

Chapter 1

Narrative machinery

John Paley

Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson go on a camping trip. At 2:00 in the morning Holmes wakes his companion, who has been in a deep sleep: 'Look up at the sky, Watson, and tell me what you see.' 'I see stars, Holmes. It is a wonderfully clear night, and I see a million beautiful stars.' 'Excellent', replies Holmes. 'And what, pray, do you deduce from this?' Watson ponders for a moment. 'That the universe is immense, awe-inspiring and sublime, and that we are completely insignificant in comparison?' 'No', says Holmes curtly. 'Somebody's stolen our tent.'

Jokes, which represent just one category in the classification 'story', strip that classification down to its barest form and illustrate, economically, the structure which makes stories what they are, the narrative machinery that makes them work. It is this machinery that I will be examining in this chapter: how it is configured, why it is deployed, what it is intended to produce. To those who are nervous about the metaphor I can, unfortunately, offer no apology. Like machines, stories are ways of getting things done. They process raw material, they generate output, they are efficient or inefficient, and they can be switched on and off. They can almost be included in the manufacturing sector.

Or so I shall argue. Before we get to that point, however, it will be necessary to discuss the difference between 'story' and 'narrative', and to introduce the idea of 'narrativity'. Later, I will consider not just jokes but illness narratives, belief in a just world, positive illusions, bad faith, and 'spirituality'. What emerges, I hope, is the idea of story-as-tool, story-as-mechanism, something with an identifiable structure which has a measurable impact on something else.

Just as the story of the camping trip has an identifiable structure – and had (I trust) a measurable impact on the reader. It made you laugh.

Definitions

The precise nature of the distinction between 'narrative' and 'story' is obscure, and there are several different accounts of it. For some writers, especially in the

health care literature, the two are effectively synonymous. Where a distinction is made, it is frequently implausible. Wiltshire (1995), for example, claims that stories are ‘told’ while narratives are ‘written’. This is puzzling because it would imply that novels and other works of fiction embody narratives but do not tell stories. Frid, et al. (2000: 695) say that ‘narrative is an account of events experienced by the narrator’ while storytelling is ‘the repeated telling or reading of a story by persons other than narrator’. This is virtually the opposite of Wiltshire’s proposal, and is baffling for a different reason: it confuses the established distinction between ‘author’ and ‘narrator’ and assumes, oddly, that all narratives are first person.

An alternative approach is more theoretical, and originates in literary criticism. According to Abbott (2002: 16), narrative ‘is the representation of events, consisting of *story* and *narrative discourse*’. The idea is that a ‘story’ is that which is conveyed through narration. This is effectively a content/container distinction: the story is the content, while the narrative discourse – the sequence of events represented in the text or the telling – is the container. Text as ship, story as cargo. The image makes it possible to say that the same story can be told (conveyed) in different narratives (vehicles). Abbott’s distinction is akin to that between *fabula* (story) and *sjuzet* (narrative ordering), introduced by Russian critics in the 1920s (Abbott, 2007), between *histoire* and *discours* (Genette, 1980), and between *story* and *discourse* (Chatman, 1978), all of which still figure in literary theory.

According to Wiltshire and Frid, then, ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ are different kinds of thing. According to literary critics, on the other hand, they are different dimensions of the same thing. However, there is a third approach, which I want to recommend here. It takes the concept of narrativity from Prince (1982), and places ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ on a continuum. Every item on this continuum counts as a narrative, but only items at one end of it count as stories. Why this is a useful way to look at the distinction will become apparent later.

Narrativity

Narrativity is something that a text has degrees of. It is possible to identify an extensive range of text features associated with narrative and place them, very roughly, in order of complexity. The simplest forms constitute ‘low’ narrativity; more complex forms, including stories, constitute ‘high’ narrativity.

Consider one definition of narrative: ‘The recounting . . . of one or more real or fictitious events’ (Prince, 1991: 58). It is obviously a pretty basic definition, because (as Prince concedes) it implies that a single sentence can count as an example of narrative. ‘The goldfish died.’ This is the recounting of one event, whether real or fictitious, so it meets the minimal requirement.

