative ‘synthesis of the heterogeneous’. Our contemporary phenomenology recognises that narrativity is what marks, organises and clarifies temporal experience; and that every historical process is recognised as such to the degree that it can be recounted. A story is made out of events, and the plot (*mythos*) is what mediates between events and the story.⁵

But the most important point to bear in mind is that from the Greek discovery of human life (*bios*) as meaningfully interpreted action (*praxis*) to the most recent descriptions of existence as narrative temporality, there is an abiding recognition that existence is inherently storied. Life is pregnant with stories. It is a nascent plot in search of a midwife. For inside every human being there are lots of little narratives trying to get out. ‘Human life has a determinate form’, as Alasdair MacIntyre explains, ‘the form of a certain kind of story. It is

not just that poems and sagas narrate what happens to men and women, but that in their narrative form poems and sagas capture a form that was already present in the lives which they relate.’⁶

That is why every person’s action can be read as part of an unfolding life-story, and why each life-story cries out to be ‘imitated’, that is, transformed into the story of a life.

TWO: RE-CREATION (*MIMESIS*)

Mimesis may be seen accordingly as an imaginative redescription which captures what Aristotle called the ‘essence’ (*eidos*) of our lives. *Mimesis* is not about idealist escapism or servile realism. It is a pathway to the disclosure of the inherent ‘universals’ of existence that make up human truth (*Poetics* 1451). Far from being a passive copy of reality, *mimesis* re-enacts the real world of action by magnifying its essential traits (1448a). It remakes the world, so to speak, in the light of its potential truths.

The most important thing in our descriptions of the temporality of *mythos* is a latent interweaving of past, present and future (though not necessarily in that order). What distinguishes human action from mere physical movement, we discovered, is that it is always a dynamic synthesis of residual sedimentation and future-oriented goals. Every action is directed towards some result that informs and motivates the agent’s aim in acting. This is what Dilthey and the hermeneutic thinkers meant when they said that ‘life interprets itself’ (*‘das Leben legt sich selber aus’*). And it is because of this directedness, conscious or unconscious, that our lives may be described as a flux of events which combine to form an action which is both cumulative and oriented – two crucial features of any narrative.⁷ But while existence may thus be considered as

pre-narrative, it is not fully narrative until it is re-created in terms of a formal verbal recounting. Until, that is, the tacit pre-plotting of our temporalising-synthesising existence is structurally emplotted. Until implicit *mythos* becomes explicit *poiesis*. This double move of narrative proper involves a second 'patterning' of our already patterned (symbolically mediated) experience.

This is probably what Aristotle meant when he said that poetic narration is the 'imitation of an action' (*mimesis praxeos*). And I think that we could also give a liberal reading here of his claim that poetic insight comes at that point in a narrative when the protagonist 'recognises again' (*anagnorisis*) the inherent direction of his or her existence – call it fate, fortune, destiny, or the 'divinity that shapes our ends' (*Hamlet*). *Mimesis* is 'invention' in the original sense of that term: *invenire* means both to discover and to create, that is, to disclose what is 'already there in the light of what is not yet (but is potentially)'. It is the power, in short, to re-create actual worlds as possible worlds.

This power of mimetic re-creation sustains a connection between fiction and life while also acknowledging their difference. Life can be properly understood only by being retold mimetically through stories. But the act of *mimesis* which enables us to pass from life to life-story introduces a 'gap' (however minimal) between living and recounting. Life is lived, as Ricoeur reminds us, while stories are told. And there is a sense in which the untold life is perhaps less rich than a told one.⁸ Why? Because the recounted life prises open perspectives inaccessible to ordinary perception. It marks a poetic extrapolation of possible worlds which supplement and refashion our referential relations to the life-world existing prior to the act of recounting. Our exposure to new

possibilities of being refigures our everyday being-in-the world. So that when we return from the story-world to the real world, our sensibility is enriched and amplified in important respects. In that sense we may say that *mimesis* involves both a free-play of fiction and a responsibility to real life. It does not force us to make a Yeatsian choice between 'perfection of the life or of the work'.

This brings me, ultimately, to what Ricoeur calls the circle of triple *mimesis*: (1) the *prefiguring* of our life-world as it seeks to be told; (2) the *configuring* of the text in the act of telling; and (3) the *refiguring* of our existence as we return from narrative text to action. This referral of the narrative text back to the life of the author and forward to the life of the reader belies the structuralist maxim that the text relates to nothing but itself. Which is not to deny that life is linguistically mediated; only to say that such mediation always points beyond itself and is not confined to a self-regarding play of signifiers (what Jameson calls the 'prisonhouse of language'). This is why we insist that the act of *mimesis* involves a circular movement from action to text and back again – passing from prefigured experience through narrative recounting back to a refigured life-world.⁹ In short, life is always on the way to narrative, but it does not arrive there until someone hears and tells this life as a story. Which is why the latent prefiguring of everyday existence calls out for a more formal configuring (*mythos-mimesis*) by narrative texts.

