

Narrativa Epidemica: Benjamin, Barthes and the Narrative Turn in the Human Sciences

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In his essay “The Storyteller,” published in 1936, Walter Benjamin would assert “the art of storytelling is coming to an end” (83)—a claim premised on the notion that storytelling was essentially a communicative act grounded, as Benjamin phrased it, in “the ability to exchange experiences.” The elegiac note struck in the essay reflected Benjamin’s conviction that experience itself had “fallen in value” and, indeed, as Benjamin saw it, “was continuing to fall into bottomlessness” (83-84), a view prompted in part by what Benjamin took to be the devastating impact of the First World War and the psychological consequences of modern mechanized violence—the “destructive torrents and explosions” (84) which had killed and mutilated millions on the battlefields of the First World War: “at the end of the war men returned from the battlefield” traumatized and mute; they had “grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience” (84). Benjamin’s views on the diminished place of story-telling—and the possibilities of communication on some more personal level—were tied into what Benjamin believed to be the diminished forms of self and community associated with modernity and the rise of the mass-produced commodity, mass consumption, mass entertainment, and the mass-circulation periodical.

Ironically, as storytelling, in Benjamin’s view, was on its way to becoming a lost art, narrative as discourse form was attracting ever-more intense scrutiny

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from specialists working in anthropology, folklore and literary studies. In its earliest phases—in studies, for example, by Vladimir Propp on Russian folktales first published in 1928—this work sought not so much simply to record, preserve and transmit ‘tales,’ but, at a theoretical level, to identify what in terms of language and text—conventions, rules, elements—came into play in the telling of stories. Structuralist approaches to story-telling beginning in the nineteen-forties and fifties under the influence of Propp and the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure would explicitly address questions of what it was about story-telling that distinguished it from other forms of discourse—I take Roland Barthes here to be an iconic figure—but in certain key respects structuralist narratology would bear out, in particular in its assumptions about the relation between language and ‘event,’ Benjamin’s claims about the diminished place of ‘experience.’ I mean this in the sense that under the influence of Saussure and Claude Levi-Strauss structural narratologists were in search of the rules governing what Barthes and others would see as the purely discursive dimension of storytelling—a ‘grammar’ of narrative—rather than some particular event or order of experience as the basis of storytelling. Barthes would state “le récit est une grande phrase,” meaning that narrative or story-telling was subject to rules or operations that might be identified in the same way that grammatical rules governing syntax can be specified, and by implication that, as a form of discourse, story was essentially autonomous with respect to any event or situation prior or external to its ‘telling’ in verbal form. This assumption gave rise to a plethora of hypotheses regarding what such ‘rules’ might comprise. Tzvetan Todorov, Gerald Prince, Julia Kristeva, Claude Bremond, A. G. Greimas and others would all construe their narratological projects as rooted in linguistics or some hybrid ‘grammar of action.’ The results, however, were not, with perhaps

one or two exceptions, particularly satisfactory, and none in the array of hypotheses put forward ever attracted a consensus. Barthes himself eventually deemed narratology a failed enterprise; indeed, he called it “fraudulent”: “we had not found the underlying order of plot because there was none” (cited Tilley, 1).

Curiously, or perhaps not so curiously given the nature of the academic beast, this failure only prompted a second wave of theorists to cast their nets more widely. Despite the skepticism which had greeted the first forays of the structuralists and notions of fictional story-telling as rule-governed discourse, researchers in an ever-wider array of fields—history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, theology, law, medicine, policy and public administration studies—would be persuaded ‘narrative’ was more than simply a matter of what we might normally think of in connection with the term—i.e. the traditional plotted forms (novel, short story, drama, tale, ballad, film script, etc.). In the course of the past two decades, ‘narrative’ has come to be viewed as a mode of discourse (and, indeed, a mode of knowing) which opened up areas of experience which prevailing research paradigms in a broad array of fields, often viewed as dominated by quantitative or statistically-oriented methods, failed to account for. Indeed, with what has been called the ‘cognitive turn’ in the human sciences, there has emerged a conviction that narrative (understood as a capability for perceiving and ordering events in a sequence in such a way as culminate in a particular outcome) was an essential aspect of mental functioning governing a subject’s perception of others, his/her relation to their culture, indeed, congruent with the very notions of self and identity. Referring to what he calls ‘cognitive narratology,’ David Herman has written that “narrative forms part of the basic mental equipment with which humans set about gaining knowledge of their own