Most people, perhaps, would be inclined not to attach the label ‘narrative’ to this sentence, and they would be even less likely to classify it as a ‘story’. However, that is not really the point. What I am proposing is that we take this initial definition as a specification of the first, and most primitive, condition that any narrative must fulfil. *No events, no narrative*. Clearly, there are more stringent conditions waiting to be identified, but this one represents the first rung on what might be called the ‘ladder of narrativity’ (Paley and Eva, 2005).

The number of events that must be recounted can be increased to at least two; and in fact some literary critics impose this as a formal requirement (Barthes, 1982; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). However, this is still a very thin concept of narrative. ‘The man opened the door. The goldfish died.’ Two events may be an improvement on one, but we remain a long way short of what ‘narrative’ normally implies. Moreover, it is evident that simply piling on additional events will not help: at best, the result would just be a list of occurrences, not a narrative. What is required to take us further up the narrativity ladder is the idea of one thing leading to another, the idea that something happened because of something else.

This is the position of another group of critics (Bal, 1985; Richardson, 1997), for whom the events in a narrative must be causally related – not in a mechanistic way, but in the sense that some of them should be consequences of others. A famous literary joke illustrates the significance of this type of connection rather nicely: ‘Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, then his wife died, and then he wrote *Paradise Regained*’ (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002: 17). I apologize for the sexist humour; but the point is, of course, that the joke depends on the implied causal connection between the death of Milton’s wife and the title of his second epic poem.

So far, then, increasing narrativity is signified by the recounting of more than one event, some of which are causally connected. However, the Milton narrative has already added a further textual feature to this condition: it has just one central character who is critically involved in the events recounted. This is, of course, an extension of the causally-connected-events condition, which does not specify that the events in question centre on a single person. So the presence of a central character represents a further rung on the narrativity ladder (Eva and Paley, 2006).

Let me here interpolate an important observation. To say that, in a narrative, some events are causally related to others is to say that narratives make claims about causal connection. In effect, they claim (or imply) that X caused Y, that X led to Y, or that without X it is unlikely that Y would have happened. The point about such claims is that they may be true or false.

Consider the joke about Milton again. The humour, as I have suggested, depends on the implied causal connection between the death of Milton’s wife

and *Paradise Regained*. In effect, the claim is that her death prompted, permitted, or encouraged the writing of the poem – ‘paradise’ being reinterpreted as a state of happiness consequent on being no longer married. There is, of course, no reason whatsoever to suppose that this claim is true (in fact, by the time the poem was published Milton had been married to his third wife for eight years). So the causal claim, in this case, is false. Here is an alternative narrative. ‘Milton was married for the first time in 1642, but his bride moved back to her parents’ home not long after the wedding. Milton’s first work as a married man, published in 1643, was a defence of divorce.’ On this occasion, the implied causal claim is that Milton had domestic trouble, and that his experience of marriage motivated him to write *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. This time, however, there is evidence to suggest that the claim is true (Wilson, 2002).

Backtrack to the narrativity continuum. I have so far identified some preliminary conditions that must be met if a text is to count as a narrative: several events, causal connection, and a central character. But the question this has all been leading up to is: at what stage does it become legitimate to call a narrative a *story*? When does increasing narrativity take us beyond what we might call the ‘story threshold’?

To some degree, the answer to this question is arbitrary. Stories may be found at the ‘high narrativity’ end of the continuum and not at the ‘low narrativity’ end; but it may be impossible to mark exactly the point at which the critical threshold is crossed. In the following section, however, I will argue that there is a textual feature which represents an especially significant upward shift in narrativity, and which – better than any other criterion – indexes the transition from bare *narrative* to full-blown *story*.

Stories

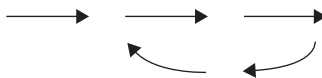
There are many instances of texts which fulfil the events-causally-connected condition which most of us would be reluctant to call stories. Examples include chronicles (as opposed to the history written by modern historians) and accounts of experiments. Even if we add a central character, as with diaries or medical case notes, calling the resulting text a story is still a bit of a stretch. However, it is possible to argue that this permutation of conditions does typify one kind of story-like narrative, namely the epic. This genre presents ‘the deeds of a hero in some chronological sequence, possibly beginning with his birth, probably ending with his death’ (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966: 208). As Davis (1987: 205) explains, ‘Epics tend to have plots that are linked in an “and-then-and-then” fashion. This form of plot I would call “consecutive” or “causal”’. The epic, of course, belongs to the period before 1600, and since then a different kind of plot has become the norm. It is this new kind of plot that Davis terms ‘teleogenic’.