In the light of the above reflections, I prefer to translate *mimesis* with Ricoeur and MacIntyre as a kind of creative retelling, thereby avoiding the connotations of servile representation mistakenly associated with the traditional term 'imitation'. The key to *mimesis* resides in a certain 'gap' demarcating the narrated world from the lived one, opened

up by the fact that every narrative is told from a certain point of view and in a certain style and genre. This is especially evident in the case of fiction, where storytelling takes the form of epic, drama, romance, novel or, more recently, such electronic or digital forms as film, video and interactive hypertexts.¹⁰

In all these forms, the gap separating real life from simulated life-likeness is relatively unmistakable. There are, of course, those who argue for a direct 'causal' rapport between media violence and mounting street violence, for example, but I think that most people recognise when they are passing from the real to the imaginary or back again – without the need for formulas like 'once upon a time' to signal the transition. These things are implied. The rules of poetic licence are generally understood by people sitting in a darkening cinema or theatre, opening the pages of a novel in a room, or listening to someone in a café or pub begin a story with the words, 'I tell you no lie . . .' (which in Ireland means the opposite). The bottom line, as the judge in the New York court ruling on Joyce's *Ulysses* said, is that 'no one was ever raped by a book'. To suggest otherwise is not only to underestimate ordinary people's intelligence, but grossly to insult those who experience *real* violence in the *real* world. People just know, and have known since the first palaeolithic caveman said 'I'll tell you a story . . .', that there is a difference between lived and recounted life. And the first civilisation to erode that difference, or our awareness of it, is a civilisation in dire straits.

The question of *mimesis* becomes far more vexed, of course, when it comes to *historical* narratives. But here too, the hiatus between the historical recounting of the past (*historia rerum gestarum*) and the historical past itself (*res gestae*) has almost

always been acknowledged. Even though the past can be reconstructed only through narrative imagination, the 'gap' between reality and representation here is of a qualitatively different kind from that operating in fiction. In history-telling we do not enjoy the same poetic licence or 'willing suspension of disbelief' (as Coleridge put it) that operates in fiction. Historical narratives could not function as history if there were not some basic *veracity*-claims involved. There is at least here a minimal claim to tell the past as it truly was; if historians are to be taken seriously, their accounts must be credible. In other words, historical narratives, unlike fictional ones, hold that their accounts refer to things that actually happened – regardless of how varied and contested the interpretations of what happened may be. The reference can be multiple, split or truncated, but it still sustains a belief in the real events (*genomena*) recounted by the historian. That is why it is so important, for example, to recognise a difference in our attitudes when reading Michelet's historical account of Napoleon and Tolstoy's fictional account in *War and Peace*. (Even though both involve a certain mixing of history and fiction, the former does so as 'imaginative history', the latter as 'historical novel'.) Or to cite a more graphic example, it is vital to observe a distinction between the truth-claims involved in the news story of the Vietcong girl covered in napalm and the tale of the Little Mermaid covered in fish-scales. Once a story is told as history it makes very different claims on the past from those made by fiction.

History and fiction, in sum, both refer to human action, but they do so on the basis of distinct referential claims. Where fiction discloses possible worlds of action, history seeks *grosso modo* to comply with the criteria of evidence common to the general body of science. Ricoeur describes

the different truth-claims involved in history and fiction thus:

In the conventional sense attached to the term 'truth' by the acquaintance with this body of science, only historical knowledge may enunciate its referential claim as a 'truth'-claim. But the very meaning of this truth-claim is itself measured by the limiting network which rules the conventional descriptions of the world. This is why fictional narratives may assert a referential claim of another kind, appropriate to the split reference of poetic discourse. This referential claim is nothing other than the claim to redescribe reality according to the symbolic structures of the fiction.¹¹

This is not, of course, to deny that once history is narrated it already assumes certain techniques of 'telling' and 'retelling' that make it more than a reportage of empirical facts. Even the presumption that the past can be told as it truly happened still contains the gap of the figural 'as'. History-telling is never literal (*pace* positivists or fundamentalists). It is always at least in part *figurative* to the extent that it involves telling according to a certain selection, sequencing, emplotment and perspective. But it does try to be *truthful*. Were this not the case, there would be no way of countering the historical distortions of Holocaust deniers or propagandists. We would be unable to respect our debts of memory, in particular to the forgotten victims of history. History-telling seeks to address the silences of history by giving a voice to the voiceless. 'The meaning of human existence', as Ricoeur rightly observes, 'is not just the power to change or master the world, but also the ability to be remembered and recollected in narrative discourse.'¹² But this controversial question of narrative truth and memory is something which we

shall revisit in section 4 on 'narrative wisdom' (*phronesis*) below.

