Narrative Analysis

Studying the Development of Individuals in Society

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Data are Everywhere

Narrative Criticism in the Literature of Experience

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Life and Literature

In much of my recent work (e.g., Freeman, 1997, 1998a, 1998b), I have spoken of the "narrative fabric" of the self and have argued further that human life is itself narratively structured. As against those who imagine life to be essentially formless, and narrative to be an imposition from without, my own perspective is that it may profitably be understood as a kind of literature. What this suggests, in turn, is that there exists the need to approach (a portion of) the "data" of human lives in a manner that differs significantly from that of traditional social science.

Without wishing to overstate the distinction at hand—there are significant continuities as well—the approach suggested herein tends more toward the qualitative than the quantitative; it is more idiographic, focusing on the individual person, than nomothetic, focusing on generalities across individuals; it looks more toward interpretive understanding than explanation; and, not least, it relies more on poetic than scientific modes of writing and is thus oriented not only toward the cognitive and discursive functions of language but also toward the emotional and evocative. On the face of it, this shift of
emphasis would seem to take narrative inquiry away from psychology’s customary aim of portraying objectively a given phenomenon; it seems more ambiguous, indefinite, “subjective.” But it may very well be that only through more interpretive modes of inquiry and more poetic modes of writing can there emerge that sort of fidelity to the phenomena that is the first requirement of the narrative analysis of human lives. Put more quaintly, this shift of emphasis seeks to practice greater fidelity to the reality of human experience and thereby to tell a more truthful story about it.

One significant source of inspiration for the perspective offered here is the seminal work of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur (1981a) maintains that human action might usefully be framed on the model of the literary text. Among the many reasons for doing so, several deserve emphasis. The first has to do with what might be termed the “semantics” of human action. “Meaningful action,” Ricoeur (1981a) states, “is an object for science only under the condition of a kind of objectification which is equivalent to the fixation of a discourse by writing” (p. 203). Second, Ricoeur (1981a) speaks of the “autonomization” of action: “In the same way that a text is detached from its author, an action is detached from its agent and develops consequences of its own” (p. 206). As Ricoeur goes on to explain, “our deeds escape us and have effects which we did not intend,” the result being that they are “read” anew by others with whom we are engaged as well as by ourselves. Taking this idea one step further, Ricoeur (1981a) considers the ideas of relevance and importance, noting that “a meaningful action is an action the importance of which goes ‘beyond’ its relevance to its initial situation” (p. 207). Fourth, and finally for the time being, Ricoeur speaks of human action as an “open work, the meaning of which is ‘in suspense'” (p. 208).

It is this last characteristic of the text that leads Ricoeur to thereafter focus explicitly on the issue of narrative, especially in relation to the issue of time (e.g., Ricoeur, 1981b, 1984, 1985, 1988; with reference to developmental psychology, see also Freeman, 1984, 1985, 1991). Human action consists of events that arc, essentially, “episodes in the making”—that is, events that will become episodes, retroactively, by virtue of their interrelation with other events, both antecedent and subsequent, as well as with those “endings” that will ultimately serve to transfigure them into the stuff of narrative. In a distinct sense, one often does not know “what is happening” until the moment is past, until it can be located within some broader constellation of events, read for its significance in some larger whole. There is something of a paradox entailed in the process at hand, one that is related to the notion of the “hermeneutical circle” (e.g., Gadamer, 1975; Ricoeur, 1981a). On the one hand, it may be said that the beginnings and middles of stories determine their endings. At the same time, however, it can also be said that endings determine beginnings and middles; for only when a story has ended—whether the ending in question is temporary, as in life, or permanent, as in death—is it possible to discern the meaning and significance of what has come before. There must, again, be a synoptic act of reading, whereby events are seen together in their interrelatedness as episodes in an evolving narrative. Ricoeur (1981b) thus speaks of two distinct dimensions of narrative: the “episodic,” which refers to the events of which a story is comprised, and the “configurational,” which refers to this process of seeing- or grasping-together, “eliciting a pattern from a succession” (p. 174). He also speaks of a “temporal dialectic” that may be said to characterize the unique temporality of narrative. By virtue of the episodic dimension, there is, in every story, a tendency toward the linear representation of time—this happened, then that happened, and so on. The model is one of succession, adhering to clock time. By virtue of the configurational dimension, however—Ricoeur speaks of the process of “emploment” (see also Brooks, 1985; White, 1978)—there is a different temporal movement altogether, one that looks essentially backward rather than forward. Indeed, Ricoeur (1981b) suggests, it is as though recollection inverted the so-called natural order of time. By reading the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end, we learn also to read time itself backward, as the recapitulating of the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences. In this way, a plot establishes human action not only within time but within memory. (p. 176)

Alongside the defining characteristics of texts enumerated earlier, Ricoeur (1981b) therefore gives us another set of criteria by which we might characterize human experience as a kind of literature: “Reading” human action partakes of the same temporal dialectic that is involved in reading literature. What Ricoeur calls “narrative time” may thus be regarded as a constitutive feature of human experience.