The key difference between the teleogenic plot and the epic plot, or any other narrative which exhibits a purely consecutive/causal plot, is that the recounted sequence of events is, from the outset, intended to lead to a particular denouement. The narrative is given a 'shape' by the author's awareness of how it will end; and the recounted sequence of events, while still conforming to the requirements of plausible and consistent causal connection, must also be organized in such a way as to arrive at that final point. The set of circumstances with which the narrative culminates is, of course, known to the author, but not (usually) to the reader or the audience; and it is prior knowledge of this culmination which permits the author to create the narrative's structure.

Davis (1987: 206) pictures the consecutive/causal, or linear, plot in the following way:



His picture of the teleogenic plot is as follows:



The idea of a teleogenic plot reflects the conviction, shared by numerous critics, that 'the end writes the beginning and shapes the middle' (Brooks, 1985: 22). It is what Kermode (1966) means by 'the sense of an ending', and what Sartre (1947) has in mind when he remarks that narrative proceeds 'in reverse'. In recognizing that stories have a teleogenic structure, the reader, while unaware of what the denouement will be, is nevertheless confident that there will be one, and that it will throw retrospective significance on what has preceded it. As a consequence, her making-sense-of-the-narrative activity will consist, to a considerable extent, in the 'anticipation of retrospection' (Brooks, 1985: 23).

Arguably, then, the story threshold is the point at which narrative acquires a teleogenic plot. All stories are narratives, but only teleogenic narratives are stories. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, jokes are where we can see this structure in its most condensed and transparent form. In a joke, the narrative is organized to culminate in the punch line, the genre's own brand of denouement. Holmes and Watson must go on a camping trip: staying in a bed and breakfast would not be helpful. The dialogue between them must take place at night, for otherwise they would presumably have been awake and noticed the theft taking place. Watson must not immediately realize that the tent has been stolen, so must be given something else to say in response to

Holmes' question – ideally something which is plausible enough to distract the audience's attention and (a bonus) set up the bathetic contrast achieved by the punch line. And so on. Narrative being constructed 'in reverse', the teleogenic plot reconciling the requirements of a plausible causal sequence with the requirements of the denouement.

Corollaries

The teleogenic plot structure has a number of consequences and corollaries, both for literary fiction and for the stories that people tell about their lives. In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine some of them, and try to indicate their significance.

Selection and editing

The requirements of a teleogenic plot are such that decisions must be made about how the story starts, what should be included and excluded, the ordering of material, and so on. If stories have 'a beginning, a middle and an end' (Gaydos, 2005; McCance, et al. 2001), this is why. In a linear narrative, such as a diary, the first and final entries represent arbitrary points in an innumerable sequence of events which comprise the diarist's life; and all the other entries reflect what the writer took to be interesting and important at the time, not a retrospective view of how some of them, with the benefit of hindsight, fit together. However, the beginning of a story is anything but arbitrary; and the events incorporated in it are selected from an indefinite range of possibilities, most of which end up being omitted because they are irrelevant to the story under construction, because they are inconsistent with it, because they fail to enhance the desired effect, or because they compromise it in some other way.

The joke about the stolen tent can again be used to illustrate these observations. The story begins as it does because (hypothetical) previous events – why Holmes and Watson decided to go camping in the first place – are irrelevant. Equally irrelevant are questions to do with the location of the camp site, why they are sharing a single tent rather than sleeping separately, how long it took Holmes to realize that the theft had taken place, and many more. Story telling of all kinds, whether fictional or autobiographical, is an extensive and ubiquitous exercise in selection and editing. This is an absolutely critical feature.