The mimetic role of narrative, to conclude our present discussion, is never fully absent from *history-telling* even as it is fully present in *fiction-telling*. That is why I am arguing that we shall never reach the end of the story. We shall never arrive at a point, even in our most 'post' of postmodern cultures, where we could credibly declare a moratorium on storytelling. Even postmodern parodies of the narrative imagination like Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* or Beckett's *Imagination Dead Imagine* presuppose the narrative act they are parodying. Think of the titles. Such parodies subvert old modes of telling with alternative ones. The serpent of storytelling may swallow its own tail, but it never disappears altogether.

THREE: RELEASE (CATHARSIS)

Next I want to look at the proposition that stories possess a specifically cathartic power. I mean by this, first, the idea that stories 'alter' us by transporting us to other times and places where we can experience things *otherwise*. This is the power to 'feel what wretches feel', as King Lear put it. To know what it is like to be in someone else's head, shoes or skin. The power, in short, of *vicarious* imagination.

Aristotle defined catharsis as 'purgation by pity and fear'. Let us begin with 'fear' (*phobos*). Aristotle believed that dramatised stories could offer us the freedom to behold all kinds of unpalatable and unliveable events, which by being narrated have some of the harm removed. 'Objects which in themselves we view with pain', he says, 'we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble beasts and of dead animals' (*Poetics* 1448b). We may, he suggests, experience a certain cathartic release

from the tragic sufferings of existence in our role of spectators (anticipating the Kantian notion of ‘disinterestedness’). Why? Because the very contrivance and artifice of *mimesis* detaches us from the action unfolding before us, affording us sufficient distance to grasp the meaning of it all. This distancing or ‘fearful’ aspect of catharsis comes from the gap opened up between the literal and the figural by the art of ‘imitated action’. It provokes a certain ‘awe’ (*phobos*) before the workings of fate. It is what we experience in *Oedipus Rex* when we learn the true meaning of the riddle of the Sphinx, or in *Hamlet* when we register the Prince’s discovery that there is a ‘divinity that shapes our ends’. It is what Stephen Daedalus calls – in his famous account of Aristotelian catharsis in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* – ‘knowledge of the secret cause of things’. Cathartic awe stops us in our tracks, throws us off kilter, deworlds us. The Greeks identified this with the detachment of Olympian deities, enabling us to see through things, however troubling or terrible, to their inner or ultimate meaning.

But that is only half the story. As well as being distanced, we need to be sufficiently *involved* in the action to feel that it matters. Catharsis, as noted, purges us by *pity* as well as fear. It comprises a double attitude of both empathy and detachment. By *pity* (*eleos*) the Greeks understood the ability to suffer with others (*sym-pathēin*). The narrated action of a drama, for example, solicits a mode of sympathy more extensive and resonant than that experienced in ordinary life. And it does so not simply because it enjoys the poetic licence to suspend our ‘normal protective reflexes (which guard us from pain) but also because it amplifies the range of those we might empathise with – reaching beyond family, friends and familiars to all kinds of foreigners. If we read *Oedipus Rex*, we

experience what it is like to be a Greek who murders his father and marries his mother. If we read *Anna Karenina*, we experience the tragic fate of a passionate woman in nineteenth-century Russia. If we read *Scarlet and Black*, we relive the life of an erratic, wilful youth in Napoleonic France. And if we read *The Jaguar* by Ted Hughes, we can even transport ourselves into the skin of a ‘non-rational’ animal. What is impossible in reality is made possible in fiction.

This power of empathy with living things other than ourselves – the stranger the better – is a major test not just of poetic imagination but of ethical sensitivity. And in this regard we might go so far as to say that genocides and atrocities presuppose a *radical failure of narrative imagination*. Jonathan Swift believed this, for instance, when he wrote *A Modest Proposal* with a view to securing understanding of the Irish Famine in his English readers. And one of J. M. Coetzee’s characters, Elizabeth Costello, applies similar arguments to the Holocaust:

The particular horror of the camps, the horror that convinces us that what went on there was a crime against humanity, is not that despite a humanity shared with their victims, the killers treated them like lice. That is too abstract. The horror is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else. They said, ‘It is *they* in those cattle-cars rattling past.’ They did not say, ‘How would it be if it were I in that cattle-car?’ They did not say, ‘It is I who am in that cattle-car.’ They said, ‘It must be the dead who are being burnt today, making the air stink and falling in ash on my cabbages.’ They did not say, ‘How would it be if I were burning?’ They did not say, ‘I am burning, I am falling in ash.’