Thus far, I have called attention largely to “formal” reasons why human experience may profitably be understood as a kind of literature: in some fundamental ways, human experience resembles literary texts. It should not be forgotten in this context, however, that literary texts are themselves modeled on human experience. Crites (1970) puts the matter well: “Life is not, after all, a work of art. An artistic drama has a coherence and a fullness of articulation that are never reached by our rudimentary drama. But the drama of experience is the crude original of all high drama” (p. 303).

This brings me to a final set of reasons for considering human experience as a kind of literature, and it is one with which we are all familiar: Our
very lives are bathed in stories, in comedies and tragedies, with happy endings and shocking, or unanticipated, or disappointing ones. I do not wish to overdramatize human experience. It can be uneventful and quite tedious. It can also be truly chaotic, possessing no discernible meaning at all, even in retrospect. But much of the time it is quite different than this. Stories abound and proliferate. Data are everywhere.

Social Science and Beyond

In order to show how I have arrived at this particular vision of narrative inquiry, it may be useful to present some sense of the path my own work has gone through during the course of the past 20 or so years. It began, in fairly traditional fashion, with a mixture of questionnaire and interview data exploring aspects of life history along with data that sought to provide something of an experiential snapshot of particular periods of the lives in question. In one study, for instance (Freeman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Larson, 1986), adolescents’ experience in various domains of their lives (with family, with friends, and alone) was charted at two points in time, 2 years apart, via the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), which asked them to rate and comment upon the quality of immediate experience in these domains. Through this method, my colleagues and I obtained a kind of map of these adolescents’ experiential worlds at the two points in time and were therefore in a position to discern what sorts of changes, if any, had occurred. At around the time of the second sampling, extensive interviews with the same individuals were also carried out, asking them to reflect on how they perceived their experience in each of the aforementioned domains to have changed during this span of time. The results proved to be interesting. While there had been virtually no significant changes in their experience as gauged by the ESM self-reports, the interviews suggested that they had gone through considerable positive change. Moreover, the adolescents were able to substantiate this change, to explain the ways in which they believed it to have occurred and how it had served to transform the fabric of their lives.

For present purposes, the details of the data gathered are less significant than the methodological framework employed. By virtue of having acquired both forms of data, one oriented toward immediate experience and the other toward recollection, we were able to get some sense of what was being done in and through the adolescents’ process of narrating the stories of their lives. The virtues of this particular methodological approach notwithstanding, I eventually came to feel that aspects of it were overly contrived. I do not wish to offer an indictment of the approach; within its sphere, it was of great value. But having had a taste of what interview data could bring—namely, a recognizable sense of people’s actual lives—I found myself drawn toward more open-ended modes of narrative inquiry and analysis.

This led to my becoming involved in a study of artists carried out at the University of Chicago in conjunction with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (under the direction of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, J.W. Getzels, and Stephen P. Kahn). In one wave of the project, carefully designed questionnaires geared toward gathering life history information had been sent to the artists in question. Not surprisingly, the data proved to be interesting and informative. But in my own mind, these data simply didn’t live. Not only wasn’t there enough space on any given page for people truly to speak, but the very structuredness with which the relevant questions were presented had led to a too-artificial form of interrogation and, in turn, a kind of objectification of those on the receiving end. They were not partners in dialogue about their lives and their art; they were the objects of questions, tied to our interests. To a greater or lesser extent, of course, this is always the case. One speaks to whomever because of a question or an interest one has; the other, therefore, becomes a means to one’s own ends. But some narrative methods do this in a cruder, more ethically questionable way. That, at least, was how I came to feel about it. I wasn’t alone either. Some of the artists to whom we had sent the questionnaires had clearly been put off by having been asked to serve as the instruments of social scientists’ empiricist designs about their art and creativity.