Experience

It is often suggested that experience takes a narrative form, and that we unavoidably 'grasp our lives in narrative' (Taylor, 1989: 47). This suggestion is associated with a narrative conception of the self, the idea that 'we just *are* the narrative we tell or could tell about ourselves' (Vice, 2003: 95), the view that we

are characters in a story of our own making (Bruner, 1990; MacIntyre, 1982), and the claim that we lead 'storied lives' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). However, if the distinction between 'narrative' and 'story' adopted here is tenable, it is a mistake to run the two concepts together, as Rashotte (2005: 40), for example, does: 'To claim that we lead storied lives . . . is to assert that any experience – in order to be my experience – has narrative form'. The idea that narrative, as a recounting of causally related events, is somehow endemic to experience is not implausible; presumably, any attempt to refer to the past will involve narration in this low narrativity sense. But the theory that experience is necessarily structured by teleogenic plots, or that lives are intrinsically 'storied', is wildly overextended. Indeed, one might argue that it is barely coherent. If teleogenic plots involve *retrospective* selection, as described above, then story *cannot* be contemporary with experience; the transcendental filter through which experience is channelled. Experience is better conceived as providing the raw materials for story building. Stories, relative to experience, are very much after the fact.

At a slight tangent to the narrative conception of the self, but clearly related to it, is the often implicit idea that a narrative approach to research offers unique and authentic access to the respondent's inner world. As Atkinson (1997: 327) has pointed out, this 'sentimental and romantic version' of realism is characteristic of several writers on health and illness, especially Mishler (1984), Kleinman (1988), and Frank (1995), all of whom exhibit 'a faith in the revelatory power of the narrative' (p. 332), and expressly privilege the patient's voice at the expense of the professional's. But, as Atkinson also notes, this is to create 'a new, individualized homunculus that escapes sociological or anthropological comprehension' (p. 335), ignoring the social contexts in which narratives are forged, how they are elicited, and what their consequences are. I would merely add that teleogenic stories, the product of retrospective selection and editing, cannot possibly represent an unalloyed, authentic inner truth. They already reflect the sifting, classification, and contouring of experience. They are, in that sense, contrived.

Speech acts

More, they are contrived for a purpose. This is obvious in the case of jokes, tailored to produce a very specific outcome: laughter. But it applies to all stories: in moving towards a denouement, they create a particular emotional cadence. I will come to that idea in a moment. First, I want to briefly explore the idea that stories are a form of speech act.

As Gail Eva (Chapter 4) explains at greater length, speech act theory originates with Austin (1975), who argued that most uses of language are *performative*: they

perform an action of some kind. Telling a story is what Austin calls an ‘illocutionary’ act, but it also has ‘perlocutionary’ force; that is, it has a certain effect on the audience, an effect usually intended by the author. In jokes, this is amusement. Of course, any story can be told in order to entertain; but stories can also be told with a view to moralizing, warning, convincing, scaring, impressing, attracting sympathy, instilling hope, and so on. In this sense, they are designed to manipulate those who hear them. Chambers (1984) talks of ‘narrative seduction’, and Phelan (2007: 209) agrees: ‘narrative is a rhetorical action in which somebody tries to accomplish some purpose . . . texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in particular ways’. In the health care context, Mattingly (1998) and Taylor (2003) adopt a similar position.

Accordingly, the most potentially useful research programme relevant to story is the determination and testing of perlocutionary effects. What impact do stories have on their audience? How is this effect achieved, and in virtue of what aspects of the story’s construction? How does the audience cognitively process these structural characteristics, and with what consequences? This is the programme outlined by Bortolussi and Dixon (2003) under the slightly daunting heading *psychonarratology*. Their proposals largely concern laboratory studies; but there is enormous scope for similar research in natural settings, including health care.

Emotional cadence

The teleogenic structure of stories primes the reader for a ‘promised although unpredictable outcome’ (Mink, 1987). ‘Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson go on a camping trip.’ Anybody hearing this will instantly recognize the schema of a joke, and will already be anticipating a punch line which somehow links an aspect of camping to the detective and his less sagacious companion. But this anticipation must be realized. If there is no punch line – if, for example, we learn only that Holmes and Watson enjoyed a splendid, sun-drenched holiday near Margate – the story will be bafflingly pointless. So the beginning of the tale provokes the expectation of a satisfying resolution to whatever story is to follow. All stories involve the creation of such expectations; good stories – ideally in unpredictable ways – fulfil them.

