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Volume 11

Beyond Narrative Coherence
Edited by Matti Hyvärinen, Lars-Christen Hydén, Marja Saarenheimo and Maria Tamboukou

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CHAPTER 10

Afterword

‘Even Amidst’: Rethinking narrative coherence

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The Manifest and the Latent

I fear that I am about to intrude on the party — or, to put the matter in more explicitly narrative terms, I fear that I am about to disrupt some central aspects of the storyline that has evolved throughout the pages of this book, rendering it just a bit less of a piece. Please understand: I concur with much of what has been said here, particularly regarding the possible ‘bias’ toward narrative coherence and linearity, the importance of recognizing the interactive and performative dimension of narration, and, more generally, the value of remaining hermeneutically suspicious about those teleological tales that flatten difference and heterogeneity, whether wittingly or unwittingly, in the name of normalization. Let it be said from the outset, therefore, that this volume does indeed provide a most valuable counterweight to the coherence paradigm — as traditionally conceived.

But there is a curious fact that needs to be emphasized here. And that is that nearly every chapter in this book seeks to show that, behind the manifest in-coherence or ‘a-coherence’ of the narratives in question a latent coherence lurks. Moreover — and here I enter even more contested territory — most of these chapters suggest that there is in fact some relationship between narrative coherence and well-being. Two qualifications are in order. The first is that narrative coherence is surely not equally necessary for all people. In fact, it may not be necessary at all. There are no doubt people whose lives and consequent ‘stories’ (should they even be called that) are dispersed, heterogeneous, even fragmented. This simple fact should be enough to convince even the most stalwart torch-bearers of coherence that it is not a strict requirement of a human life. Moreover, it may very well be the case that these more dispersed, dis-unified beings are just fine about it, perhaps even rejecting the very coherence others seem to want to foist upon them. Now, it might be argued here that this ‘anti-coherence’ — or even anti-narrativism — bespeaks a coherence of its own, that it is the inverted image of, and is thus parasitic
upon, the very coherence it rejects and replaces. But no matter: such lives and the stories that might be told about them are still 'open works', testifying to the fact that those tidier beginning-middle-end narratives that are so much the lore of the coherence crowd are not for everyone.

As a corollary to these qualifications, it should also be noted that some people become imprisoned by too-coherent narratives, assimilating everything that comes their way to the 'same old' storyline, and that what they seem to need most of all is a good dose of difference, one that might allow them to live and breathe a bit more freely. In a related vein, we must not forget that in the case of traumatic 'limit events' of the sort that Molly Andrews addresses in the last chapter, it may be that there is simply no coherence to be had, that the experiences in question far exceed that sort of intelligible sense that is often sought in narrative. Indeed, it could be the case that such experiences not only bring us beyond coherence but, following Andrews, beyond narrative altogether. It all depends on what we might mean by coherence and narrative.

Taking this line of thinking one step farther, it could also be the case that these experiences, in their excess, their surplus, their ostensible beyond-tellability, reveal something fundamental about the 'gap' between experience and narrative more generally. For all of its apparent virtues, particularly to the likes of us 'narrativists', narrative seems to have its share of vices too. In fact, if Crispin Sartwell's polemical *End of Story: Toward an Annihilation of Language and History* (2000) has it right, it is the vice-like grip of narrative itself that must be cast into question. What is it, Sartwell asks early on in the book, that escapes linguistic, and more specifically narrative, articulation? 'A rough estimate,' he answers, 'almost everything' (p. 5). How curious it is, therefore, that there should have emerged an industry, such as our own, so strenuously devoted to the narrative cause. 'Narrative,' Sartwell writes, 'has become a sort of philosophical panacea, performing all sorts of tasks that philosophers and other intellectuals seem to think need performing.' These range from explaining 'the human experience of time' to addressing 'the personal existential project of constructing a coherent life out of the chaos of experience' (p. 9). The problem at hand, however, is not just that narrative has overextended its reach; that would simply require trimming it back a bit. The more significant problem, for Sartwell at any rate, is that narrative seems to have a built-in tendency to flatten and homogenize the very experience it seeks to tell about. And at the very heart of the problem is coherence itself. 'This is not to say that narrative doesn't have liberatory possibilities, and it is not to say that you or I could or should live without it.' But its liberatory possibilities notwithstanding, 'every [such] counter-narrative brings with it a new capacity for oppression, and ... this capacity is proportional to the coherence and meaningfulness of the narrative. So the more narrativized the narrative, the more thoroughly organized and chock-full of significance it is, the more problematic' (p. 10).

Narrative's 'problematic' nature is perhaps most visible in the context of catastrophic traumas such as those Andrews explores: the Holocaust, 9/11, and other such unspeakable horrors. It is also visible in experiences ranging from ecstatic mystical trances to the 'selflessness' of dementia (see Freeman, 2008). As Sartwell puts the matter, 'Narrative comes apart at the extremes... It comes apart in ecstasy, in writhing pain, at death. But it has already also come apart everywhere, all the time, wherever people are breathing, or walking around, or watching TV, and not getting anywhere narratively speaking.' What to do? 'Pull yourself away from significance for a moment and let yourself feel the sweet, all-enveloping insignificance all around. And take comfort in your own insignificance; take comfort in the triviality of your culture; take comfort in the triviality of your life-project and your failure in realizing it' (p. 65). Try, in other words, to move beyond the vice-like clutches of narrative, particularly those forms of it that seek to render coherent the irrevocable otherness and incoherence of life. We thus return to an idea posed earlier, which I now put in the form of a question: Is it time to move not only beyond narrative coherence but beyond narrative itself? I return to the aforementioned answer as well: It all depends on what we mean by coherence and narrative.