Here, too, I do not wish to offer a blanket indictment of the methodological approach employed in this first wave of the study. Questionnaires have their place, and there is no inherent need to exclude artists and the like from the burden of filling them out every now and then. It should also be emphasized that, as questionnaires go, this one was composed with a good deal of care, both for the instrument and for the artists themselves. In fact, I am fully prepared to say that my own alienation from this sort of method had more to do with me than anything else. I simply could not “get near” the basic approach employed. That was my last encounter with it.

The next wave of the study was much more appealing. We would go to artists’ studios or homes and speak with them, at length, about their lives and work. We were armed with discrete questions, of course, for, among other reasons, a number of dissertations had to be completed. But we were to proceed in as dialogic a way as possible, trying as best we could to ensure that there emerged a natural flow of conversation in which the artists themselves had ample opportunity to speak their minds. The resultant data were extraordinarily rich and informative. There was also an immense quantity
of data. By the project's end, there were transcripts from some 54 artists, with some of the transcripts being upwards of 30 single-spaced pages. What were we to do with all of this information? How might we begin the difficult process of narrative analysis?

The plan was to build an elaborate coding scheme designed to encompass as much of the data as possible. We would also look at word frequencies and other such ostensible indices of (possible) meaning and significance. And, sensibly enough, we would try to determine ways of cataloguing the data in order that they might be related to earlier data sets. Basically, therefore, the aim was to take this voluminous quantity of data and boil it down as best we could to the clearest, most manipulable categories in order, subsequently, to undertake the most rigorous and systematic analysis possible. This is in fact how most of those working on the project proceeded. There would also be narrative analysis of a sort, for instance, in the form of a brief case history. But it would likely be presented as a supplement, designed to flesh out or to substantiate the main, quantitatively derived findings.

In principle, I have no qualms whatsoever about quantitatively derived findings. I also want to emphasize that many of those working on the project in largely quantitative fashion did some excellent and important work. But there were several problems that came to plague me at the time. The first was that the elaborate coding scheme on which we were working seemed overly reductive, serving to flatten some of the richest and most significant information into generic categories. Second, this way of proceeding also tended to break the narrative order: An episode that might have been an integral part of a given person's story had been extracted from the story and transformed into an instance of this or that codable phenomenon. Another set of problems had to do with the kinds of analyses being done. For lack of a more graceful way of putting the matter, it sometimes felt as if we had taken information that was meaningful, significant, and revealing, broken it down in such a way that many of its most interesting features were no longer recognizable, and then tried to reassemble it to determine whether in fact anything notable emerged. There was also the sense that the quantitatively derived information was the real stuff and that the rest was somehow decorative, ornamental. Why should this be?

Much to the chagrin of some of those with whom I had been working, I resolved to do a purely qualitative dissertation that would place people's stories at the forefront. In addition to all of the methodological reasons that have been identified, there was another, more substantive reason for doing so, and it is one that brings us closer to one of the aims of the present volume, that of studying the development of individuals in society. As I went on to suggest in the book that eventually emerged from this work, *Finding the Muse: A Sociopsychological Inquiry into the Conditions of Artistic Creativity* (Freeman, 1993a), what life narratives reveal frequently extends well beyond the psychological plane. In addition to serving as vehicles for understanding the unique trajectories of individuals' lives, they also serve as means of access to social reality, signifying the worlds through which people have moved.

One related methodological issue that I brought up in *Finding the Muse* deserves mention before we move on. In a very basic and obvious sense, life narratives deal with subjective meanings; they are individuals' perceptions of their past, their interpretive renditions of the past from the standpoint of the present. But this subjective dimension of narrative inquiry is by no means the only dimension. "As with any text," I had suggested, "the interest is not only in what the author himself or herself may have meant by a particular utterance but what the text itself means: We want to understand what is being said and what this something is about" (Freeman, 1993a, p. 34). Following the aforementioned reflections of Ricoeur (1981a) on the text as an appropriate model of human action, the project of narrative understanding and analysis expands greatly. "For in moving beyond subjective meanings, localized in the person of the author, we immediately have before us a much larger range of possible interpretations, emerging in line with the essential openness of discourse itself" (Freeman, 1993a, p. 34). The narrative analysis undertaken, therefore, would not rest with subjective meanings alone; the aim would be "to extend their reach, through interpretation, to the social realities constitutive of them" (p. 35).