Velleman (2003) calls this anticipated resolution the ‘emotional cadence’. Stories promise completion, just as *tick* promises *tock* (Kermode, 1966: 44). The opening line of a joke promises amusement; other stories promise different kinds of psychological consummation. Among the most familiar, one can cite: the expectation that the hero will succeed, that the boy will get the girl, that the virtuous person will be rewarded, that the villain will get his come-uppance.

These consummations are essentially normative, embodying certain kinds of preference and reflecting idealized, culturally accessible concepts of merit and desert. They represent, as Velleman (2003: 19) observes, ‘patterns of how things feel’, as opposed to ‘patterns of how things happen’. The selection and editing required by teleogenic plots is designed, precisely, to encourage the audience to assimilate events not to the latter (‘yes, that is just how things happen’), but to the *tick-tock* patterns of the former (‘yes, that is just how things should feel’).

This creates a potential problem. Teleogenic plots incorporate two distinct orders of explanation. The first is inherent in the causal sequence of events, and the requirement that it should be consistent and plausible (fiction), or that it should be evidenced and accurate (history and biography). The second is normative explanation, associated with the condition that exactly the same sequence of events should be resolved in an emotionally satisfying manner. This is the ‘double logic’ (Culler, 1981: 178) exhibited by stories, combining *cause-effect* movement with the *in-order-to-arrive-at-the-conclusion* movement. The danger, as Velleman (2003: 20) points out, is that the audience will tend to confuse the two, that it will mistake ‘emotional closure for intellectual closure’. In other words, the fact that a reader finds the emotional resolution satisfying may encourage her to overlook problems in the cause – effect sequence, the narrator’s claims about how one thing led to another. She may even assume that, because the story makes sense emotionally, it must also be a credible account of how things actually happened.

By way of simple illustration, let me return to the literary joke about Milton. Before I checked Milton’s biography, I had imagined that when Milton wrote *Paradise Regained* he had not remarried after being widowed. My assumption was that, although the joke presumably misrepresented his feelings about his wife, what it implied about his marital situation was nevertheless accurate. It did not occur to me that this might also be a misrepresentation, despite the fact that I was writing something about the risk of confusing a satisfying resolution with a trustworthy report, which ought to have sensitized me to the possibility.

The example is a trivial but revealing one. If amusement can blind one to the question of accuracy, so can other emotions. Greater risks are attached to hearing stories which arouse sympathy or admiration. For example, in many illness narratives, the narrating patient is a ‘narrative hero’ and the physician is a ‘narrative villain’ (Atkinson, 1997: 336). Although many people who write about health care find this an emotionally satisfying typification, it would be a mistake to assume – on those grounds alone – that such narratives are necessarily credible as reports of what really occurred.

Sympathy and admiration

The emotional cadence of a teleogenic plot is almost invariably associated with the portrayal of the central character in a certain light, and the consequent elicitation of an appropriate response. This is implicit in the idea of perlocution, and is reflected in the discussion of the previous section. Stories in which the hero's virtue is rewarded invite admiration. Stories in which the central character suffers undeservedly invite sympathy. Stories which have an obvious villain invite disapproval and distaste.

First-person stories are particularly likely to exploit this function of teleogenic structure. Consider, for example, the stories we tell about ourselves. We are all familiar with the temptation to select and edit: an omission here, a little embroidery there, a subtle massaging of the facts somewhere else – with no intent to deceive, exactly, but certainly with a view to portraying ourselves as kinder, cleverer, funnier, more successful than we really are. Equally, most of us have, at one time or another, suppressed some key facts and exaggerated less important ones in order to win sympathy, playing down the extent to which failure or misfortune may have been our own responsibility, and conveying the impression that it was somebody else's (Craib, 2000). When constructed skilfully, such stories can be effective exercises in narrative seduction, the emotional cadence distracting the audience's attention away from the project of testing the causal sequence for plausibility and accuracy.