In other words, concludes Elizabeth Costello,

they closed their hearts. The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another. . . . There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity, and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it . . . there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.¹³

If we possess narrative sympathy – enabling us to see the world from the other’s point of view – we cannot kill. If we do not, we cannot love.

We might say, consequently, that catharsis affords a singular mix of pity and fear whereby we experience the suffering of other beings as if we were them. And it is precisely this double-take of difference and identity – experiencing oneself as another and the other as oneself – that provokes a reversal of our natural attitude to things and opens us to novel ways of seeing and being.

One especially moving example of the cathartic narrator is Helen Bamber, and a major reason for this is that she is an exceptionally ‘good listener’. Bamber’s ability to receive repressed stories and return them to the speakers themselves – and to other listeners and readers – had extraordinary healing results. I have already cited her work of witness in relation to the narratives of Belsen, where she worked as therapist and counsellor after the liberation. But Bamber’s work also extended to Amnesty International and its multiple records of testimony to victims of torture throughout the world. One particularly powerful case, reported in *The Good Listener*, is that of Bill Beaushire, a ‘disappeared’ victim of the Chilean coup

against Allende, who suffered the most appalling treatment, including electrocution and repeated hangings, before his eventual execution. The story of Beaushire transmitted by Bamber ‘was description, but it was also a way of paying heed to memory’, an acknowledgement of the need to have this story ‘connected to the world of those who had not been tortured’. The Beaushire dossier would, thanks to her witness, serve as an indispensable testament to an individual’s otherwise forgotten fate, ‘told in the many voices of those who saw him after he “disappeared”’.¹⁴ As one of the survivors of Chile’s terror remarked, ‘you never give up on your dead . . . we must *acknowledge* the truth, as well as having knowledge of it’. This double duty of admission and cognition is the irremissible task of narrative remembrance.

A final example of cathartic testimony I would like to cite here is that of a survivor of the Armenian massacre. One evening in the summer of 1915 a young Armenian mother hid her baby in a mulberry bush in the mountain village of Kharpert in eastern Turkey. The child, who survived the subsequent slaughter of the village population by Turkish troops, was Michael Hagopian, who eighty years later completed a documentary film called *Voices from the Lake*. The killing of over 1.5 million Armenians is called the ‘silent genocide’ since it has always been denied by the Turkish government. Hagopian spent years researching the film, travelling widely to glean first-hand testimonies and stitching together the events which unfolded in that fateful year. One of the most important pieces of evidence was a series of photographs taken by an American diplomat, posted to Turkey at the time, which he buried on his departure from the country for fear they would be confiscated. Many years later he returned and retrieved the photos, faded and gnawed at the edges, but providing proof

nonetheless of claims that over 10,000 bodies were deposited in the lake just west of Khapert. This reclaiming of buried 'imitations of an action' served as confirmation of Hagopian's story of genocide, verifying the dictum, 'you can kill a people but you cannot silence their voices' (the *Montreal Gazette*, 22 April 2000, p. 10). In allowing these suppressed voices to speak at last after more than eighty years of silence, Hagopian permits a certain working-through of memory, if by no means a cure. And this is crucial to the whole work of catharsis: it is a matter of acknowledging painful truths – through the 'gap' of narrative imitation – rather than some magic potion which miraculously resolves them. Catharsis is a matter of recognition, not remedy.¹⁵

What the stories of people like Beaushire, Hagopian or Srebnik demonstrate is that testimonies may serve sympathetic imagination as powerfully as fictional ones. Whether it is a matter of history or fiction, *mimesis* imitates action in such a way that we can re-present things absent or forgotten. And this narrative function of making absent things present can serve a therapeutic purpose.

FOUR: WISDOM (*PHRONESIS*)

And so we return to the vexed question: what can we know about the world from stories? Is there a truth proper to fiction? And if so, how does this differ from the truth of history, understood as events worked over by certain story structures but retaining a referential claim to the way things actually happened? Presuming that they do indeed differ, as I have been arguing throughout this book, we might then ask how this relates to the curious fact that the word 'history' in English, as in several other languages (for example *Geschichte*, *historia*, *histoire*) means both events and our narrated accounts of

these events. A fact underscored by the canonical definition of *histoire* in the *Dictionnaire universel* as both the 'narration of things as they happened' and a 'fabulous but credible story made up by an author'.¹⁶

