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This is a contribution from *Narrative Inquiry 16:1*

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Life “on holiday”?

In defense of big stories

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There has been an increasing emphasis in narrative inquiry on “small” stories (i.e., those derived from everyday social exchanges) rather than “big” stories (i.e., those derived from interviews, clinical encounters, autobiographical writing, and other such interrogative venues). The latter, it may be argued, inevitably entail a problematic distance from everyday reality and may thus be said to embody life “on holiday.” On one level, this is surely true: big stories, insofar as they entail a significant measure of reflection on either an episode, a portion of a life, or the whole of it, are a step removed from those everyday goings-on that are the focus of small stories. Far from necessarily being a liability, however, the distance that is intrinsic to big story narrative reflection creates opportunities for understanding that are largely unavailable in the immediacy of the moment. Big stories and small stories thus complement one another; taken together, they represent a promising integrative direction for narrative inquiry. (*Identity, Stories, Narrative, Reflection, Self*)

Michael Bamberg, among others, has indicated in some recent (e.g., 2004, 2006) work that there is something troubling about “life story” research, namely that putting aside certain discrete reflective occasions — writing an autobiography, for instance, or responding to an in-depth life story interview — people didn’t actually *tell* such “big stories” most of the time. They mainly told “small stories,” played out during the course of living out their life. Big stories, therefore, seemed somewhat abstract, even artificial, artifacts of just those kinds of reflective occasions that life story types wished to create. They were renditions of life “on holiday”: only by stepping out of the flow of concrete, flesh and blood life, with its steady stream of small stories, that “seem to pop up, not necessarily even recognized as stories, and quickly forgotten” (Bamberg, 2006, p. 63), could big ones emerge.

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Narrative Inquiry 16:1 (2006), 131–138.

ISSN 1387-6740 / E-ISSN 1569-9935 © John Benjamins Publishing Company

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It should be noted that Bamberg's complaint in this context is not unrelated to the frequently-made assertion that narratives — big ones, especially — cannot help but falsify the past: because narration occurs irrevocably in the present and because the ordering of the past inevitably partakes of fictive (if not outright fictional) designs, wrought by whomever is doing the narrating, there is no re-presenting the past (i.e., the past present) "as it was." Consequently, the argument generally goes, narratives are untrue to "life itself." Whether this is cause for alarm (the data are distorted!) or celebration (a toast to the imagination!) depends on who is offering the critique. I have tried to respond to this critique on several different occasions (e.g., Freeman, 2002, 2003a), mainly by suggesting that it entails an impoverished conception of both the "real" and the "true." I need not repeat the details here. Now, the more recent critique of big stories, offered by Bamberg and others (see especially Potter & Hepburn, 2005), has less to do with issues of truth and falsity than it does with issues of proximity and distance; small stories are closer to the action and enmeshed within the interactive, especially conversational, dynamics of social life while big ones are more removed and tend to efface the social dimension. But the connection between the two critiques stands. Bamberg's (2004) reference to small stories as being the "'real' stories of our lived lives" (p. 367) is telling in this context.

In any case, rather than privileging big stories, as has customarily been the case in narrative inquiry (at least by Bamberg's account), he is urging us to turn our attention to small ones. The bottom line is, there is plenty of meaning to go around in these stories, they are extremely valuable for showing how identity gets renegotiated and reconstructed in and through social interaction, and, perhaps most centrally, they are a lot "closer to home." Narrative thus gets taken down to size. And while it may be true that the resultant stories, small as they are, stop short of possessing the existential power of (some) big ones, perhaps that's a good thing. The quotidian deserves a piece of the narrative action too. There is an important bonus to the small story perspective as well: by shifting attention away from that sort of big story-driven quasi-substantialistic vision of identity that sees it operating behind the scenes and calling the narrative shots, it calls forth a quite different image of self, one that is more thoroughly moored in social life.