There is a corollary to this set of ideas that can present a difficult interpretive and indeed ethical challenge for those pursuing narrative analysis. It is one, in fact, about which there may be considerable disagreement. In some of the work I have carried out, I explore possible meanings that the people in question may find unrecognizable or, for that matter, completely disavow. In some of the stories provided by the artists, for instance, it became clear to me that they had bought into a myth about the struggling genius, at odds with the world, that had actually stunted their creativity. They themselves may not have been fully aware of this myth and, had I presented this interpretation to them, they might have rejected it. Now, it is of course true in this context that my word is hardly the last. But neither, I would argue, is theirs. And sometimes it can be extremely valuable to look beyond intended meanings and pursue the possibility of different ones altogether. In recent years, some narrative researchers have taken to presenting their own renditions of people's lives to the people themselves. This is a way of trying to ensure that what the researchers have said is faithful to what
they have been told, but it is also a way of “giving back” to those being studied. The motives are surely noble ones. I would nevertheless question the necessity and even, in some instances, the desirability of returning one’s interpretations in this way.

The story continues. Once I had decided to pursue a purely qualitative approach, the narrative-analytic challenge loomed before me. What exactly should be done with these 50-plus interviews? As an initial step, I decided that I would transform the interview transcripts into narrative form, using the artists’ own words as much as possible in the service of fashioning stories adequate to what they had said. Had the artists read these preliminary narratives, they would likely have found them recognizable and acceptable. In this first phase, in other words, the primary aim was to translate into story form what the artists themselves had said, following their own narrative leads. Subsequently, the task—not unlike the task of categorizing and coding in some sense—was to determine what went with what (for instance, which pieces of one person’s story seemed to go with which pieces of another’s), which of the narratives would be turned into full-blown case histories (perhaps for their richness or tellingness), and, finally, how to tell the “collective” story within which these individual stories emerged. I need not recount the details of the analyses pursued. But basically, I commenced dealing with the interviews and the resultant narrative texts as one would deal with works of literature, on the lookout for plot structures and themes and literary tropes. The entire process—which, in a distinct sense, had become a kind of literary criticism—proved to be terrifyingly exciting, for a vast new realm of possibilities for narrative analysis had been opened up.

In speaking of literary criticism here, I refer to that sort of broad interpretive undertaking that seeks to unpack literary texts for their meaning and significance. Following one of the basic distinctions often made in contemporary literary criticism, some of my interpretive analyses were largely “formalist” in nature, “close readings” that remained within the perimeter of the text, seeking to explicate what was being said. In these instances, careful attention was paid to the use of language and to the formal properties of the texts in question. Other analyses were more “historicist” in nature, seeking instead to situate the texts within some broader cultural/historical constellation of issues—for instance, the problem of women artists trying to gain entry into a male-dominated art world or the problem of artists trying to make art in an artistic climate that had become so pluralistic as to actually undermine creativity. Other kinds of analyses were employed as well. None of these analyses, I should aow, were the product of a discrete method of extracting the relevant information, of the sort that might be given to someone else to use. I do not mean to suggest that the analyses just discussed were unmethedical. In carrying out this kind of work, there is always an approach to inquiry involved, a methodological perspective, geared toward trying to understand the phenomenon in question and trying to say something meaningful about it. But the perspective employed is not determined ahead of time. Nor is it determined by any one technique or set of techniques for carrying out the analysis. It is determined instead by the nature of the phenomenon, what’s interesting about it, and what’s worth saying.

What Are Legitimate Data for Narrative Analysis?

I begin this section with a somewhat contentious assertion: Social scientists—including psychologists interested in narrative—have generally been unduly restrictive in their conception of what constitutes legitimate data. Likewise, there has been too much restrictiveness in terms of method, that is, in terms of how one goes about acquiring one’s data. Consequently, ways of meaningfully expanding the scope of narrative inquiry ought to be pursued.

From the analysis of life narratives derived from interviews, it was but a short step to examining memoirs, autobiographies, and other personal documents. In *Rewriting the Self* (Freeman, 1993b), I examined fictional literary texts, ranging from St. Augustine’s *Confessions* (397/1980) to Helen Keller’s *The Story of My Life* (1902/1988). These texts were selected not just on the basis of how interesting or important they were but on the basis of what sorts of methodological and theoretical questions and problems, pertinent to narrative analysis, they presented. In the case of *Confessions*, for instance, much of the focus was on the problem of memory and, specifically, on the difference between life as lived and as told in retrospect, through narrative. In the case of *The Story of My Life*, the focus was on the interrelationship of language and personal identity. Insofar as *Rewriting the Self* remained attentive to psychological issues, it could still plausibly be called “psychology.” But by this time it had become difficult to differentiate this work from literary criticism itself. Was there a need to?