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and others' minds" (Herman, *What Is Narratology?*, 323). Given what has become a now-widespread view that narrative is part of our "basic mental equipment," it's probably safe to say there is virtually no discipline in the humanities or social sciences—or other fields, such as legal studies, business, or policy studies—which has not been impacted by the notion that we see and understand the world around us (either on a personal level or from our position within some larger collective organization) in terms of narrative; which is to say, by the view the mind processes, orders and interprets information about the world around it in terms of a capability for locating persons, situations and events in coherent story-like sequences. Thus Jay D. White, in a volume entitled *Taking Language Seriously: The Narrative Foundations of Public Administration Research*, would contend that "all forms of knowledge development and use are fundamentally a matter of narration and storytelling" (xi); White asserts that "whenever we speak authoritatively as scholars about the nature of anything, we do so through language in the form of a story ... All research is fundamentally a matter of storytelling or narration. Any type of knowledge, even scientific knowledge, that we might have about public administration is basically a story grounded in language and discourse and expressed in narrative form through conversations" (5-6).

But if the 'narrative turn' in the human sciences, or medicine or policy studies, marks a re-orientation within the conventional academic disciplines—and indeed has been seen to constitute the beginnings of the new trans-disciplinary field of narrative studies—what precisely the term 'narrative' means and how narrative as discourse, or as concept and tool, is to be deployed across the disciplines remains subject to considerable variation. On the one side are the studies of a psychologist like Jerome Bruner who argues that notions of

personality and identity are grounded in the stories we tell about ourselves (“In the end we become the autobiographical narrative by which we tell about our lives [694]… a life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not “how it was” but how it is told and retold” [708])—a view, insofar as it presupposes a narrator telling a story about a protagonist or an ‘actant,’ which does not, at least in terms of conceptual framework, differ markedly from approaches narratologists were exploring. On the other side, are studies like Donald E. Polkinghorne’s *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (1988), Emery Roe’s *Narrative Policy Analysis. Theory and Practice* (1994), Jay D. White’s *Taking Language Seriously: The Narrative Foundations of Public Administration Research* (1999), Barbara Czarniawska’s *Narratives in Social Science Research* (2004), Catherine Kohler Riessman’s *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (2008), and Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein’s *Analyzing Narrative Reality* (2009), which envision the narrative subject functioning on the level of the group, collectivity or organization. While Polkinghorne was attempting in part to revalidate a tradition associated with the early Chicago School of sociology, which relied on extended interviews (for instance, of members of various immigrant groups) and, to a certain extent, sought to balance out the larger claims of the group with the specificity of the individual life story, he was also advocating the use of ‘narrative’ as a means for better grasping the (as-it-were) ‘human’ dimension of the contemporary business corporation. In considering how business consultants can make use of narrative, Polkinghorne notes: “The notion of organizational change or transformation is linked to the concept of change in an association’s realm of meaning, that is, its culture, which is expressed through the particular narratives that carry and create meaning that informs the group. The narratives—also called

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organizational myths, stories, sagas, and legends—function to help members to interpret and signify the purpose of the organization and the role of its individual members” (122). The implications for the field of business consulting, at least for those who might emphasize the significance of narrative, is that employees can only be properly motivated where they have a sense of the narrative (and what this would imply in terms of roles, goals, obstacles to be overcome, etc.) to which, in some sense, they are contributing.