Narrative reflection

Compelling though the small story perspective may be, there are good and important reasons for big stories to retain a prominent place in the narrative picture. Let me be clear about what is meant here by big stories (acknowledging that others may have a somewhat different conception): big stories are those narratives, often derived from interviews, clinical encounters, and other such interrogative venues, that entail a significant measure of reflection on either an event or experience, a significant portion of a life, or the whole of it. The most loaded term in this characterization of big stories is the term *reflection*. In part, this is because big story reflection involves "a particular kind of accounting practice [that is] quite different from situations in which 'small

stories’ are created and shared” (Bamberg, 2006, p. 64). More to the point, however, it is because the very idea of reflection, in its big story form (small stories, of course, involve reflection too), entails a *going-beyond* the specific discursive contexts in which “real life” talk occurs. It is an effort after meaning — often “big” meaning. Indeed, it is a *making-meaning*, an act of *poiesis*, in which one attempts to *make sense* of some significant dimension of one’s life (see Freeman, 1999, 2001, 2002), the operative presumption often being that one can somehow tap into the deep well of the self and extract its innermost dimensions. In a related vein, it should be emphasized that narrative reflection of this sort inevitably entails a measure of *distance* from the particular “object” of one’s reflection (see especially Freeman, 2003b) as well.

This is where the trouble begins. The simple fact that big story reflection entails *poiesis* means that it is also likely to entail not only (excessive) ordering (e.g., Sartwell, 2000), but such additional maladies as “narrative smoothing” (e.g., Spence, 1983), “claustrophilic” closure-seeking (e.g., Smith, 1988), and, as noted already, outright fictionalization (e.g., Gazzaniga, 1998). Add to these maladies the fact that one’s big story is likely to be self-serving, the product of one’s wishes and weaknesses, and it becomes even more suspect. Amidst all this, add the fact that the big story in question is likely to be the product of an interactive situation (an interview dialogue, for instance) that is largely effaced in the telling, thereby creating the illusion that the resultant story is self-sufficient, wholly “one’s own,” surging up from the depths of Being. Little wonder that big stories may be held in suspicion. And then, to top it off, there is this factor of distance — or, perhaps more accurately, *distance-from*. There is no denying it: in big story reflection, one has temporarily stepped out of the flow of (small storied) life; one has stepped-back-from, paused, gone on holiday. And so, the resultant story cannot help but be (some maintain) contrived, artificial, and altogether too illusorily leisure-filled. Holidays can be great fun and most worthwhile — as long, of course, as one doesn’t mistake them for real life. (That can make one’s return to the workaday world that much more of a letdown.)

Generally speaking, there is a twofold assumption operative in the big story critique just presented. The first aspect of the assumption is that small storied experience — that which occurs in the context of “lived lives,” in the sensuous present moment — is taken to be a kind of baseline of the Real; it is the narrative archive, the foundation, against which all other accounts are to be compared. The second aspect follows from the first: insofar as narrative, via reflective distance, veers away from the fleshy immediacy of the present moment, it cannot help but involve some measure of holiday-ish distortion and, perhaps more troubling, it cannot help reify the self — which is imagined to somehow be “disclosed,” even “discovered,” through the very process at hand. I want to question this twofold assumption, and I want to do so in a twofold way. First, I want to question the tendency to equate the immediate, the momentary, the sensuous narrative present, as it is found in small stories, with Reality — or, more subtly put, with a linguistic framing of experience that is closer to “real life.” It is *one* reality, to be sure, but there is no necessary reason to consider it primary — the “baseline,” as I put it, against which any and all other renditions are to be compared. Indeed, there are profound *limits* to the present moment due to our all too human tendency

to be unreflectively caught up in it — which is to say, due to the absence of precisely that sort of temporal distance that allows us to see things in their full, or at least fuller, measure. As Gadamer (1975) puts the matter, “what a thing has to say, its intrinsic content, first appears only after it is divorced from the fleeting circumstances of its actuality” (p. 265). As such, temporal distance, so often assumed to be a source of distortion or outright falsification, bears within it a “positive and productive possibility of understanding” (p. 264).

This brings me to the second reason for casting into question the twofold assumption outlined above. In line with questioning the small-story-as-closer-to-reality thesis, I want to question what might be termed the “narrative-reflection-as-inevitable-distortion” thesis. Let me be clear about this: there *can* be hyper-ordering, claustrophilia, self-aggrandizing fictionalization, and all the rest. Inquiring into these sorts of issues is vitally important. This focus, however, is but one axis of inquiry into the reflective dimension of big stories. As such, I want to turn to a quite different axis of inquiry, my primary interest being in the *revelatory* power of big stories — that is, their capacity to yield insight and understanding, of the sort that cannot, occur in the immediacy of the present moment and the small stories that issue from it. Georges Gusdorf, in his seminal essay on the “Conditions and limits of autobiography” (1980), does well to flesh out this important idea. “In the immediate moment,” he writes, “the agitation of things ordinarily surrounds me too much for me to be able to see it in its entirety. Memory gives me a certain remove and allows me to take into consideration all the ins and outs of the matter, its context in time and space, [like] an aerial view sometimes reveals to an archeologist the direction of a road or a fortification or the map of a city invisible to someone on the ground” (p. 38). One might approach this issue from a more literary angle as well. Works of literature are themselves filled with small stories; we generally think of them as “episodes.” But of course the episodes we find in such works do not stand on their own but only acquire significance by virtue of the larger constellations of meaning — the “plot” — to which they contribute.

