

Narrative and Life

The Universality of Narrative

When we think of narrative, we usually think of it as art, however modest. We think of it as novels or sagas or folk tales or, at the least, anecdotes. We speak of a gift for telling stories. But as true as it is that narrative can be an art and that art thrives on narrative, narrative is also something we all engage in, artists and nonartists alike. We make narratives many times a day, every day of our lives. It so permeates our lives that Nick Davis could write that when we try to understand the nature of narrative, we are like “fish trying to discuss the nature of water.”¹ In fact, we start making narratives almost from the moment we begin putting words together. As soon as we follow a subject with a verb, there is a good chance we are engaged in narrative discourse. “I fell down,” the child cries, and in the process tells her mother a little narrative, just as I have told in this still-unfinished sentence a different, somewhat longer narrative that includes the action of the child’s telling (“I fell down,’ the child cries”).

Given the presence of narrative in almost all human discourse, there is little wonder that there are theorists who place it next to language itself as *the* distinctive human trait. Fredric Jameson, for example, writes about the “all-informing process of *narrative*,” which he describes as “the central function or instance of the human mind.”² Jean-François Lyotard calls narration “the quintessential form of customary knowledge.”³ Whether or not such assertions stand up under scrutiny, it is still the case that we engage in narrative so often and with such unconscious ease that the gift for it would seem to be everyone’s birthright. Perhaps the fullest statement regarding the universality of narrative among humans is the opening to Roland Barthes’s landmark essay on narrative (1966). It is worth quoting at length:

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend,

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fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's *Saint Ursula*), stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.⁴

Barthes is right. There are, of course, narrative *genres* (literary kinds) – the novel, the epic poem, the short story, the saga, the tragedy, the comedy, the farce, the ballad, the western, and so on – in which narrative provides the overall structure. We call them narratives and expect them to tell a story. But if you look at any of the so-called nonnarrative genres, like, say, the lyric poem, which is frequently featured as preeminently a static form – that is, dominated not by a story line but by a single feeling – you will still find narrative. “Drink to me, onely, with thine eyes,” wrote Ben Jonson in the first line of his “Song: To Celia,” and already we have a micronarrative brewing – “look at me” – overlaid by another micronarrative which acts as a metaphor – “drink to me.”

Drink to me, onely, with thine eyes,
 And I will pledge with mine;
 Or leave a kisse but in the cup,
 And Ile not looke for wine.
 The thirst, that from the soule doth rise,
 Doth aske a drinke divine:
 But might I of JOVE'S *Nectar* sup,
 I would not change for thine.
 I sent thee, late, a rosie wreath,
 Not so much honoring thee,
 As giving it a hope, that there
 It could not withered bee.
 But thou thereon didst onely breath,
 And sent'st it backe to mee:
 Since when it growes, and smells, I sweare,
 Not of itself, but thee.

Here you have a poem dedicated to the expression of a powerful feeling, erotic love (threaded with irony and good humor), but the poem as a whole is

structured by two narrative situations. The first is a series of micronarratives, in the imperative mood, involving looking, kissing, and drinking. The second, beginning midway through, tells a more elaborate story of flowers that were sent, breathed on, returned, and now flourish, smelling of his beloved.

Narrative capability shows up in infants some time in their third or fourth year, when they start putting verbs together with nouns. Its appearance coincides, roughly, with the first memories that are retained by adults of their infancy, a conjunction that has led some to propose that memory itself is dependent on the capacity for narrative. In other words, we do not have any mental record of who we are until narrative is present as a kind of armature, giving shape to that record.⁵ If this is so, then “[o]ur very definition as human beings,” as Peter Brooks has written, “is very much bound up with the stories we tell about our own lives and the world in which we live. We cannot, in our dreams, our daydreams, our ambitious fantasies, avoid the imaginative imposition of form on life.”⁶ The gift of narrative is so pervasive and universal that there are those who strongly suggest that narrative is a “deep structure,” a human capacity genetically hardwired into our brains in the same way as our capacity for grammar (according to some linguists) is something we are born with.⁷ The novelist Paul Auster once wrote that “A child’s need for stories is as fundamental as his need for food.”⁸ For anyone who has read to a child or taken a child to the movies and watched her rapt attention, it is hard to believe that the appetite for narrative is something we learn rather than something that is built into us through our genes.