What do we mean? Just as I began writing this chapter, I sent a note to Matti Hyvärinen that said the following: 'I am finally working on my chapter for the book, and I should have it to you within a week or two. I apologize for the delay.' (It's important to keep certain academic traditions alive.) In any case, and more substantively, I went on to note that 'I do have a concern about it. Although you moved from the idea of broken narratives to that of coherence, a number of the chapters continue to use language more appropriate to the former idea than the latter. Is there a way of rectifying this? On one level, it's a minor problem. But conceptually, the notion of "brokenness" is quite different than coherence/incoherence, and it seems important to address in some way. What are your thoughts on this?' This is what he wrote (in a wonderfully Matti-esque way):

Your question seems to be on the tricky side. Due to the long editorial process we were not able to re-shape the articles after the change of the title. We discussed the option of a longer subtitle, including the earlier themes of broken, fragmented and unfinished narratives, but writers voted for a simple and straightforward title. It seems to me, thus, that anything that can be done should be included in your comments.

My take on the issue is rather more historical than strictly philosophical: even though "coherence" and "brokenness", for example, may be seen to locate on entirely different levels, in praxis the problem has repeatedly been to equate coherence, linearity, and clear story-level moral ending. I agree that in many a case the reading model still is to find the ultimate coherence — but again it is ethically
and scholarly a better option than [to] start with claims about [narratives] lacking coherence. Thus, to my mind the antonym of ‘coherence’ may change from ‘incoherence’ to complexity, incompleteness, brokenness, depending on the context. If and when you seek some clarity — and theoretical coherence — on this conundrum, we would be pleased!

A tall order, this one. Let us begin at the beginning by asking, once again: What do we mean by narrative coherence? And is it in fact something to move beyond?

A New Paradigm?

In their introduction to the volume, Hyvärinen and his co-authors wish ‘to suggest and nurture a kind of paradigmatic change within narrative studies’. Operating under the (questionable, in my view) presumption that the earlier phase of ‘the narrative turn’ tended to posit ‘a vital and many-layered relationship between narrative and coherence’, they wish to recast the relationship at hand. Whether the coherence at hand was linguistic, temporal, sequential, or what have you, it ‘was assumed as a norm for good and healthy life stories’. It was also ‘something that scholars ventured to investigate and to find, for instance, in life-story interviews’ (p. 1). These scholars might even bemoan gathering an incoherent narrative — unless, of course, they could find some interesting pathology (a silver lining, as it were) amidst the narrative debris. What, then, is coherence?

The coherence paradigm generally implies that i) good and competent narratives always proceed in a linear, chronological way, from a beginning and middle to an end, which also constitutes a thematic closure; ii) the function of narrative and storytelling is primarily to create coherence in regard to experience, which is understood as being rather formless (which may be understood as a merit or disadvantage of narrative); iii) persons live better and in a more ethical way if they have a coherent life-story and coherent narrative identity (or, in contrast, narrative identity is understood as being detrimental because it creates such coherence). (p. 1–2)

The present volume, Hyvärinen and his colleagues go on to assert, challenges this paradigm theoretically, methodologically, and ethically via both theoretical argumentation and by exploring specific cases that cannot be assimilated to the paradigm, those in which the stories told are ‘fragmented, disorganized or where the narrative text is superseded by the performance of the story’ (p. 2).

The preceding chapters have done well to remind us of what lies beyond narrative coherence as the coherence paradigm conceives it. They have also done well to render more subtly the notion of narrative identity, which, not unlike narrative itself, had been ‘thematised from the perspective of unity and coherence it was able to afford, not in terms of complexities, contradictions and undecided elements it might include’ (p. 8). As Hyvärinen et al. go on to note in this context, it had been maintained by Hayden White and others that narrative provided a kind of aesthetic counterweight to ‘life itself’, its messy, formless, ongoingness. The result, however, was ‘a binary opposition between the multitude of life and the full, fixed and eternal form of narrative’ (p. 5) that kept the coherence paradigm front and centre. Bearing this in mind, there would seem to emerge a dual task: to recognize the narrativity that is part and parcel of experience and, in so doing, to loosen the hold of the coherence paradigm. Narratives need not flatten out difference — at least not to the extent that had been posited; they are not to be understood merely as ordering machines, seeking (an illusory) unity, harmony, and closure amidst the chaotic openness of reality. Insofar as ‘coherence’ is equated with unity, harmony, and closure, therefore, it is indeed something to be moved beyond, and the present volume should be instrumental in hastening the process. But it could also be that the idea of coherence itself needs to be rethought, in a way that at once explodes the unity-harmony-closure equation while still retaining the sense-making ‘binding’ function that narrative is designed to serve. By ‘binding’, I have in mind the desire of survivors of trauma, among others, to speak — even while recognizing that their experience exceeds what words can say and that, consequently, whatever ‘account’ they might provide will fall short of the mark of containing it, expressing it adequately. Only by speaking, indeed only by narrating, will they be able to prevent the utter dispersion of experience, its evaporation into nothingness. By all indications, moreover, they will need and seek to find some measure of coherence — broadly conceived — in and through the act of narrating. That is to say, they will need to find a language commensurate with, if not ‘adequate’ to, their traumas and their lives. It will not, and cannot, be a language rooted in unity, harmony, and closure. But nor can it be a language wholly devoid of the sense-making, binding function to which I have referred. To move entirely beyond coherence is to move beyond narrative itself, and this, I believe, we cannot do. Nor do the contributors to this volume. The challenge, therefore, is to think anew both coherence and narrative in such a way as to render them more appropriate to the complexities of experience. As shall become clear, doing so will take us to the very edge of both.