My basic view is that however historical and fictional narratives relate to each other, there is a kind of understanding specific to narrativity in general and that this corresponds closely to what Aristotle called *phronesis* – namely, a form of practical wisdom capable of respecting the singularity of situations as well as the nascent universality of values aimed at by human actions. This particular kind of 'phronetic' understanding results from a certain *overlapping* of history and story. It acknowledges that there is always a certain fictionality to our representing history 'as if' we were actually there in the past to experience it (which in reality we weren't). And, by the same token, it recognises a certain historical character to fictional narratives – for example the fact that most stories are recounted in the *past tense* and describe characters and events as though they were *real*. As Aristotle put it, for narrative to work what seems impossible must be made credible (*Poetics* 1460a 26–7). Which is perhaps why even the most inhuman monsters in science-fiction narratives must bear some resemblance to historically life-like beings if they are to be recognised or to command our interest. As already noted, for example, the extra-terrestrials in the *Alien* series have organs, mouths and tails, and even the AI cyber-machine in *2001: A Space Odyssey* carries a human name, Hal, and speaks with a human voice. The question of *literary belief* is absolutely crucial to the working of narrative; for the narrator makes a 'secondary world', and once we enter it we make believe that what is narrated is 'true' in so far as it accords with the laws of that world. 'You believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The

moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed.'¹⁷

It is this curious criss-crossing of narrative functions which allows (a) for fiction to portray the 'essential' truths of life that Aristotle speaks of, and (b) for history to portray a credible sense of particularity. But while confirming this interweaving of fiction and history on the arc of narrative, I would equally insist on identifying their different locations on this arc – for example, the former clearly gravitates towards the pole of the 'imaginary', the latter towards that of the 'real'. And I would insist, moreover, that the great majority of readers, including young children, know how to make this primordial distinction.¹⁸ The story of the Frog-King is possible only, as Tolkien reminds us, because we know that frogs are not men and that princesses do not marry them in the real world of history!

There are devil's advocates galore, of course, when it comes to narrative truth. Let me briefly rehearse a number of them by way of clarifying my own position. I have already cited certain constructivists, like Schafer in psychotherapy or Hayden White in history, who espouse a position of pragmatic relativism. Narratives, on this account, are deemed pure linguistic functions with no reliable reference to any truth beyond themselves. They involve a self-referential play of signifiers, spliced together in an intra-textual web.¹⁹ Espousing a post-modern position of Irony, White will admit that this view tends to erode

all belief in positive political actions. In its apprehension of the essential folly or absurdity of the human condition, it tends to engender belief in the 'madness' of civilisation itself

and to inspire a Mandarin-like disdain for those seeking to grasp the nature of social reality in either science or art.²⁰

White basically argues that because all narrated history is inevitably mediated by linguistic processes of emplotment, explication and ideology, we are somehow obliged to embrace an 'irreducible relativism of knowledge'. And tracing the evolution of the relativist-idealist philosophy of history – from Hegel, through Nietzsche, to Croce, Gentile and beyond – White concludes that historiography culminates today in a sophisticated version of the 'Ironic condition'. The best we can do is trade in historical truth for pragmatic 'effectiveness'. A historical account is right if it works.²¹

In response to this radical indeterminism I would reply that the body of ascertainable evidence pertaining to a historical event deeply determines our ultimate interpretation. 'Reality must shine through', as Friedlander insists in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 'even if indirectly'. And in reply to White's apologist plea for a 'new voice' to bear witness to past crimes, Friedlander rightly retorts that 'it is the reality and the significance of . . . catastrophies that generate the search for a new voice and not the use of a specific voice which constructs the significance of these events'.²² We can, in short, readily accept that narrative is a world-making as well as a world-disclosing process – whose results never reach the exactitude of an algorithm or syllogism – without thereby succumbing to linguistic relativism. The fact that we acknowledge the narrative function of 'as if' in all fictional stories, and of 'as' in all histories, does not mean that we must abandon all referential claims to reality.¶

I would suggest, all things considered, that every narrative history be subject to both the external criteria of evidence and

the internal criteria of linguistic/genre appropriateness (for example one doesn't portray Auschwitz in a tourist commercial for rural Poland). For if an appropriate balance is not struck here, it is difficult to avoid the extremes of positivism or relativism, both of which threaten the legitimacy of narrative witness. Moreover, I would insist that in addition to the epistemological criteria for evaluating rival accounts of history – accounts more approximate than exact – it is necessary to add ethical ones, that is, to serve justice as well as truth. We need to invoke as many solid criteria as possible – linguistic, scientific and moral – if we are to be able to say that one historical account is more 'real' or 'true' or 'just' than another, that one particular revision of history is more legitimate than its contrary. And we should be able to say that.

The position of extreme postmodern irony is deftly parodied by the novelist Julian Barnes in *A History of the World in 10 and a Half Chapters*. The following citations typify his subtly sardonic reasoning. 'History isn't what happened', he writes.