As concerns the notion that big story reflection cannot help but reify the self — and that it essentially mistakes self-*construction* for self-*discovery* — there is surely some validity to it. Oftentimes, not only is the discursive situation in which such reflection occurs effaced but so too is the very constructedness of the reflective process. Big story reflection therefore turns out to be a kind of accomplice to exactly that sort of Big Self, there to be unearthed, that is so much the lore of modern, literate Western humanism. One must indeed be wary of this Big Self, or at least remain cognizant of the particular discursive structures and situations that call it forth. None of what is being said here, however, should lead to the conclusion that the kind of self, or self-identity, that emerges from big story reflection (some would say “produced-from”; I would say “articulated-through”) is merely an hypostatized artifact of the process.

Bamberg and others are quite right in calling attention to the ways in which identity is produced and re-produced in specific discursive situations. They are also right in underscoring the fact that the self that emerges from big story reflection is, on some level, a product of the reflective process and that it perpetuates an image of identity that is much “larger,” more continuous, and more stable than small stories would suggest.

But we are not only the selves that issue from small stories. Whether we like it or not, we are also — at this moment in history, in the context of contemporary Western culture — big story selves. This doesn't commit us to some fixed, grandiose, narcissistic, hyper-masculine vision of the Individual, only to the idea that our *lives* — the movement of our lives, across significant swaths of time — continues to have meaning for many. Such meaning frequently issues from the sorts of reflective accounting practices found in interview settings and the like. Indeed, these settings provide opportunities for (big) reflection that are generally not found in everyday, non-interviewed life. But surely, this mode of reflection, along with the “data” that issue from it, bears *some* relationship to what goes on outside the more rarefied methodological environments contrived by social scientists. And the same, I would argue, may be said of the self that is articulated through the reflective process.

Holiday fare

Along the lines being drawn here, I offer two somewhat different responses to the life-on-holiday idea sometimes thought to be intrinsic to the project of gathering big stories. The first is a spirited rejection of the idea: *narrative reflection, far from being a step removed from life, is itself a part of life*. There remains a tendency in psychology especially toward a kind of positivism, an attitude that privileges the here and now of behavior, action, language (whatever). Rather than recording behaviors, one might record conversations, linguistic fragments, parsing and notating, being sure that the text at hand is as close to the action, and as accurate, as it can be. The underside of this commitment is a denigration both of those methods that are a step removed from the action *and of reflection itself*, which is often deemed too sketchy and fallible to provide the kind of knowledge that social scientists seek. It might even be claimed that there is a kind of elitist strain to this notion of reflection, that it is for the privileged, and that if it weren't for social scientists coming along and doing their interviews, it might never happen. Big stories, I want to argue, restore reflection to its rightful place in human scientific inquiry. Indeed, *narrative* inquiry — or at least that portion of it that focuses on big stories — is perhaps the preeminent contemporary arena in which reflection is not only rendered legitimate but potentially significant. Big stories, therefore, are every bit as much a part of life as small ones are.

They are, however, a quite different part of life. This brings me to my second, ostensibly contradictory, response to the life-on-holiday idea. Even though holidays are unquestionably part of life, there is also no question but that they represent something of a break — at least from life as it is ordinarily lived. We do different things on holiday than we ordinarily do. If all goes well, the result will be replenishment, restoration, *re-creation*. But there also exists the possibility that a holiday break will lead in quite the opposite direction, to emptiness and a sense of disappointment. Big story narrative reflection is thus an arena both of great promise and great peril. On the one hand, it is a vehicle of potential insight and, at times, a source of deep fulfillment: I can realize what is truly important — or unimportant — about this or that feature of my past

experience; I can see the contours of people I care for more clearly; I can look back on an event or a period of life that had seemed ordinary and find in its very ordinariness a source of pleasure and gratitude for it having existed at all. On the other hand, it can be a source of sentiments such as regret and remorse, guilt and shame: I look back on my past only to find my own shortsightedness or wastefulness or cowardice (pick your sin). In this case too there can be insight, but of the sort that hurts.