Beyond 'Weird'

Jens Brockmeier and Maria Medved's chapter on 'Weird stories' is a fitting point of entry for the central ideas I want to convey. According to Brockmeier and Medved, 'the standard — Aristotelian — view on what represents narrative coherence in autobiographical narrative is misleading because it offers too narrow a picture of coherence and incoherence' alike.Appearances notwithstanding, 'not all weird
autobiographical stories are necessarily incoherent, and not all incoherent stories mirror a weird self' (p. 21). The 'main difficulty' of the Aristotelian approach, they go on to suggest, has to do with 'its tendency to decontextualize stories' from both the intersubjective context in which all stories are told (which includes the dialogic relationship between teller and told), the larger autobiographical context that is behind all self-narratives (which includes one's life history), and the socio-cultural context (which includes the social environments in which narrators share their lives with others') (p. 22). Exclude this trio of contexts from the fragmentary tales told by those with brain-based memory impairments and the like, and what they have to say may sound incoherent indeed. 'These people struggle to formulate narrative accounts, either because their linguistic and cognitive resources were seriously limited' or 'because they simply had no or very few autobiographical memories ... on which their stories could draw'. What came as a surprise to Brockmeier and Medved was that these individuals 'did not complain about changes in their sense of self and their identities in time' (p. 22).

This comes as a surprise to me as well. I have been trying to understand how my 86-year-old mother, who has been living with dementia for some years. On the one hand, she, like those Brockmeier and Medved have studied, tells stories that sometimes appear 'disconnected, fragmented, and implausible' (p. 22). Unlike them, however, she does complain, about who and what she has become. Lately, she has taken to waking up from afternoon naps only to find that she has no idea where she is, how she got there, or how long she's been there. She looks around to find somebody, anybody, who can answer these questions. But of course these people are unknown too. So their words don't stick. No; she needs to speak to me; I'm still in the picture, on the edge of consciousness. And when the phone rings sometime in the late afternoon and I see who is calling, I know how the conversation will unfold. 'Mark? I'm just trying to find out what's going on.' There's confusion in her voice, and perhaps panic; and there may be some rage too. Nothing makes any sense. She's reaching for a narrative through-line, an anchor, a story that makes sense. But she can't find one. It's at that point that I may try to explain to her, for the umpteenth time, that she's home (in an assisted living residence), that she's been there for some five years due to her memory problems—which, of course, she forgets she has, thus inaugurating yet another cycle of dialogue about her 'whereabouts'. As her response to this dialogue, it is almost always exactly the same: 'Oh, my god. Oh, my god. Oh, my god.' And then she might utter a Yiddish phrase that she used to hear from her own aging mother years ago, which translates roughly as, 'Oh, what becomes of a person.' It is at these junctures that she has an acute and very painful sense of her own loss and infirmity. She can complain about being 'dumb,' 'stupid,' a 'moron.' 'I have to be put in a nursery with infants, to be watched,' she said recently. 'Brainless. I don't have a brain anymore.'

On one level, my mother's situation seems quite different from what Brockmeier and Medved report. Instead of the 'unbroken continuity between their lives and selves before and after the neurotrauma of their tellers,' coupled with 'a strong sense of sameness' (p. 22), she displays a rather more broken continuity—a continuity in discontinuity, as it were — coupled with a disturbed sense of sameness: the 'I' who reflects looks upon the 'me' that has emerged only to find its radical difference and otherness. But of course it is precisely at this point that Brockmeier and Medved's account and my own come together once again. For even amidst the chaos and debris of her life, 'she' nevertheless remains, a witness to the devastation (see Freeman, 2009). Were we to rely on those 'rounded and autonomous Aristotelian stories told by an isolated individual' (p. 24), we might readily be lulled by 'deficit diagnoses', seeing in the more fragmentary stories told little more than testimony to the incoherence of narrative and identity alike. But the fact is, 'the coherence of stories ... can change relative to the rhetorical dynamic of the conversation in which the interplay among the possibly different strategies, intentions, and narrative competencies of the participants plays a central role' (p. 25). It can also change as a function of 'world knowledge', for instance knowledge about the life of the storyteller. So it is that when cast against the backdrop of her life history, a 'weird' story, of the sort told by one of Brockmeier and Medved's informants, 'begins to make more sense' (p. 26). More to the point still, 'obscene, bizarre, and weird' though her stories might have been, 'they were not incoherent stories, at least not when understood as ... attempts to struggle against the utter breakdown that fully realizing and accepting her desperate situation would have entailed' (p. 26).

I am not sure Brockmeier and Medved would want to frame it this way, but ultimately they seem to be issuing a plea on behalf of narrative coherence — albeit of a different sort than Aristotelian. It is one that is less 'rounded' and 'autonomous,' to be sure, and it is founded not so much upon the tidy flow of meaning from beginning to middle to end as it is upon a search for continuity and wholeness amidst the absurdities that have come one's way.

Lars-Christine Hydén's reflections on identity, self, and narrative extend these ideas by asking explicitly 'whether the inability to tell stories about the past and to establish a plot implies a loss of identity, replaced by a void never to be filled again' (p. 34). Rather than dealing with storytelling in 'representational' terms, Hydén wants to call attention to how it is 'used as a tool to establish and negotiate identity in specific situations' (p. 37). By doing so, he also wants to call attention to the 'narrative expansion of identities,' the way in which 'the teller is able to put forward something new about him/herself, something that he/she wants to highlight at a certain moment in the ongoing interaction. In this way, Hydén maintains, 'the teller is able to negotiate his or her identity with the audience by presenting
contrasts and alternatives, by stressing continuity or discontinuity. Indeed, there is a distinct sense in which, through such negotiation, 'the teller to some extent becomes someone else, or becomes at least a bit different compared to before the telling of the story' (p. 40). Whether in fact the teller 'becomes someone else' is an open question. Framing the issue this way implies that 'the' self that has existed previously has become wholly other. But insofar as the identity of the self is itself framed in more plural terms — as what William James (1981) refers to as a 'loosely construed thing', an identity 'on the whole', wrought out of multiplicity — one has simply become oneself, yet again. Having offered this qualification, let me hasten to acknowledge that Hydén does well in his chapter to underscore the fluid, interactive, performative dimension of narrative and identity alike. What he has also underscored is the idea that 'continuity' and 'discontinuity' are not to be understood as immutable properties of identity but are rather constructed and reconstructed anew in interaction. Whether the former is stressed or the latter thus depends on the nature and purpose of the interaction itself, especially how one wishes to 'position' oneself therein (e.g., Bamberg, 1997). 'In this way the organization of the storytelling event can be used as a tool for presenting identity', and 'concerns how the telling of autobiographical stories can be used to change the audience's perception and definition of the teller — and probably also the teller's perception of him- or herself' (p. 44).