History is just what historians tell us. There was a pattern, a plan, a movement, expansion, the march of democracy; it is a tapestry, a flow of events, a complex narrative, connected, explicable. One good story leads to another. First it was kings and archbishops with some offstage divine tinkering, then it was the march of ideas and the movements of masses, then little local events which mean something bigger, but all the time it's connections, progress, meaning, this led to this, this happened because of this. And we, the readers of history, the sufferers from history, we scan the pattern for hopeful conclusions, for the way ahead. And we cling to history as a series of salon pictures, conversation pieces whose

participants we can easily reimagine back into life, when all the time it's more like a multi-media collage.

Barnes terminates his *argumentum ad absurdum* on this sobering note:

The history of the world? Just voices echoing in the dark; images that burn for a few centuries and then fade; stories, old stories that sometimes seem to overlap; strange links, impertinent connections . . . We think we know who we are, though we don't quite know why we are here, or how long we shall be forced to stay. And while we fret and writhe in bandaged uncertainty we fabricate. We make up a story to cover the facts we don't know or can't accept; we keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them. Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabrication; we call it history.²³

But fabrications are not enough. Not when it comes to the history of individual lives nor indeed that of collective events. Would we be happy to accept, for instance, that retelling the horror of Auschwitz or Srebrenice is a mere exercise in fabrication? Surely not. And that is why I have been arguing here that to admit we cannot narrate the past with absolute certainty does not mean endorsing the arbitrariness of every narrative. The tendency to carve an unbridgeable gulf between empirical chronicles and fantastic stories is, I believe, an error; for in doing so we forfeit any way of crossing from one to the other. The error is, curiously, shared by relativists and positivists (though for opposite reasons): the relativists claim that the only criteria for interpreting the historical past are rhetorical; while the positivists hold that any implication of narrative in the practice of historical reporting is a distortion of the 'facts'. Both positions nonetheless deny

the links between narrative and real life, and both are, I believe, untenable.

It is oddly telling that these two arguments have been used by negationists in the death-camps controversy. While some Holocaust deniers argue that the history of the gas chambers is just 'one narrative amongst others', enforced as 'official history' by the Allies, others, including Irving and Faurisson, base their denials on the conviction that there are insufficient 'objective facts' to prove it. The latter do not see themselves as relativistic irrationalists – as Deborah Lipstadt and others charge – but as the very opposite: uncompromising rationalists compelled to dismiss the history of the Holocaust as a 'myth' with no basis in fact!²⁴ Far from dismissing science, these revisionists claim that the problem with Holocaust evidence is that it is not scientific enough! Such evidence cannot, they insist, be unequivocally verified as empirical history.

To counter negationism effectively, I believe that the Holocaust needs to be told as both history and story. Dogmatic appeals to 'pure facts' are not sufficient when it comes to historical testimony, whether such appeals come from positivists or revisionists. The best way of respecting historical memory against revisionism is, I repeat, to combine the most effective forms of narrative witness with the most objective forms of archival, forensic and empirical evidence. For truth is not the sole prerogative of the so-called exact sciences. There is also a truth, with its corresponding understanding, that we may properly call 'narrative'. We need both.

This whole question of testimonial truth has, I would argue, been dramatically highlighted by recent tribunals on the Holocaust controversy. I believe that Judge Charles Gray was absolutely correct, for example, in his High Court ruling

in London (April 2000) that David Irving was not a 'historian' but someone who 'misrepresented and distorted' historical evidence and sought to 'obliterate from memory the [depths] humanity reached'. Irving and his revisionist allies do seek to 'whitewash the most heinous crime in human history'. And it must be possible to state this without reservation. But not by appealing solely to some absolute scientific criterion of 'fact'. It is not because history is informed to a greater or lesser degree by storytelling that it is condemned to untruth. This is why I fully endorse here the view of the French historian Pierre Vidal-Nacquet, when he says that we can acknowledge that history is invariably mediated through narrative and at the same time affirm that there is something irreducible which, willy-nilly, we 'still call reality'. Without some referential claim to 'reality', however indirect, it would seem that we would have no justification at all for distinguishing between history and fiction.²⁵ As Julian Barnes writes, in response to his own parody of historical relativism cited above,

We all know objective truth is not obtainable . . . but we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable; or we must believe that it is 99 per cent obtainable; or if we can't believe this we must believe that 43 per cent objective truth is better than 41 per cent. We must do so because if we don't we're lost, we fall into beguiling relativity, we value one liar's version as much as another liar's, we throw up our hands at the puzzle of it all, we admit that the victor has the right not just to the spoils but also to the truth.