More and more, it strikes me as essentially irrelevant whether narrative inquiry, in psychology and beyond, continues to be subsumed under the rubric of *science*. I used to care about this. In fact, in some of my earlier work, I tried to suggest that, appearances notwithstanding, I really was doing a kind of science. I even had a rationale for why I was able to call it that: In line with what was said earlier regarding fidelity to the phenomena, my aim was to be faithful to the human experience. And so, if science is about faithfulness to reality, then surely I was doing it. In fact, I would
sometimes argue that it could be that what I was doing was more scientific than what they were doing ("they" being whoever my positivist opponents were)—at least there were some signs of life.

I also insisted that I was doing psychology. A very brief autobiographical excursion may be appropriate here. One time, in my own department after I had given a presentation on some issues related to those being explored here, one of my colleagues had come up to me and said something like, That was interesting. But why do you call what you're doing psychology? Why not literary criticism? Another, more "playful" colleague had also found the presentation interesting. He liked fiction a great deal, he explained, and by all indications that's what I was doing. The same fundamental question had emerged from each of them: What is it that allows you to call yourself a psychologist? At the time, I had an entire arsenal of answers prepared, for why I should still be considered part of the club, why the club had to expand its membership, and so forth. Recollections of this sort can be extremely humbling.

At this point, in any case, I am not entirely sure how important it is for this sort of work to be considered science. Strictly speaking, it's probably not. I am also not sure whether it is important for it to be considered psychology. Although a good deal of contemporary work in narrative is in fact being carried out by psychologists, much of it intersects with fields other than psychology, such as sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and literature. I believe this is a potential plus. The question that needs to be asked is not whether a given piece of work is or isn't psychology (though of course this sort of question may well be pertinent to job placement, tenure decisions, etc.) but whether it is adequate to its own aims, and whether the aims themselves have any value.

Now, it is true that analyzing a literary text involves somewhat different interpretive assumptions and requires somewhat different interpretive strategies than analyzing texts produced by interviews and other such methods. In the case of autobiography, for instance, it has likely been written for a reason of some sort (demonstrating how a sinner can become a saint, showing how a deaf and blind child can triumph over adversity), and the writer has likely shaped the resultant story with as much attention to its aesthetic qualities as its informational value. Cruder issues may be involved as well. Some autobiographies, in the present moment especially, may be crafted with an eye toward what will sell (a lot). But all this means is that in undertaking narrative analysis of these kinds of texts, one needs to be aware of and attentive to the relevant rhetorical issues.

The same may be said in regard to the analysis of fictional texts. Of the six texts explored in *Rewriting the Self*, only one—Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938/1964)—was a work of fiction. Not too long after completing this work, I turned my attention to another fictional text, Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886/1960; see Freeman, 1997). With fiction, the methodological challenges become more pronounced. Among the many reasons for why this is so, there is the simple fact that the story in question is not true and that the situations depicted, however much they may rely on the author's knowledge of "real life," also rely on his or her imaginative reworking of it. More problematically still, we often meet up with characters in works of fiction that could not exist in the real world. They may be Martians or cyborgs or just inordinately quirky. What is one to say about them? In some cases, perhaps nothing. But in other cases, it may well remain possible to discern what is being said about the world, the real world, in and through the imaginary vision being presented. As Ricoeur (1983) has suggested, fictional texts entail the suppression of a first-order reference to the world as the condition of possibility for disclosing a second-order reference. The empirically unreal and untrue thereby become a means of articulating the real and true on a deeper, more fundamental plane. To the extent that one wishes to say something (meaningful) about the psychological sphere via narrative analysis of fictional texts, one needs to proceed very cautiously, being attentive to the specifically literary dimensions of the texts at hand. But it can surely be done. Literary critics, who may know very little about psychological matters, have been doing it for many years. Psychologists and other social scientists can, and should, add to the mix.

There are other sources of data as well. They are rich and indeed limitless (and don't even require extensive funding from granting agencies). Here, I refer to that which we colloquially call "life itself," that is, the world of our everyday encounters with others as well as ourselves. There are several significant reasons for exploring such data. First, there is the opportunity to move beyond the rarefied atmosphere of the interview, along with other discrete social scientific methods. As suggested already, I certainly would not want to say that the interview is without value or that it should be abandoned—far from it. But to a greater or lesser degree, the resultant data are bound to be an artifact of the questions and presumptions we, the researchers, bring to the situation, and the situation itself is bound to be (more or less) contrived. Put in more positive terms, there are aspects of trying to explore people's lives outside the research context that allow a different kind of relationship to the data.