How, then, does the issue of coherence enter this picture of narrative identity? In emphasizing the expansion of identities, Hydén seems to want to keep a version of coherence in the picture. 'I am this too', one essentially says through his or her performance. One can, of course, imagine instances in which coherence is undermined. During a dinner with the boss, I begin to act in a way that is 'out of character', and when I reflect on it later on I see just how crude my performance was. Or I get drunk and begin to do things that are quite unexpected, even offensive, given my usual ways of being in the world. 'He's not himself', an observer might say, hoping to calm the situation down. Even in these more extreme cases, it should be emphasized, there will likely be some attempt to tell a (more or less) coherent story after the fact. 'It was pathetic how I acted with my boss', I might eventually say. 'I wish I didn't have such a profound need to be affirmed by people'. Or: 'What a jerk I become after a few too many — the wild rogue, with his devil-may-care attitude. I ought to look at that part of me a little more closely'. There is no questioning the fact that 'one important aspect of identities is that they are performed through the storytelling event' and that such storytelling 'is a way of ritually changing the relationship and the social status of the participants' (p. 46) — even if only temporarily. 'In this sense the storytelling has a performative force', such that 'by telling the story a certain identity is put in place' (pp. 46). This implies that 'it is important when studying identity in social scientific situations to not only study stories, but also the way stories are told, received and negotiated' (p. 47). Doing so will surely call attention to the complexity, mutability, and multiplicity of narrative identity. It will also serve to undermine the notion of narrative coherence as strict self-sameness. But unless we do in fact 'become someone else' altogether — in which case the term 'identity' would no longer be applicable — there is bound to remain some measure of continuity and coherence amidst the flux. In people with intact brains, and memories, and enduring social relationships, how could the situation be otherwise?

Tarja Aaltonen offers some similar ideas in her consideration of 'mind-reading'. Acknowledging the interpretive problem often posed by aphasic speakers, the speech therapist, nonetheless, 'treats the speech acts of the aphasic man as if they were coherent, ... as if his speech had a point, ... as if it was meaningful' (p. 55). The communicative efforts of the aphasic's partners in dialogue are key in this context. Indeed, 'Research on strategies people use when communicating with aphasic individuals have shown rather unanimously that communicative partners attempt to support the smooth flow of conversation and try to resolve the problems created by aphasia' (p. 57). It is difficult to imagine doing otherwise: operating on the assumption — or at least the hope — that there is meaning immanent in the utterances being made, people generally do what they can, with aphasics among others, to make sense of things. Skill will be required. 'In her interpretation the speech therapist is filling in the gaps by combining the information she gleans from both what the aphasic speaker says and the prosodic and nonverbal communication'. Moreover, 'she also draws from her knowledge of rehabilitation practices in Finland' such that 'hypotheses' about what is being said rapidly emerge (p. 60). As Aaltonen goes on to suggest, the therapist is thus 'reading both the individual mind as well as the social mind and the meaning of the utterances is linked to both minds' (p. 60). Here too, taken out of context, the aphasic's utterances may appear quite nonsensical. But placed in context, and supported by the skills and knowledge of the therapist, the manifestly nonsensical becomes decidedly more meaningful. Indeed, writes Aaltonen, through the 'co-construction' of meaning, 'the aphasic man's utterances and non-verbal messages are interpreted and made a coherent part of the storyworld' (p. 62). It is this storyworld, she continues, that 'provides the presuppositions that enable the reader or the listener to construct a coherent understanding of the narrative that is told'. So it is that 'We were able to recognize that he was telling a story even without knowing from time to time what that story meant' (p. 63). From this perspective, therefore, coherence very much remains the rule. The challenge is precisely to locate it amidst debris of what is said.
Multiplicities and Coherences

There are some apparent exceptions to the rule. As Maria Tamboukou suggests in her chapter through her presentation of Gwen John, the very 'events' that transpire in John's life bear within them an instability, an unfixedness. Rather than being bounded occurrences, happening 'in' time, the letters she writes embody traces of virtual forces, narratives of intensities and passions, messages for the yet-to-come; they do not represent "realities" — they are pure events emitting signs and releasing forces, ... vectors of deterritorialization" (p. 74). Along these lines, 'subjects are dispersed, sometimes even emerging in the text as pre-individual singularities rather than coherent characters' (p. 75). There is no singular 'Gwen John' discernible through her letters; there are 'traces of a divergent series of states, difficult to be enveloped in the sequential unity and structure of classical narratology: they become broken narratives of nomadic distributions, while her paintings release forces of her narratability'. John thus 'lives out of order and her letters and paintings carry traces of disjointed space/time blocks' (p. 77). Indeed, Tamboukou asserts, 'there are many and different Johns and her character has both an actual and a virtual dimension'. At the same time, 'her letters hold differences together, not as oppositions but as multiplicities: despair — and — hope, woman — and — artist, inside — and — outside, solitude — and — communication'. One might ask: Is John an unusual person? Yes and no. Yes: she is unusual in the degree to which she is dispersed, heterogeneous, ever-reconstituted. Presumably, this is one of the reasons Tamboukou has elected to tell her story. But in other, perhaps more fundamental ways, it would seem that she is simply 'one of us': the events that comprise our own lives being, in the end, no more fixable than those comprising hers. Perhaps this too is a reason why Tamboukou wishes to tell her story. In John herself, we can find an emblem of the open event, 'in the sense that she is complicated, keeping all the selves that compose her in a continuous state of intensity' (p. 78). Strictly speaking, 'she' doesn't exist — not, at any rate, as some 'thing' that lives in a circumscribable time-space block. And nor do we. We are perpetual openings, becomings, nomadically on the move.