Emery Roe’s *Narrative Policy Analysis. Theory and Practice* (1994)—a work which focuses in particular on those addressing environmental issues or problems of economic development—argues that policy analysts can arrive at satisfactory solutions only where a “multiplicity of different and conflicting voices” are recognized, “because the more voices there are, the better the idea about the metanarrative” (12). While both Polkinghorne and Roe view narratives of organizations or communities as implicating a wide group of subjects and thus display heightened awareness of the plurality of voices and diverse often conflicting individual narratives which surround a particular issue, they also envision the end-result of the consultative process as an ‘organizational myth’ or ‘metanarrative’ transcending any one particular voice or subject (even where the aim in bringing together diverging accounts is ideally a consensus to which individuals can lend their consent). In this sense, as in some of the early work on historical narrative by Louis Mink and Hayden White, or in Homi Bhabha’s analysis of post-colonial narrative (Bhabha refers, for instance, to ‘the nation as a form of narrative’ [3]), Polkinghorne and Roe envision narrative in terms of trajectories of which a group or organization is the operative mode of agency.

The formulation of policy affecting a particular group or corporation in

terms of a ‘narrative’ may in fact be methodologically more productive (i.e. in terms of understanding how issues come to be defined and resolved) than, for instance, polling, statistical surveys, or reliance on some already-existing organizational model, but it nevertheless leaves open—at least for those who approach this particular use of story from the fields of literary studies or discourse analysis—the question of agency itself, or, what in the parlance of more conventional forms of literary criticism, are referred to as ‘narrator’ and/or ‘character.’ If narrative, in the sense in which Polkinghorne and Roe use the term, continues to imply some of the most basic attributes we associate with narrative—a discourse with beginning, progression and resolution of some sort—it either suggests the mode of agency which propels the story being told is, at some level, that of a collectivity or, indeed, in certain odd ways, something that occasionally seems simply to bracket out the notion of character or agency. What Roe calls a “common definition of story” refers to a set of statements which have “a beginning, middle and an end and revolves around a sequence of events or positions in which something is said to happen or from which something is said to follow” (36). There is certainly nothing here that can be said to be wrong or ‘falsifiable,’ if only because it would be difficult to come up with a formulation working at any higher level of abstraction.

While definitions of this sort may allow us to bring together a broad array of discourses (philosophical narrative, legal narrative, ‘nation as narrative,’ ‘self as narrative,’ culture as narrative, history as narrative, the psychoanalytic narrative) under the rubric of ‘narrative,’ such definitions inevitably compel us to return to the kinds of concerns voiced by Benjamin when he lamented the ‘end of story-telling’ and to ask where we stand today with respect to the

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study of more conventional, i.e. generally fictional, forms of narrative—which both Polkinghorne and Roe invoke in seeking to legitimize their own projects. Once we begin to see narrative built into our perceptions and processing of actual events and situations, can we—or ought we—continue or make the effort to distinguish fictional forms of story from other orders of narrative (historical narrative, philosophical narrative, policy studies narrative, medical narrative, law and narrative)?

I raise this question partly because even as we may welcome the ‘narrative turn’ and approaches to the solicitation and assessing of information which, from a policy-or business-studies angle, strike us as more pluralistic, there remain key differences between the narratives Polkinghorne and Roe, and even for that matter Bruner and the ‘identity-as-narrative’ school of psychologists, seek to bring into focus, and the sorts of narrative we encounter in fictional form—whether tale, novel, short story or in cinematic or dramatic form. While orally-communicated narratives or narrative in the form, for instance, of a widely circulated novel also constitute discourses available to broader communities or publics (and thus could be said to possess a collective dimension), fictional story-telling continues, I would argue, to display certain distinctive features which set it apart from narrative in its historical, legal, national, organizational, or any more broadly-conceptualized forms. If the ‘narrative turn’ in the human sciences may be of any use to those working with fictional narrative, it may be in the extent to which it throws into relief features which distinguish ‘literary’ or ‘fictional’ forms of narrative from the now much more broadly conceptualized universe of narrative discourse.