A second, more substantive, reason for writing about life itself is that it sometimes serves to bind together more closely the world we live in and the world we study. To reiterate a point made earlier, we are surrounded by
stories all the time, and many of them are not only fascinating but telling. That is to say, we can learn something from them. Here, one might plausibly ask: What? And my answer to this question, also once more, would be that it depends entirely on the nature of the narrative in question. For the sake of making this answer more concrete, I now turn briefly to several recent pieces that draw from the bountiful literature of life itself.

The Challenge of Exploring the Lives We Lead

In one recent piece of autobiographical reflection, titled “The Presence of What Is Missing: Memory, Poetry, and the Ride Home” (Freeman, 2002a), I tried to say something about the nature of memory, specifically about the way in which certain outcomes or “endings” can condition and monumentalize views of earlier life events. It is the story of a ride home from college I took with my father at the end of my sophomore year in which he and I spoke to one another, made some connections, for the first time in years. In a sense, we ratified one another’s existence. A month or so later, he was gone. Had my father lived beyond that fateful summer, had there been more rides home together, more points of contact, that particular one might have faded into the oblivion of memory or simply have become a nice episode to recount in the history of a relationship. But because it was virtually the last experience he and I shared, it became something else, something more. One might of course deem this conviction a consolatory fiction, for at the time the event occurred, it had hardly been monumental. But memory, I suggested, is ordinarily not about returning to an earlier time and narrative is not about telling it “as it was.” Imagination is involved, poiesis, a process of articulating meanings that could not possibly emerge except in retrospect, through narration.

It is important to emphasize that I had little interest in revealing something about me in this autobiographical exercise (although I am sure I did so on some level). The aim was instead to “use” me, to use my experience, as a vehicle to explore something else: memory, the poetic process of fashioning a connection between past and present, the building of psychical monuments. This brings me to a more general point about method. In much of my recent work, not only is there no discrete method being relied upon, but the data themselves are unplanned and the process of analysis highly exploratory and speculative. It should also be noted that, in most of these instances, there are no discrete texts involved—or at least no texts possessing an existence independent of, well, me. This is true of all autobiographical reflection to the extent that it takes place in the absence of material documents such as diaries or journals: The “text,” such as it is, is itself one’s own creation, one’s own imaging and imagining of the past. On some occasions, I do rely on some rough notes. But on other occasions—in the case of that ride home with my father, for instance—all I had were memories, and distant ones at that. The outlines of these memories had become blurred, the details murky, and they were surely suffused with my wishes, my desire for the story to have a particular meaning, one that was redemptive, that allowed me some measure of solace and rest. In this sort of situation, all one can do is to be candid about what one remembers and what one does not, about the blurriness and the possible wishes, about one’s very position as a teller and a writer. The resultant story may not please those who insist on following strictly the rules and expectations of empirical social science. This would be their loss, for there is much to be gained, I believe, from carrying out such work.

In order to show concretely what might be gained, let me now discuss in some detail a piece I did several years ago that dealt with someone else’s life, a friend of mine, who had gone through some very rough times. The piece is called “Culture, Narrative, and the Poetic Construction of Selfhood,” and its argument is that, even though the “tools” employed in the construction of selfhood are social in nature—by virtue of language, prevailing ways of understanding human conduct, prevailing genres of narration, and so on—the acts through which this process of construction occurs are better conceived in poetic terms, as what I call “imaginative labor” seeking to give form and meaning to experience (Freeman, 1999b). A secondary argument in the piece is that there are ways of understanding this poetic, imaginative process that do not necessarily return us to the Romantic, sovereign self, creating his or her own private world of meaning, but that point instead toward the relational dimension of autobiographical self-fashioning. In fact, what I tried to suggest is that the central source of inspiration for this process of autobiographical construction is not so much the self as the Other—in this case, another person.