Are we heading anywhere? Nowhere in particular, it would seem. And yet John, and we, are ignited and indeed moved by desires, which draw us this way rather than that. So it is that 'John has written extensively in her letters about her love of the Parisian quarters, the city gardens and the grand boulevards, ... the countryside and the sea' and 'about her walks in the woods and her boat rides on the Seine' (p. 80). Even if she is heading nowhere in particular — no single teleologically-driven place — there is a certain selectivity at work, a space of desire that is at once open and delimited. We, as readers, are thus able to gather some sense of who she is, even in her dispersion and heterogeneity. To tell her story, Tamboukou cannot possibly resort to the beginning-middle-end framework of narrative enshrined in the aforementioned coherence paradigm. This tripartite structure, one might argue, itself relies on a conception of the event that is being cast into question here, one that remains tethered to Chronos rather than set free by Aion. And yet we read the story at hand, with interest, imagining and wondering, not only who she is but who we are. The question is sensible, if ultimately unanswerable.

'Identity created in narrative,' Linda Sandino adds, 'is always in process and incomplete' (p. 88). In the case of the artist especially, 'the employment of the character ... is made up of "fits and starts" rather than describing a coherent, stable selfhood' (p. 91). This is so for fairly clear reasons: Insofar as one devotes oneself to creation, and insofar as the objects one creates are themselves transformative of their creators, one is engaged in a process of constant re-creation. As Heidegger (1971) puts the matter, 'The artist is the origin of the work,' while at the same time 'The work is the origin of the artist.' (p. 45) What's more, even though a given work may be completed, brought to an end, this end is but a pausing before the next beginning. There is thus an irrevocable incompleteness to the process of creation, an unfinalizability. No work will ever, no work can ever, say it all. Indeed, in line with what Tamboukou tells us, the work of art is not to be considered a discrete event of saying, able to be encapsulated in discursive terms, but an open space of meaning, disclosure, unconcealment. 'The work,' Heidegger states succinctly, 'holds open the open of the world' (ibid).

Are artists unusual? The answer, once again, would seem to be yes and no. Yes, to the degree that they devote their lives to the creation of objects that hold open the open of the world and, folding back upon those who create them, hold open their very stories and identities. Not only may there emerge an unusual trajectory of fits and starts, as Sandino mentions, but, in some instances, outright breaks, giving-up and beginnings-again. Once again, however, it isn't only artists who are 'open works' but the entire lot of us, ever in the process of bringing into the world new 'objects' — children, meals, cars, book chapters — that return our way, transforming, yet again, the stories we might tell about the movement of our lives. There will be both change and, to a greater or lesser extent, continuity and coherence — manifested perhaps most visibly in the form of our own distinctive style of being and our own particular oeuvre of creations, whatever they may be. There can of course be radical changes in style in artists and non-artists alike — so much so that an outsider, utterly unaware of the context within which such changes have taken place — may become convinced that those in question have indeed become different people altogether. But most artists, and most non-artists too, would be extremely reluctant to claim this, not least because even amidst their, our, fits and starts or even radical breaks, there are threads of continuity. Whether the break in question is an artistic turnabout or a divorce or a mid-life crisis, there will more
than likely be some sense to the move, some way of linking up before and after — in retrospect if not at the time. There can, of course, be psychotic breaks too, in which the very connections between 'T' and 'me' have been severed. But that is, truly, another story altogether.

Let us explore more closely this language of 'breaking' through Hänninen and Koski-Jännes' chapter. Against the backdrop of those 'well-formed narratives' found in most research on 'ordinary people' when asked to tell the story of their lives, Hänninen and Koski-Jännes want to focus on a 'non-canonical' narrative. A researcher who has set out to find well-formed narratives from the data is tempted to relegate a non-chronological text to the margins in presenting her results. But it need not be this way. For 'she can, depending on her level of commitment to the canons of narrativity psychology, either see it as indicating some kind of abnormality or as a reminder that it can, after all, be quite normal not to write, indeed not even to grasp one's life, according to traditional narrative conventions' (p. 104). It may be that such non-canonical telling is intentional; 'a person with a fully coherent inner narrative may write about her life in an experimenting fashion'. Likewise, it may be that more canonical telling masks a rather hazier inner narrative. As Hänninen and Koski-Jännes rightly acknowledge in this context, 'There is no one-to-one relation between the narrative text [and] the author's inner life' (p.105). More important for present purposes is the fact that a manifestly 'deviant' text may well serve important psychological functions for the teller, its surface incoherence and contradictory sometimes signifying deep inner work. The story of Anna is just this kind of story. 'She moves between varying positions in relation to her life and to the text: between the hierarchical positions of a protagonist, a narrator and an author, between the immediacy of narration and distanced reflection, and between multiple same-level perspectives' (p.107). Her text is 'also at times populated by different same-level voices addressing, condemning and even haunting each other' (p.108). There is what Hänninen and Koski-Jännes term a 'distrust of language' as well, in the sense of a resistance to too-codified meanings and an attempt to find those words that will authentically convey what most needs to be said. Finally, and most prominently, is the text's lack of chronology; it does not proceed neatly from past to present.... On the contrary, its event structure is totally broken,' such that 'the major part of her story dwells in the "timeless" internal universe of crisscrossing thoughts and memories'. Was Anna a self-conscious postmodernist, mixing it up for the social scientists? Or was her text 'rather an intuitive choice that reflects her relationship to her current life problems!' (p.110).