(p. 244)

Let me conclude by stating that what narrative promises those of us concerned with historical truth is a form of

understanding which is neither absolute nor relative, but something in between. It is what Aristotle called *phronesis*, in contrast to the mere chronicling of facts or the pure abstraction of scientific *theoria*. It is closer to art than science; or, if you prefer, to a human science than to an exact one.²⁶ Like the architect's ruler, it is approximative but committed to lived experience. It is, perhaps, what Shakespeare was hinting at in *A Winter's Tale* when he spoke of 'an art lawful as eating'. The point is not to deny the role of storytelling in history but to recognise that its function here is different from its function in fiction. I leave the last word on the matter to Primo Levi, who speaks for those forbidden to tell their story:

The need to tell our story to 'the rest', to make 'the rest' participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competition with our other elementary needs.²⁷

In such cases, storytelling is indeed an art as lawful, and as vital, as eating.

FIVE: ETHICS (*ETHOS*)

I shall end this book with some reflections on the *ethical* role of storytelling. The most basic point to recall here is, I think, that stories make possible the ethical sharing of a common world with others in that they are invariably a mode of discourse. Every act of storytelling involves someone (a teller) telling something (a story) to someone (a listener) about something (a real or imaginary world).

Different approaches to narrative emphasise one or other of these roles, sometimes to the point of exclusivity. Romantic idealists and existentialists often overstress the intentional role of the 'teller', structuralists the linguistic workings of

the 'story' itself, post-structuralists the receptive role of the 'reader', and materialists and realists the referential role of the 'world'. But the most judicious approach, I would argue, is that of a critical hermeneutics which holds all four coordinates of the narrative process in balance.

This allows us to recognise not only the highly complex workings of textual play, but also the referential world of action from which the text derives and to which it ultimately returns. The acknowledgement of a two-way passage from action to text and back again encourages us to recognise the indispensable role of human agency. This role is multiple, relating as it does to the agent as author, actor and reader. So that when we engage with a story we are simultaneously aware of a narrator (telling the story), narrated characters (acting in the story) and a narrative interpreter (receiving the story and relating it back to a life-world of action and suffering).

Without this interplay of agency I believe that we would no longer possess that sense of narrative identity which provides us with a particular experience of *selfhood* indispensable to any kind of moral responsibility.²⁸ Every moral agent must, after all, have some sense of self-identity which perdures over a lifetime of past, present and future – as well as over a communal history of predecessors, contemporaries and successors – if it is to be capable of making and keeping promises. This sense of selfhood, which MacIntyre calls the 'narrative unity of a life', ultimately derives from the question: Who are you? In other words, our life becomes an answer to the question 'who?' – usually addressed to us by another – in so far as we tell our life-story to ourselves and to others. This telling furnishes each of us with a sense of being a 'subject' capable of acting and committing ourselves to others.

Now, it is this very claim to narrative selfhood which an

overemphasising of textual indeterminacy and anonymity challenges. But the stakes are high. With the proposed obliteration of 'the experiencing, acting subject' the very idea of taking action to change the world is jeopardised.²⁹ And the old question: *what is to be done?* goes unanswered. Against this scenario of political paralysis I reply that storytelling is intrinsically interactive; and that apocalyptic pronouncements to the contrary, suggesting that we are assisting at the 'end of storytelling', do not consider the full consequences of their claims.

A model of narrative selfhood can, I propose, respond to anti-humanist suspicions of subjectivity while preserving a significant notion of the ethical-political subject. The best response to this crisis of self is not, I believe, to revive some foundationalist notion of the person as substance, cogito or ego. Apologetics is no answer. It is foolhardy to deny the legitimacy of many postmodern critiques of the essentialist subject. A far more appropriate strategy, I suggest, is to be found in a philosophical model of narrative which seeks to furnish an alternative model of self-identity. Namely, the narrative identity of a person, presupposed by the designation of a proper name, and sustained by the conviction that it is the same subject who perdures through its diverse acts and words between birth and death. The story told by a self about itself tells about the action of the 'who' in question: and the identity of this 'who' is a narrative one. This is what Ricoeur calls an *ipse-self* of process and promise, in contrast to a *fixed idem-self*, which responds only to the question 'what?'.³⁰ In sum, I would wager that no matter how cyber, digital or intergalactic our world becomes, there will always be human selves to recite and receive stories. And these narrative selves will always be capable of ethically responsible action.