The man about whom I wrote, a colleague and friend, had been known by people as a vital, strong, bigger-than-life figure, someone remarkably good at what he did. He was also known for his sharp intellect, his quick wit, and his refusal to suffer fools gladly. There had been a few wrinkles for him at work in recent years, but overall things had gone well. As for his life beyond work, I referred to there having been “one great, big, chaotic, unruly happy family” with him at the center. He had been their “rock,” as he eventually put it to me. Things suddenly changed when his wife, herself a model of strength and vitality, was diagnosed with cancer. Even then, he had been able to maintain some semblance of his usual persona, if only as...
a way of reassuring himself and others that the situation was less than dire. The guise was hardly foolproof: On occasion, his fear and misery would break through. But, for a time, he hung tough, believing that God played a significant role in allowing him to do so.

What sent him over the edge was his own trip to the doctor. An x-ray had revealed a shadow, and although it was likely nothing to worry about, or so he was told, everything suddenly came undone: He too was going to die, and his children would be alone, forever. How could this be? How could their good fortune have changed so radically? And, where was God? He had brought these questions, and more, to me, in an office, shortly after the doctor visit. We talked about numerous things, from Kierkegaard's reflections on dread and despair to the all too mysterious ways that God often worked. But his main focus was the children, and the injustice that seemed to be hurting their way, so suddenly and inexplicably. I had never seen this man so vulnerable. Nor had he seen himself this way. He wondered if perhaps he wasn't the 'tower of strength' he had imagined himself to be. He didn't say this outright, but the meaning of his response to this horrific situation was clear enough: Even I can be broken. I **am** broken. I am not all that I appear to be. The scene of that conversation was an unusual one. Ordinarily, he wasn't given to self-disclosure, certainly not with me. I wasn't a best friend but only a friend, and colleague, the philosophically oriented psychologist down the hall who had kids of his own and often seemed to think about these kinds of issues.

The doctor turned out to have been right about the shadow on the x-ray. It was nothing. Normalcy returned, after a fashion. But there had been a change, too—significant and perhaps permanent; much had been disclosed during that awful time. I knew this by his silence, by the fact that we never revisited that scene, the ideas we had exchanged, the emotions we had felt. Someone is now on to me, he might have thought. Someone has witnessed me at my most vulnerable. Narrative analysis can take a strange turn at times like these. What is not said may be every bit as important as what is.

Because we never "processed" our exchange, I do not know for certain what he made of it. But in all likelihood, he had to fashion for himself a somewhat new story, a new version of who and what he was, one that was more adequate to the multiple fields of his existence. This doesn't mean that he had been engaged in self-deception earlier or that this new version somehow falsified the previous one or that, finally, after all these years, he had stumbled onto the definitive truth of his life. Rather, the conditions of his life had changed in such a way that regions of his own being, heretofore uncharted and unarticulated, had suddenly come into view. Along these lines, he himself had undoubtedly learned something through this series of events, about his own life and, perhaps, about life itself. Not only were he and his wife mortal, but they could die at any moment, leaving their children behind to suffer their absence. How shocking and strange. I eventually asked him if it was okay for me to write about his situation, discreetly of course, to which he agreed. He never asked me to read the piece, and I never volunteered to show it to him. And I never will. Since the time I wrote the essay, there has been a death in his family, not of his wife but of a child. Although there is a great deal that might be said about this story, it is highly doubtful whether I will ever write about it. In my own mind, it is simply out of bounds. This, I suppose, is one of the liabilities of writing about real life. There are, however, some significant assets as well. Let me therefore try to unpack some of the different dimensions of analysis this brief narrative called forth.

The first dimension has to do with interpretation. As I suggested earlier, the man being discussed had been forced to come to terms with new "data," new evidences of self, and he had to find some kind of interpretive context within which these new data would fit. I also had to do so on some level. The data that I had before me were much the same as those he had, and the truth had to be made an interpretive context that would begin to make sense of things. I should note here that there was an avowedly speculative nature to this particular interpretive endeavor. The truth is, I don't know for sure whether he engaged in exactly the interpretive process that I have attributed to him. In fact, as I also noted earlier, I relied as much on his silence as his words to frame this very interpretation. But all that this underscores is the often speculative and ambiguous nature of the interpretive endeavor itself, particularly when there is no written text to consult.