Although there may be elements of the former contributing to the text, Hänninen and Koski-Jännes lean more to the latter in their understanding of Anna and her world. Something is being done in and through her fashioning of this deviant text. Perhaps some of the 'devastating events' that have come her way 'are made bearable' by the 'distancing' displayed therein. Perhaps the fact that there are 'no strong connections of cause and effect' signifies that she is more in the mode of exploration and speculation than causation. There is no canonical story to be told at this point in time. Anna remains very much 'in process', and to stop the process in the name of a well-formed story would be defensive and destructive of her inner reality. Nevertheless, certain themes emerge, most notably 'her relations to other people and her relation to herself, and the tensions between these two poles' (p.114). Even amidst the story's deviance, therefore, there arise some plotlines, candidates for making sense of what is being said. Indeed, Hänninen and Koski-Jännes speak of a 'core contradiction', between 'relationality' and 'autonomy', their supposition being that, in some way, Anna is trying to work through the contradiction at hand. 'Ambivalent' though she is 'about describing her life in story form,' she still seems to "find the thread, find the shape of her path". In Hänninen and Koski-Jännes' view, 'Anna's text shows the pieces of a puzzle but does not assemble them as a picture' (p.115). Her story is like a dream in this respect, a somewhat fragmented constellation of images and plots-in-formation, pointing at times in the direction of a meaning but moving along multiple associative pathways.

Recognizing once more the possibility that Anna's text reflects her desire to write in an artistic way, Hänninen and Koski-Jännes go on to raise the more likely possibility that 'the characteristics of Anna's text ... reflect her striving towards a more authentic inner narrative'. Operating on the assumption that 'the search for self-understanding seems indeed to be the most prominent motive in Anna's story' it 'is not just any self-understanding' that will do: 'she seems to want to find a solid and authentic understanding which she could rely on' (p.116) — elusive though it may be at the present moment. It is curious that Hänninen and Koski-Jännes go on to discuss 'the psychological meaning of the incoherence and unconventional structure of Anna's text and how it can be related to her inner narrative'. I suppose one can consider her text 'unconventional'. But I am not at all sure why it would be considered 'incoherent'. Taken out of context and background knowledge, shorn of interpretation, sure: of it might seem downright senseless, akin, perhaps, to the utterings of the brain-injured or demented. But this would be precisely to mistake the manifest text for the latent thoughts that inform it; and as the authors' own interpretive unpacking of Anna's story has shown, it is imperative to avoid this sort of conflation. Is it true that 'some people are just episodic in their thinking about their life'? And, 'Could this be true of Anna?' Well, I hesitate to say it again, but yes and no: Yes, in the sense that 'her memory operates on the basis of vivid images rather than on verbal storylines' (p.116). But no, in the sense that, whatever her mode of telling may be — whether through words or paint, chronologically or non-chronologically, caussally or non-caussally — it seems to represent an attempt to move beyond the episodic, toward some semblance of
narrative coherence. Along these lines, the kind of 'shuffling of one's memories' one finds in Anna's text 'may serve as a necessary step in creating a fresh and authentic interpretation of the past and in avoiding premature consolidation of a new story' (p. 116). Well said. Moving 'beyond narrative coherence', therefore, may very well be a 'transitory phase' in Anna's case, paving the way, ultimately, to one that is deeper, more real — *true and authentic* narrative coherence, one might say, rather than false and inauthentic.

In their concluding comments, Hänninen and Koski-Jänes evince their reluctance 'to take a definitive stance as regards whether a coherent and chronological understanding of one's life is in general superior to an incoherent and fragmentary one' (p. 117). As far as I can tell, there is no reason whatsoever to assume that a 'chronological understanding' of one's life is superior to a non-chronological one. I also see no reason for one's narrative to be 'well-formed' in the Aristotelian sense. In fact, I would tend to regard most well-formed narratives with a measure of suspicion, and for one very basic reason. Most of our lives are quite messy, and to the extent that we are inclined to tell about them — some people are, some aren't — the resultant stories ought to be messy in turn. Anna is to be commended for seeing this. Perhaps one day there will emerge 'a solid and coherent story that welds together the discrepant parts of [her] life' (p. 117). Or, perhaps not. What would be unlikely is for Anna to remain in a purely episodic mode, one in which she is fully resigned to a fragmentary, saccadic, senseless inner story. Somehow or other, she will need to find that particular mode of narrative coherence that suits her life and being, that allows her to carry on with some sense of connection to what matters most, in all of its messy multiplicity.

To Speak the Unspeakable

Alison Perez, Yishai Tobin, and Shifra Shag's chapter on the broken discourse of Israeli bus drivers also serves to show the latent coherence within the manifest text. 'In particular, the interviewees' use of personal pronouns throughout the narrative — while initially seemingly arbitrary and "illogical" — emerged through deeper analysis as not only following a pattern of non-random distribution, but also representative of specific, systematic communicative strategies' (p. 121). Notice that, here as elsewhere, I have referred to manifest and latent properties of the text itself. Important to emphasize in this context is that the latent properties eventually to be disclosed only emerge in and through *interpretation*: only then, after the fact, can we speak of what might exist beyond the *seemingly* incoherent, the arbitrary and the illogical. As such, one might ask: Is the coherence revealed to be 'located' in the text, the interpretation, or both? My own inclination is to say 'both'; for while interpretation is in fact needed to move from manifest to latent, what is disclosed through the process nonetheless refers back to the text itself. In the present case, the interviewees' use of personal pronouns might have escaped the naked eye. Eventually, however, we come to see patterns in the text itself that can plausibly be said to have been there all along, awaiting savvy interpreters to find them. So it is that Perez et al. maintain their analysis 'emerged directly from the interview transcript, as these discursive phenomena simply commanded attention, almost screaming that "something interesting" was happening within and surrounding them'. Admittedly, 'It took a great deal of time ... to find the "missing link" that would tie these various linguistic signs and discursive forms into a cohesive story explaining the larger picture'. In fact, 'It was only after conducting a thorough analysis ... that we were able to understand the central message' (p. 136).