“Lateness”

As I have suggested in some recent work (Freeman, 2003b), human existence frequently involves a *delay*, or “postponement,” of insight into its affairs: realizations, narrative connections, are made after-the-fact, when the dust has settled. The result is that we are frequently *late* in our own understanding of things. This is particularly so in the moral domain, where there is a tendency to act first and think later. Consider in this context some of Primo Levi’s (1989) comments regarding the concentration camp experience. It was characterized by a kind of “leveling,” as he describes it, in which one was focused mainly on the moment. “Only at rare intervals,” Levi writes, “did we come out of this condition of leveling, during the very few Sundays of rest, the fleeting minutes before falling asleep, or the fury of the air raids” (p. 75). These intervals were painful “precisely because they gave us the opportunity to measure our diminishment from the outside” (p. 74). Tragically enough, their eventual “liberation” from the camps served to intensify this pain:

Coming out of the darkness, one suffered because of the reacquired consciousness of having been diminished. Not by our will, cowardice, or fault, yet nevertheless we had lived for months and years at an animal level: our days had been encumbered from dawn to dusk by hunger, fatigue, cold, and fear; and any space for reflection, reasoning, experiencing emotions was wiped out... We had not only forgotten our country and our culture, but also our family, our past, the future we had imagined for ourselves, because like animals, we were confined to the present moment. (p. 75)

It is only from the distant “now” of narrative reflection, as he gazes back upon those moments, that Levi is able to see the life to which he had been reduced. This view from afar, therefore, was the requisite condition for seeing exactly that which *could not be seen* in the flux of the present. Narrative thus presents a positive possibility here, an opportunity to move beyond the confines of the moment. But it was this very possibility that yielded so much pain. Indeed, Levi suggests, it was this “turning to look back at the ‘perilous water’” that led to so many suicides following liberation. There would be “a flood of rethinking and depression” (p. 76), and the all too radiant clarity of what had been would suddenly burst through the walls of consciousness. The result was frequently shame, of the sort that permeated one’s very identity. “Is this belated shame justified or not?” Levi goes on to ask. “I was not able to decide then and I am not able to decide even now, but shame there was and is, concrete, heavy, perennial” (p. 81).

As noted earlier, much of the small story work that has been done has been oriented toward the “production” of identity, that is, the ways in which identity is constructed and reconstructed in and through social interaction. There are many small stories told in Levi’s work, about everyday incidents and exchanges; and were they to meet the gaze of the small story researcher, they would indeed show, quite successfully, how identity had been renegotiated and reconstructed *in situ*. Far from being some fixed, quasi-substantial characteristic of one’s personal being, therefore, it would have been shown to be fluid and transient, intimately tied to the particularities of time and place. The big story researcher, on the other hand, might have been more interested in the process by which these small stories had been “metabolized” through narrative reflection. He or she might also be interested in how they had become folded into larger constellations of identity. These larger constellations can be decidedly less fluid and transient. Levi himself had remained haunted by his own small stories precisely because of what they seemed to say about the big story of his life; there had emerged painful truths that he could not or would see earlier on, in the rush of the moment, and there had emerged wounds — identity-wounds — that seemed virtually permanent, beyond repair. However much of a reification Levi’s Big Self identity might have been, there was no denying its existence.

While big stories may not possess the kind of naturalistic immediacy that small stories often do by virtue of their being told at a distance from the experiences they recount, they remain vitally important in narrative inquiry. They are important precisely *because* of this distance — because, as suggested earlier, they embody a mode of interpretive reflection that goes beyond the vicissitudes of the moment. This does not mean that they are any better, or “truer,” than small stories. Neither small stories nor big ones have privileged access to “the” truth. Rather, they tell about different regions of experience, one that involves the quotidian workaday world of incidents and exchanges, of routine talk about this or that, and another that involves a kind of holiday, in which one takes the time to consider what it is that’s being going on. This holiday, however, is not something one takes from “life itself.” It is an aspect of life itself — one, in fact, that is too often in short supply. Indeed, narrative reflection frequently serves a kind of “rescue” function: by taking up what could not be seen, or known, in the moment, it can deliver us from the forgetfulness that so often characterizes the human condition. Big stories thus create a space for reflection and are thus integral to the examined life.

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