Briefly, I would suggest that any attempt to characterize fictional narrative might productively begin with the sort of issues Benjamin addressed in his

own account of traditional story-telling. In postulating what has been lost when “narrative is removed from the realm of living speech” (87) and “experience is (no longer) passed on from mouth to mouth” (84) (a development Benjamin takes to be “a symptom of the secular productive forces of history” [87]), Benjamin asserts that, at the most fundamental level, authentic story-telling has to do with that which is communicated on a person-to-person level. In suggesting that what follows the loss of this aural/oral dimension, which is to say, the emergence of print culture and the rise of the novel (“What distinguishes the novel from the story is its essential dependence on the book” [87]), Benjamin sees the modern writer and reader reflecting modes of the social (or a curiously a-social form of the social) specific to modern industrial, urban societies. Despite “beginnings which go back to antiquity” (88), the novel only flourishes once there arises a middle class in the modern sense of the term (“the rise of the novel” coincides with “the beginning of modern times” [87]) and the particular emphasis on the individual subject that accompanied the emergence of societies dominated by conditions of social and personal life specific to an emerging middle class. With a broad, widely dispersed public, this was a world marked by the distance separating the story-telling writer from his audience. As Benjamin writes, “the birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual,” and just as “The novelist has isolated himself” (87) so too “the reader of a novel is isolated” (100).

If Benjamin sees the rise of the modern novel as in some ways symptomatic of a loss of the personal (and the sort of authentic ‘folk wisdom’ that true storytellers—whose masters were artisans not artists—passed along on a person-to-person basis), we can surmise some of the consequences of what Benjamin posits as the intrinsically disjunctive nature between the modern author as

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‘producer’ of fictional narrative, and the reader as recipient. In noting that the isolation of writer and reader goes hand in hand with a ‘compartmentalizing’ of experience characteristic of modern bourgeois life, Benjamin observes, for instance, how in “in the course of the nineteenth century bourgeois society has, by means of hygienic and social, private and public institutions (made) it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying, (which was) once a public process ... In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living” (93-94).

Benjamin’s comments here anticipate Juergen Habermas’s account of the growing divide between public and private spheres characteristic of modern middle-class societies, as reflected, in particular, in the bourgeois subject ‘retreating into the privacy of his home’—a situation which gives rise to a new sort of curiosity about what goes on ‘behind closed doors,’ and what, in the absence of publicly-displayed models of behavior, constituted conduct to be emulated or shunned. Once the modern bourgeois reader has been, as it were, sequestered in the privacy of his or her own home, there arises a new sort of uncertainty or forms of anxiety (Benjamin speaks of “the perplexity of the living” [87]) characteristic of any society in which the private sphere is increasingly separated off from public life, whether the public sphere is conceived as a marketplace in the commercial sense where sellers compete for buyers, or as political arena in which individuals and groups vie for power, or as a ‘marketplace of ideas.’ As the ‘public sphere,’ in its various forms, comes to be marked to greater or lesser degree by forms of competition and rivalry, the private sphere is defined as a realm in which the subject is socially and psychologically insulated from the sorts of aggressiveness, scrutiny or accountability increasingly characteristic of interaction in the public sphere. As the public sphere is

characterized, on the level of lived experience, by ever more competitive and thus ever more isolating forms of experience, it gives rise to a compensatory need for spaces where individuals are not—or not immediately—subject to the demands placed on them in their roles within the realms of the political, the economic or the cultural: viz. as citizen propounding a particular ideal or principle, as producer/laborer/employee, or as defender of a particular aesthetic form or style. But this situation gives rise simultaneously to a demand for knowledge of what within the private sphere—the realm of the family, the domestic, the intimate—shapes our notions of the subject and thus, in whatever way, might conceivably influence a subject’s public behavior. As public life comes to be constituted as an arena of competing productive, political, and ideological/cultural forces (whether on the part of individuals, groups, firms, political parties, organizations), and thus what transpires in private becomes, correspondingly, ever more insulated from public life, there emerges a demand for forms of representation which enable the reader to ‘see,’ learn and know what ‘others’ do—not so much with respect to their functions in the workplace, or as consumers displaying their acquisitions in Benjamin’s arcade, or as participants/spectators at public events (whether town meeting or theatrical performance, etc.), as with respect to what becomes increasingly closed off from public view: the private space within the domicile or, an immediate corollary of this, the inner life of a character, not immediately revealed in public. The modern novel—or one particular form of the modern novel—emerges in response to this deficit; beginning, arguably, in the English novelistic tradition with the work of Samuel Richardson who conceived his novels, notably, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), as ‘primers,’ providing models of behavior as an ascendant middle class sought to negotiate a *modus vivendi* with an aristocracy