*Only after*: Putting aside those instances of narrative coherence that wear their coherence outright, Aristotelian-style, what we find in many of the chapters in this volume is that narrative coherence is sometimes *deferred*, 'put on hold', until some interpretive work has been carried out. Then, after the fact, we come to see a greater measure of coherence than meets the eye. Whether we frame the matter spatially, via terms like manifest and latent, or temporally, by speaking of deferral, the story is much the same. Strictly speaking, coherence — and *meaning* more generally — is neither 'found' nor 'made'. Rather, there is a distinct sense in which it is found and made at one and the same time — or, as I have put it elsewhere, *meaning is found through being made* (Freeman, 2002, p. 24). I am speaking here of *poesis*. On one level, I have suggested, the term highlights the constructive, imaginative dimension entailed in the process of meaning-making. But this very process of meaning-making has as its ultimate aim disclosing what is there, in the world — including the world of the text.

Let us return to Perez et al's chapter with these ideas in mind. Dani, their interviewee, 'appears to directly contradict statements he made mere sentences beforehand; and yet', they suggest once more, 'there may indeed be an internal logic to Dani's discourse. Perhaps what may appear to be contradictions are actually the signs of Dani attempting to make sense of his ambivalence and his own realizations that some of his statements may seem to be paradoctical' (p. 139). Dani's specific situation aside, the authors' position on the coherence of the narratives derived from their work is clear enough: 'Embedded within the moments and positions in which certain linguistic signs are used, there is a meaning, a message, a systematic nature, and a significance to both this usage and the surrounding context' (p. 140). I must confess to being just a bit uncertain about this claim. Do *all* of their narratives have a message and a systematic nature? Can all of them be 'decoded' in the way Dani's has been? One might also ask, more generally: To what extent do we, as interpreters, seek coherence in the narratives we explore? And how often do we
"find" it in narratives that may actually not warrant it? 'Seek and ye shall find'. But might it not be the case that some narratives are as incoherent as they appear to be? A still more vexing question might be raised at this point as well: How do we know, how can we know, which narratives bear within them a latent coherence and which do not? Is the question even a meaningful one?

Here, we come full circle and can turn once more to Molly Andrews' chapter on traumatic testimony. On the face of it, her chapter would appear to be different in kind than virtually all the others. For, by all indications she is committed, for ethical reasons, to honour and preserve the manifest form in which survivors' words are uttered. 'The central dilemma for many survivors of trauma,' she writes, 'is that they must tell their stories, and yet their stories cannot be told. The experiences which they have endured defy understanding; the very act of rendering them into narrative form lends them a coherence which they do not have' (p. 4). As Andrews points out, this situation may in fact be an extreme version of the more general relationship between experience and narrative. 'By structuring our experiences into traditional narrative form, do we lend them a coherence and unity which raw life does not contain?' (p. 152). We have already established that there is an element of pòiesis, meaning-making, entailed in the interpretive process itself and that coherence, in turn, is derived — issues? is discovered? is articulated? — after the fact. It is true: the transformation of experience into narrative form 'is a product of human creation' (p. 152). It is also true that we sometimes 'force' narratives onto experience in a way that dilutes and detracts from the autonomous power of such experience. Here, we enter some perilous territory:

Life is characterized by an infinite unfolding of time. There is no beginning, middle or end, just a state of forever continuing. We organize our life and our past into structured events precisely because that contains them for us, renders them more manageable. We cannot keep a "forever continuing" entity in our heads; it surpasses even the great potential of our imagination, and is something which we can only dip into once in a while, when we afford ourselves the opportunity to contemplate the structure of life. But on a daily basis, we do not do this, we cannot do this, the task is simply too enormous. And so experience is broken down into constituent parts. From this partitioning, we gain the ability to make sense of what we are living. But we lose something as well. Although our life can be recounted as story, there are aspects of our human experience which cannot be contained within the boundaries of a conventional narrative structure. This is particularly so in trauma testimony. (p. 153–154)

Andrews is surely right to note that there are aspects of experience that cannot be contained within a conventional narrative structure. That this is 'particularly so' in the case of trauma testimony stands to reason as well: according to some, there is no language, narrative or otherwise, that can adequately convey the enormity of traumatic experience. But Andrews seems to be going a significant step farther here, claiming in essence that narrative cannot help but falsify 'raw life'. The problem, therefore, is not coherence per se but narrative itself.

'Traumatic testimony', Andrews continues, 'is marked by what is not there: coherence, structure, meaning, comprehensibility' (p. 155). It is also marked by a different dimension of time — 'trauma time' — than the linear time that is said to characterize the temporality of narrative, with its beginnings, middles, and ends. But, time, I would argue, is not to be equated with linear time (see Freeman, 1998; Ricoeur, 1981). And while there surely is a distinction to be made between 'raw life' and the stories we might tell about it at some subsequent point in time, it is not at all clear that the former is as devoid of narrative — or, more appropriately, narrativity — as Andrews implies or that narrative is quite as 'imposing'. Yes: 'the imposition of a traditional narrative structure compromises the attempt to speak the unspeakable' (p. 156). But all this means, in my view, is that it is precisely this 'traditional narrative structure' that needs to be gotten beyond, not narrative itself.