The most convincing argument I have come across to date against the ethical character of narratives is Langer's claim that many Holocaust witnesses are split or 'diminished' selves immune to the moral criteria of 'action and evaluation'. His reasoning, touched on earlier, is that the testimonies of these survivors often bespeak shattered identities 'trying to come to terms with memories of the need to act and the simultaneous inability to do so that continue to haunt [them] today'. And because this need to act issued from an agent 'who was never in control of the consequences, the ensuing drama resists all effort at interpretation using traditional moral expectations'. We are left, he surmises, 'with a series of personal histories beyond judgment and evaluation'.³¹ But the problem with Langer's refusal of a moral function to narrative memories of the Holocaust is that he risks, despite himself, condemning the survivors to the condition of a permanently 'disunited' self, which is exactly what, by his own account, the Nazis themselves tried to achieve. He thus undermines his own argument, it seems to me, when he concedes that the witness's 'diminished self' is a symptom of the 'psychological consequences of the Nazi strategy to fragment identity by allying it with disunity instead of community'.³² To insist on seeing Holocaust testimonies in an a-moral light might then, paradoxically, be doing the Nazis' work for them. Thus while Langer duly reminds us of the limits and difficulties of narration, especially in the Holocaust context, he does not, I believe, disprove the ethical legitimacy of continuing to tell the story in spite of all. Nor, I suspect, would he want to.

Storytelling is, of course, something we participate in (as actors) as well as something we do (as agents). We are subject to narrative as well as being subjects of narrative. We are made by

stories before we ever get around to making our own. Which is what makes each human existence a fabric stitched from stories heard and told. As storytellers and story-followers we are born into a certain intersubjective historicity which we inherit along with our language, ancestry and genetic code. 'We belong-to history before telling stories or writing histories. The historicity proper to story-telling and history-writing is encompassed within the reality of history.'³³ Moreover, it is because of our belonging to history as storytellers and story-followers that we are interested by stories – in addition to being merely informed by facts. History is always told with specific 'interests' in mind, as Habermas observes, the first of which is the 'interest' in communication. This interestedness is essentially ethical in that what we consider *communicable* and *memorable* is also what we consider *valuable*. What is most worthy of being preserved in memory is precisely those 'values which ruled the individual actions, the life of the institutions, and the social struggles of the past'.³⁴ It is with just such an interest in intersubjective sympathy in mind that Richard Rorty has recently argued for a society inspired by narrative imagination rather than doctrinal sermons or abstract treatises.

In a moral world based on what Kundera calls the 'wisdom of the novel' moral comparisons and judgements would be made with the help of proper names rather than general terms or general principles. A society which took its moral vocabulary from novels rather than from ontico-theological or ontico-moral treatises would . . . ask itself what we can do so as to get along with each other, how we can arrange things so as to be comfortable with one another, how institutions can be changed so that everyone's right to be understood has a better chance of being gratified.³⁵

Indeed, Rorty goes so far as to suggest that narratives not only help to humanise aliens, strangers and scapegoats – as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did, for example, regarding white prejudices against blacks – but also to make each one of us into an 'agent of love' sensitive to the particular details of others' pain and humiliation.³⁶

Storytelling, we may conclude, then, is never neutral. Every narrative bears some evaluative charge regarding the events narrated and the actors featured in the narration. After all, could we truly appreciate the tragic tale of Othello if we were not persuaded that Iago was devious and Desdemona innocent? Could we really enjoy the battle between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader if we did not see the former as an agent of justice and the latter as a force of destruction? Or to take another tack on this question, would it make any sense to argue that *Anne Frank* is an anti-Semitic story? Or that *Oliver Twist* is an apologia for nineteenth-century capitalism? The fact that the answers are obvious is indication enough that each narrative carries its own weightings regarding the moral worth of its characters, and dramatises the moral relationship between certain actions and their consequences. (This is what Aristotle referred to as the emplotted relation between character, virtue and fortune in *Poetics* 1448a–1450b.) There is no narrated action that does not involve some response of approval or disapproval relative to some scale of goodness or justice – though it is always up to us readers to choose for ourselves from the various value options proposed by the narrative. The very notion of cathartic pity and fear, linked as it is to unmerited misfortune, for example, would collapse if our aesthetic responses were to be totally divorced from any empathy or antipathy towards the character's ethical quality.³⁷

Far from being ethically neutral, each story seeks to

persuade us one way or another about the evaluative character of its actors and their actions. And regardless of whether we embrace these rhetorical and moral situations, we cannot pretend that they are not at work in the text's effect upon us. Stories alter our lives as we return from text to action. Every story is loaded. And while it is true to say that a story is neither good nor bad but thinking makes it so, this is so only up to a point. Granted, we deploy our own ethical presuppositions each time we respond to a story, but we always have something to respond to. The story is not confined to the mind of its author alone (the romantic fallacy regarding the primacy of the author's original intentions). Nor is it confined to the mind of its reader. Nor indeed to the action of its narrated actors. The story exists in the interplay between all these. Every story is a play of at least three persons (author/actor/addressee) whose outcome is never final. That is why narrative is an open-ended invitation to ethical and poetic responsiveness. Storytelling invites us to become not just agents of our own lives, but narrators and readers as well. It shows us that the untold life is not worth living.

There will always be someone there to say, 'tell me a story', and someone there to respond. Were this not so, we would no longer be fully human.

THE END