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in economic and political decline. While Benjamin denies the modern novelist the sort of knowledge he reserved for the pre-modern story-teller, he nevertheless speaks, in terms borrowed from Georg Lukacs, of the novelist seeking to delineate “the meaning of life” (99), something to be sought in solving the problem of what Lukacs famously called the “*metaphysische Obdachlosigkeit*” (“*metaphysical homelessness*”) of the modern subject. The modern novel, in this sense, seeks to provide us with some knowledge of what ‘home’—or the domestic in some more general sense—might mean in the modern world or of what in modern life might provide such shelter; which is to say, knowledge of what remains closed off to public view

Following this line of argument, we can begin to suggest that the ‘plots’ of fictional narrative almost invariably hinge on issues of private and domestic life—courtship, marriage, relationship between parent and child, interaction among siblings; which is to say, dimensions of personal life which remain occulted from public view. Modern novelists assumed a critical function and were elevated to the position of importance they came to occupy in western cultures from the eighteenth century onwards by virtue of a capability for seeing into, transcribing and commenting on events otherwise closed off to public scrutiny. It is in this sense, too, that the novel, at least in its eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century forms, assumes a specific social function—that of exploring, advocating, challenging, codifying, or simply commenting on forms of behavior related to courtship, conjugality, domestic life, child-rearing, i.e., a domain of highly personal relationships and interaction which, if subject to certain customary and legal constraints, was generally not immediately visible to those outside the ‘family circle.’ If the producer of narrative in its modern novelistic form can lay claim to authority of any sort, it derives from

knowledge possessed of what transpires within the domain of the private and which the author makes available to readers with their specifically modern forms of curiosity with respect to issues of feeling, intimacy, sexuality, love, and the whole spectrum of emotions which determine the degree to which one is or is not living a 'fulfilled' life. Whether probing into the dimensions of affect associated with courtship (Jane Austen) or advocating escape from a restrictive bourgeois morality (D. H. Lawrence), the modern novelist offered up for inspection realms of experience which were otherwise closed off to the ordinary reader. If the modern novel constitutes, in this sense, testimony to a de-personalization associated with the public sphere, it nevertheless points to desire for the personal—and a view of intimacy itself as redemptive—as relatively constant, whatever the particular form of relationship or intimacy such desire might give rise to.

In making this argument, I would nevertheless suggest there remain certain underlying continuities between story-telling of the sort Benjamin or Propp had in mind—i.e., the tale communicated by one speaker in the immediate presence of a recipient or interlocutor. As Propp's theoretical efforts would make clear, what is at issue in the tale—and certain key aspects of Propp's account of the Russian folktale would be taken up and 'streamlined' by theorists like A. G. Greimas—are dimensions of action centered on marriage and family: the disruption of family life and the restoration of domestic harmony in some form or other, frequently, as suggested in Propp's account by the function, 'the hero is married,' an act which assures that familial and communal life will be carried forward. It is in this way too that we might begin to conceptualize the underlying 'social logic' governing the production of fictional narrative, even in its modern forms.