But what about coherence? Drawing on the work of Hayden White (1987), Andrews writes, 'We urgently want and need our narratives to make sense, to be characterised by a logical sequencing, and towards this end, we instil in them a wholeness which is not theirs' (p. 156). There is no questioning the tendency. Along with White, Kermode (1979) notes that we all seek narrative 'fulfillment, ... the center that will allow the senses to rest, at any rate for one interpreter, at any rate for one moment' (p. 73). Paul Smith (1988) goes a step farther, speaking of our 'claustraphobic' inclinations, our desire for narrative closure. Insofar as narrative coherence connotes such claustraphobic inclinations, then it too must be gotten beyond, particularly in the context of cases such as those Andrews is examining. To demand this form of coherence from those who have experienced unspeakable atrocities is to do violence to them. On some level, again, experience always exceeds narrative. In extreme situations, this fact becomes that much more clear. Also clear is the fact that there are more, and less, appropriate demands for narrative coherence. When investigating a petty crime, it may be important fashion as coherent a story as possible, such that in the end one can proclaim: case closed. But when dealing with experiences tied to large-scale political traumas, such as those related in the transcripts of the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it is imperative to not elide 'messy' discourse for the sake of the tellable story.

As noted earlier, Andrews is speaking here of 'limit events', and these 'pose a challenge to narrative, because they lie beyond language, and possibly beyond representation'. At the same time, of course, there still remains the desire to speak on the part of many victims of trauma, and there still remains the need to tell their stories in a way that is somehow commensurate with, if not entirely adequate to or representative of, their experience. 'Just as these events demand a new language, so
too they demand a new method of representation. Andrews therefore asks: 'What might this new representation look like? And might new forms of narrative be a useful tool in this most challenging pursuit?' (p. 184). It is here, at this juncture, that we can see most clearly the import of this very volume. The challenge at hand is neither to move beyond narrative nor beyond coherence. Rather, it is to find forms of narrative and modes of coherence that move beyond — well beyond — the classical model in order to do justice to reality, in all of its potential unruliness and beauty, violence and horror. In some narratives, there is simply no room for consolation or redemption — indeed no room even for the sort of 'followability' that is generally associated with stories. And certainly, 'there may be no promise that telling leads to healing.' At the same time, 'the very act of speech — no matter how garbled or seemingly nonsensical — can begin the process of reconnecting one to the world of the living' (p. 164).

Do such acts of speech or writing deserve to be called narrative acts? 'Traumatic testimonies might not provide listeners with a beginning, middle, and end' (p. 165). I therefore ask: Is it possible to think the idea of narrative — and narrative coherence — apart from these classical categories? Some would say no; do away with this temporal triad and one does away with narrative itself. But it is precisely here, in thinking both narrative and narrative coherence anew, that the challenge at hand begins to emerge in full force. As Andrews has pointed out, the classical categories — endings in particular — frequently seem downright impertinent in traumatic testimony, for there may be no ending, no conclusion, and surely no lesson. But these classical categories, I have suggested, may not work much better in the context of more ordinary lives, like most of our own. As Paul Ricoeur points out in *Onself as Another* (1992),

there is nothing in real life that serves as a narrative beginning; memory is lost in the hazes of early childhood; my birth and, with greater reason, the act through which I was conceived belong more to the history of others — in this case, to my parents — than to me. As for my death, it will finally be recounted only in the stories of those who survive me. I am always moving toward my death, and this prevents me from ever grasping it as a narrative end. (p. 160)

So much for the classical categories: at the most, it seems, all we can speak about, with any cogency and clarity, are 'middles'.

Hayden White and others are partially right when they note that 'real life' is different from the stories we subsequently tell about it, particularly those stories that entail false coherence, with the rough edges of experience smoothed out, even erased. But they err, I believe, in separating real life and narrative in the way they have. 'Without leaving the sphere of everyday experience,' Ricoeur (1991) adds, 'are not inclined to see in a given chain of episodes in our own life something like stories that have not yet been told, stories that demand to be told, stories that offer points of anchorage for the narrative.' Following Ricoeur, we are 'entangled' in stories; narrating is a 'secondary process' that is 'grafted' onto this entanglement. 'Recounting, following, understanding stories is then simply the continuation of these unspoken stories' (p. 30).

As for narrative coherence, there is no question but that it entails some measure of what Ricoeur refers to as a 'synthesis of heterogeneous elements', a seeing-together of the disparate and different. There need not be unity, in the sense of a single, circumscribed narrative arc. Nor, I would argue, need there be chronology or linearity; many of the most mundane stories we tell about experience move beyond chronology and linearity. What, then, does there need to be in order for us to use the magical word 'narrative'? There needs to be an aspect of 'after-the-factness', a looking-backward, that somehow binds together, however loosely, the 'heterogeneous elements' about which Ricoeur speaks. In no way does this mean that narratives deal with the past alone; they can deal with the present and future as well. Nor, emphatically, does it mean that the seeing-together and binding-together process must culminate in coherent stories in the classical style. In point of fact, such stories are of minimal applicability to real life — or at least those aspects of real life that matter. 'I went to the store, bought some wine, and came home.' The end: case closed, once again. When it comes to the messy stuff of life, on the other hand, the classical categories break down.

How messy is it? Messy enough that the classical categories will not suffice but not so messy that we need to relinquish entirely the idea of narrative coherence. Something similar may be said of another fraught term, namely 'identity'. And here, the story is much the same. I refer once again to Paul Ricoeur (1991):

> Our life, when then embraced in a single glance, appears to us as the field of a constructive activity, borrowed from narrative understanding, by which we attempt to discover and not simply to impose from outside the *narrative identity* which *constitutes us*. I am stressing the expression 'narrative identity' for what we call subjectivity is neither an incoherent series of events nor an immutable substantiality, impervious to evolution. This is precisely the sort of identity which narrative composition alone can create through its dynamism. (p. 32)

Neither incoherent nor immutable, neither senseless nor static, 'we' persist, never quite the same and, with rare exceptions, never entirely different. Even amidst profound difference, there is a measure of identity. And, as we have seen here, even amidst manifest arbitrariness, illogic, senselessness, and incoherence, there is a measure of coherence — or at least, in the case of the victims of limit events, a process of 'reconnecting one to the world of the living.' In a way, this process of reconnecting may itself be seen as a mode of coherence, binding together what remains of the human community even amidst its devastation.
References


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