Master plots

When an author constructs a teleogenic plot, she does not usually start from scratch. As Polkinghorne (1988: 20) notes: 'Cultural traditions offer a store of plot lines which can be used to configure events into stories.' Hence the idea of a 'masterplot' (Abbott, 2002; Brooks, 1985), and the various attempts to produce a plot taxonomy (Booker, 2004; Crane, 1952; Friedman, 1975; Frye, 1957; Scholes and Kellogg, 1966). Friedman's categories, for example, include the 'admiration plot', in which an attractive hero succeeds, and so wins the reader's respect and admiration. This could also be described as the 'virtue rewarded' plot: think *Cinderella*. Another of Friedman's categories is the 'pathetic plot', in which an attractive but unfortunately weak protagonist fails, and there is an unhappy ending which provokes the reader's sympathy. These are often tales of adversity and injustice.

Many health care narratives fall into these categories. Nursing, for example, has a favourite masterplot concerning the relationship between itself and medicine. It is an example of the 'pathetic plot', in that an attractive but weak protagonist – nursing itself – succumbs to the injustices perpetrated on it by the villain (medicine), thus arousing sympathy. But one can see the shadow of

the ‘admiration plot’ in this story, too, because nursing resembles Cinderella in her patient, put-upon virtue. Perhaps it depends on a denouement as yet unreached, with certain nurse theorists bidding for the role of fairy godmother: ‘The essence of nursing is caring . . . and you *shall* go to the ball!’

Just world theory

Plot taxonomies organize stories into thematic groups: virtue rewarded, the victim, the quest, triumph against the odds, the revenge, rags to riches, and so on. At an even higher level of superordination, there are what might be termed ‘meta-plots’. An example is the ‘just world’: a configuration of events which demonstrate that the world is ultimately a just place, and people get exactly what they deserve. The good achieve success, the bad are punished (sometimes, indirectly, by their own misdeeds). In the just world, outcomes are determined on merit.

This just world meta-plot is so deeply entrenched in western culture that, even in real life, we are very reluctant to abandon it. Indeed, during the past 40 years this reluctance has become a topic in social psychology, under the heading ‘just world theory’ or ‘belief in a just world’ (Lerner, 1980; Montada and Lerner, 1998). The theory suggests that, when confronted by circumstances which appear to disconfirm belief in a just world (BJW) – bad things happening to good people – we adopt cognitive strategies designed to preserve BJW and explain away the circumstances. One of these strategies is ‘blaming the victim’. For example, in a just world, morally decent people would not contract life-limiting illnesses when young; so, if someone does contract such an illness, he cannot be morally decent (this strategy was used early in the AIDS epidemic). The contradiction is resolved by changing the appraisal of the person concerned, instead of abandoning BJW (Anderson, 1992; Braman and Lambert, 2001).

Two other strategies are more relevant to the current discussion. One is to recalibrate the bad situation, reinterpreting it as something which is in fact beneficial. In the case of illness, this implies representing suffering in a positive light, as an educative or spiritually illuminating experience (Boden and Baumeister, 1997; Mendolia, et al. 1996). The other is to embrace a belief in ‘ultimate justice’, supposing that, while an affliction may look unfair in the present, justice will eventually prevail, either in this world or the next (Maes, 1998; Maes and Kals, 2002). These strategies figure prominently in stories about loss. For example, people often represent the death of a partner – initially cruel and devastating – in BJW terms, through stories which claim, in effect, that it was ‘a kind way to go’, that they learned something from the experience, or that they will be reunited with loved ones in an afterlife (Golsworthy and Coyle, 1999).

Life as story

Earlier, I expressed scepticism about the descriptive thesis that experience takes a 'storied' form. There is also, as Vice (2003) and Strawson (2004) both observe, a normative version of the same idea. This is the view that we *should* lead 'storied lives', that 'conceiving one's life as a narrative is a good thing: a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life' (Strawson, 2004: 428).

Vice and Strawson both take 'narrative' and 'story' as effective synonyms; and I shall not comment on the limp, and rather strange, idea that lives should be lived in *narrative* (i.e. low narrativity) mode. However, given the teleogenic view of plots adopted in this chapter, the claim that one ought, ethically, to conceptualize one's life as a *story* (high narrativity) is deeply unpersuasive. Events in the real world are part of a causal sequence; they are governed by cause and effect. They are not organized in order to arrive at conclusions; they are not 'pulled' towards denouements. So it is not evident why it should be ethically desirable to pretend that they are, which is what construing one's life as a story would mean.