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While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with contemporary uses of the term ‘narrative’—this is not something in any event that a single commentator might do much to affect one way or the other—I would suggest that the current vogue for all things narrative owes much to what is perceived as the drama, or suspense, the unexpected, the idiosyncratic, or the ‘mystery’ we have come to associate with specifically fictional forms of story-telling. But in making this point, I would suggest, too, that narrative theorists have failed to clarify the criteria readers bring to bear when they distinguish fictional forms of story from other forms of narrative within the vastly expanded narrative universe in which researchers today must orient themselves and find their way. To be sure, scholars like A. G. Greimas and Cesare Segre, in their critique of structuralist theory, have in fact displayed a certain conceptual acuity in exploring modes of relation and forms of interaction specific to fictional story-telling. In a comment on Todorov’s *Grammaire du Decameron*, Segre had observed that Todorov’s ‘grammar of narrative’ incorporated a semantic dimension that Todorov failed to account for in any systematic fashion. Segre suggested that the verbs “modify,” “sin,” “punish”—which Todorov viewed as characteristic of story-telling in general—were “not located at a single level of generalization,” “do not constitute a single coherent semantic system,” and thus were “not capable of grouping together under their aegis even the actions which really are described in the *The Decameron*” (31). In his efforts to work out an alternative approach, Segre proposed what he called “real functions which already belong to the diegesis” (formulated “at a much reduced level of abstraction”) which included “falling in love, promise of marriage or such” (29). Segre would note that events such as “the promise of marriage,” “delaying misfortune,” “obstacles to overcome,” “obstacles overcome,”

“marriage” are common to “hundreds of texts, from Alexandrian romances to *I promessi sposi* to sentimental love stories.” But Segre’s work has been largely neglected, partly as the deconstructive attack on language—or the possibility of meaning—gained the high ground and was broadly institutionalized in language and literature departments at American universities and elsewhere. If the cultural studies movement and what in the United States came to be known as ‘new historicism’ reasserted the possibility of ‘meaning’ (i.e., a demonstrable or reasonably plausible linkage between discourse and events), it also embraced the wider notions of narrative—‘nation as narrative,’ cultural identity as narrative, self as narrative—without delineating in any more specific form the socio-poetic dimensions of fictional storytelling, and thus would forego any attempt to account in systematic fashion for the degree to which story-telling addresses and incorporates events associated with a restricted realm of interaction defined by intimate or private life. Even in narratives which, in various ways, address larger historical issues or questions of collective life (one thinks here of anything that one might qualify as ‘epic’), the story-teller must make use of the close-up and ensure a glimpse into the personal in such ways as enable the reader to visualize the action, hear what is said, enter into the thought of characters as they encounter others. If in one sense the ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences or policy studies—something I would characterize more accurately as a ‘meta-narrative’ turn—would seem in certain ways to carry narrative (as a discourse form) yet further from that sense of immediacy which for Benjamin was the mark of true story-telling, it has also perhaps made clear what Emery Roe notes in discussing the consequences which follow in the wake of a failure of individual narratives to coalesce: that the failure or breakdown of narrative, or of a capability for telling stories, can be symptomatic of a larger failure—

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that of being able to link the individual life to the survival of the organization or, at another ontological level, the survival of the community. It is in this sense that it could be said the story-teller—including the modern novelist—has to convey a certain sense of urgency about a narrator's or a character's actions, either insofar as they pertain to the narrator's/character's own survival, or insofar as such actions jeopardize the lives of others. (Indeed, Benjamin would make the point that death was “the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell” [94]). I would suggest that the greater the distance between reader and author, or reader and fiction, the greater in some sense in fact the demand the reader be made to experience what threatens or contributes to the survival of the character and human life.

To view fictional narrative as a special form of what might be called the ‘discourse of intimacy’ can serve to clarify where fictional story-telling is situated not only with regard to the broader array of discourse forms now characterized as narrative, but in relation to a particular set of institutional practices relating to sexuality, courtship, coupling, marriage, family, parenting. In taking cognizance of the historical and cultural variability of personal and intimate life, and of the complex ways in which the ‘couple’ or ‘family’ unit, while reflecting and shaped by larger cultural forces, imposes its own specific demands upon discourse and the social, I would continue to argue the need for more systematic inquiry into how private life and particular relational axes within the family or couple unit (husband/wife, parent/child, brother/brother, sister/sister, etc.) are inscribed within fictional narrative—a project which would perhaps enable us to better map the tangled field where, as some have asserted (*pace* Benjamin), there is nothing but story.

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