The second dimension has to do with the idea that self-interpretation is at one and the same time an act of self-construction, or *poeisis*—self-articulation and self-discovery entail self-creation as well. What they also entail is the idea of developmental process, that is, the fashioning of a new, and perhaps more adequate view of who and what one is. Far from implying that this process is somehow leading to some absolute endpoint or telos, all that is being implied is that the understanding at which one has arrived is, arguably, *better*—fuller, more comprehensive, more adequate—than the one that had existed previously. What I call rewriting the self, therefore, may often be regarded as a developmental process and project, broadly conceived (see Freeman, 1991, 1993b). It is a process of refashioning the past and in turn reconfiguring the self in a way that moves beyond what had existed previously. The backward movement of narrative therefore turns out to be dialectically intertwined with the forward movement of development.
A third dimension has to do more directly with culture. This man's dread and despair—along with his discomfort in revealing this dread and despair to me—was related to his bravado, his status as the "rock" of the family, and the expectation that he ought to hang tough through it all. He was like a dam that had suddenly sprung some serious leaks, leaks that, because of the pressure they had been under, threatened to burst forward and flood him. There were other cultural narratives at work as well, having to do, for instance, with the nature of the happy American family, suddenly undone, and the quintessential Mother-Provider, suddenly felled. All of these narratives may be thought of as cultural resources, cultural tools, with which people make sense of things.

A fourth dimension has to do with the imaginative labor that this man had himself employed, using these cultural tools, in order to refashion his self. In a sense, he had come to realize how pervasively his own attitudes, his own self, had been shaped by certain prevalent social expectations and cultural storylines. With this in mind, part of his challenge was precisely to identify how these had been operative in his stoicism and, ultimately, to challenge and resist them. Narratives don't simply maintain and uphold the status quo; they can also change it, revise it, exactly through the kind of imaginative labor that had been exercised in this case. In some ways, the process was one of deconstruction followed by reconstruction. That, at least, is how I came to understand some of what had gone on.

Finally, I want to call attention to the social dimension of this man's very self. Social relationships loom large in all facets of the story: with his wife and children; with others, both real and imagined, who might learn of his fragility; and, of course, with me, his partner in dialogue. In addition, there is the wider world—the world of the individual in society—within which his story took place. This is the world of doctors and x-rays, norms and values, wives and children, life and death. There is no story apart from this world. Narrative analysis of the sort being pursued here moves beyond the confines of the individual as a matter of course and necessity.

**Theory, Writing, and the Project of Narrative Criticism**

Narrative analysis of the sort being considered here also moves beyond the confines of "theory" as it is ordinarily conceived. I emphasize the phrase "as ordinarily conceived." Ordinarily, theory is conceived in rationalistic, scientific terms. One develops a theory, about this or that, in order to rationally account for a particular sphere of reality. One then goes on to test the theory, which may in turn lead to further refinement and differentiation of its terms or, if the data prove to be too recalcitrant, abandonment. Narrative analysis of the sort I have been pursuing aims at something somewhat different. In its very concern with the concrete particularities of individual cases, it is as much about the "possible" as the "actual," its aim being more to suggest than convince, to open a "region" of truth rather than seek to present a definitive one. So it is, I have also suggested (Freeman, 1999a; see also Freeman, 2000), that at least a portion of writing about life narratives might move from argument, based on the logic of theoretical postulates, to appeal, based on the poetic resonances of the narratives in question, on their aesthetic texture and their evocative power. I offer this perspective not out of some sort of antiscientific, aestheticist fervor but, rather, out of a conviction that narrative analysis, insofar as it seeks to depict the concrete particularities of individual cases, lends itself more readily to poetics, to the project of articulating and explicating meaning, than to theoretical knowledge.

Taking this last idea one step farther, I want to claim that being attentive to the poetry of human lives on some level requires more poetic modes of writing, ones that are closer to those modes of writing found in literature. The reason is straightforward. Life itself is variously quite beautiful and very messy, and literature generally does well to embody it in its full measure. It also does well in dealing with the emotional side of things, allowing us not only to think but also to feel. In emphasizing the importance of feeling, I am suggesting that narrative analysis, in addition to supporting the customary scientific aim of increasing knowledge and understanding about the human realm, can support the aim of increasing compassion and sympathy, and a sense of connection to others. It can therefore provide readers with much the same kind of experience that literature and literary criticism can provide when they orient readers toward the reality of people's lives. Hence my suggestion that a portion of narrative psychology be devoted to narrative criticism, geared toward addressing the literature found not only in actual texts but also in the very fabric of human experience.

This sort of project isn't for everyone. For some, however, working in this way sometimes allows there to be more of a bridge between work and life, between the academic and the lived realm of narrative. The two become continuous: Trying to make sense of experience and trying to think about narrative become one and the same undivided process. Maddening though this can sometimes be, it helps ensure that narrative analysis remains anchored in the world we most intimately know.
References