If I really want to understand my life, I am confined to understanding it as events and circumstances precipitating other events and circumstances, and not as being 'drawn' towards some future state (see Lamarque, 2007 for a forceful statement of this view). In any case, the selection and editing required to invent a 'story of my life', even in retrospect, would require the exclusion of any inconvenient facts – parts of my history which did not fit the cleanly contoured, implausibly consistent teleogenic structure. It is for this reason that Craib (2000: 67) suggests: 'All personal narratives are to some degree bad faith narratives.' Iris Murdoch approaches the same idea from a slightly different angle: 'Any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete. However, human life *is* chancy and incomplete.' (Murdoch, 2000: 87, emphasis added).

Positive illusions

The argument of the previous section turns on a tacit premise: that we should want to understand our lives *as they really are*, and not tell tidied-up, inevitably misleading teleogenic stories about them. But there are situations in which 'consoling ourselves', believing seductive falsehoods, may be rationally and ethically acceptable. This is a conclusion which can be drawn from the social psychological work on 'positive illusions' (Helgeson and Taylor, 1992; Taylor, et al. 2000). Studies of patients with breast cancer, heart disease, AIDS, and mental health problems have all shown that optimistic but unequivocally false beliefs

are associated with enhanced health outcomes. For example, if people with HIV or diagnosed with AIDS hold unrealistically positive views about the probable trajectory of their illness, they experience less rapid disease progression and greater longevity (Reed, et al. 1994,1999) than patients whose appraisal is more realistic and accurate.

The same could be true of other forms of positive illusion – life stories, just world beliefs, spiritual and religious beliefs. In some circumstances these might be, not just examples of self-consolation, but ways of improving physical and mental health. The suggestion that religious beliefs represent a special case of ‘positive illusion’ has been made before (Côté and Pepler, 2005; Dennett, 2006), and it would explain the controversial research which links religion and spirituality to improved health outcomes (Koenig and Cohen, 2002; Thoresen, 1999). Here, I am more interested in ‘stories about ourselves’ than in religious and spiritual beliefs specifically; but in both cases it is tempting to suppose that the end of life is one situation in which the benefits of positive illusions are likely to be apparent.

Self-consolation and self-persuasion, then, turn out to be further examples of perlocutionary force. The audience for a story conceivably includes the author. So if stories are speech acts, engaged in ‘narrative seduction’, we can sometimes count ourselves among those we are trying to seduce (see Frank, Chapter 10).

Conclusion

Teleogenic plot structure, which I have taken to be roughly definitive of those narratives which are also stories, has remarkably fertile theoretical consequences, and the second half of this chapter has been a quick canter through its principal corollaries. The selection and editing of raw material necessitated by teleogenic plots is not carried out randomly but with a specific purpose in mind, exhibiting storytelling as a form of speech act, designed to produce a specific effect on the audience, which might include the author herself. This emotional cadence is prompted by the organization of events as a forward-looking sequence preparing for a denouement, which must be distinguished from the backward-looking causal sequence inherent in any narrative. It assimilates these events to patterns of how things should feel and, in particular, elicits familiar responses, such as sympathy and admiration, to the central character. As a result, stories can broadly be classified according to their plots, typical configurations of character and events evoking typical reactions, many of which imply the meta-plot of a ‘just world’. Since stories are driven by their endings, they cannot function as a transcendental filter for experience; nor can

lives be ‘storied’, although the pretence that they are, a form of positive illusion, can in certain circumstances be ethically justified.

At the heart of this theoretical network is the idea of narrative machinery, story-as-mechanism, a way of accomplishing a goal by telling somebody that something happened. Although jokes are the most condensed (but transient) examples of this machinery, they nevertheless reveal, in miniature, how the mechanism works. The components of the narrative, carefully selected to lead to an outcome, evoking the desired reaction. That, in a nutshell, is what stories are.

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