Narrative and Time

Whatever the final word may be regarding the source of this gift for narrative – whether from nature or from nurture or, as is more likely, from some complex combination of the two – the question remains: What does narrative do for us? And the first answer is that it does many things for us, some of which we will go into in later chapters. But if I had to choose one answer above all others, the likeliest is that *narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time*. This would seem to be the fundamental gift of narrative with the greatest range of benefits. And it certainly makes evolutionary sense. As we are the only species on earth with both language and a conscious awareness of the passage of time, it stands to reason that we would have a mechanism for expressing this awareness.

Of course, there are other ways to organize time and to express it. In our own age, the commonest of these is the mechanical timepiece: the clock or

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watch. But mechanical clocks have been around only since the Middle Ages. Before that, the measurement of time was more approximate than exact. Still, there were then (as there are now and always will be) dependable nonnarrative ways of organizing time: the passage of the sun, the phases of the moon, the succession of seasons, and the season cycles that we call years. Like the clock, these modes of organizing time are abstract in the sense that they provide a grid of regular intervals within which we can locate events. Narrative, by contrast, turns this process inside out, *allowing events themselves to create the order of time*. “I fell down,” cries the child, and in so doing gives shape to what in clock time would be roughly a second. In effect, the child carves out a piece of time, spanning her collapse and fall to the ground. This is the way time, to quote Paul Ricoeur, becomes “human time”: “Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence.”⁹

If we extend our example just a bit, we can show how much we rely on the free exercise of narrative to shape time according to human priorities:

The child fell down. After a while she got up and ran, until at last, seeing her mother, she burst into tears: “I fell down,” she cried. “There, there,” said her mother. “That must have hurt.”

Here time is comprised of a succession of events that appear as links in a chain: the fall, the getting up, the running, the seeing of her mother, the bursting into tears, what she said, and what her mother said. If one tries to imagine this sequence underscored by integers of clock time (–), one might come up with something like this:

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The juxtaposition of the two kinds of time makes the difference clear. Clock time, like other forms of abstract or regular time, always relates to itself, so that one speaks in terms of numbers of seconds or their multiples (minutes,

hours) and fractions (nanoseconds). Narrative time, in contrast, relates to events or incidents. And while clock time is necessarily marked off by regular intervals of a certain length, narrative time is not necessarily any length at all. In the previous short narrative, for example, we could slow this whole sequence down simply by adding details, and in the process, we would have expanded time.

The child fell down. She sat where she had fallen, her eyes frightened, her lower lip trembling. She rubbed her knee. Was it bleeding? No, but the skin was scraped. Where was her mother? Carefully, she got to her feet and started running ...

We have not added clock time to what happened. But we have added narrative time. We have added time in the sense that we have added greater complexity of narrative shape to its passage. This complexity is a matter of the accumulation of incident. It is as if we went inside the phrase “After a while she got up and ran” and lingered there to observe a fabric of microevents. Conversely, we can make narrative time go like the wind:

“There, there,” said her mother. “That must have hurt.” In the following months, the child fell often. But slowly she acquired confidence and eventually stopped falling altogether. Indeed, as a young woman, the assurance of her gait would command attention whenever she entered a roomful of people – people who would have found it hard to imagine that this was once a little girl who fell down all the time.

Here a new narrative structure comes into place, stretching over years. Time becomes a sequential reduction of falls and the acquirement of balanced poise, while all the numerous incidents that must have marked the daily life of this child/woman are screened from view. With a few broad strokes, time is now structured as the history of an acquired capability.

This gives some idea of how fluid narrative time is. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that this way of expressing time, though in a way the opposite of the many modes of regular, or abstract, time, is rarely kept in strict isolation from regular time. Notice, in the previous example, I used the phrase “In the following months,” invoking the thirty-day interval with which we are all familiar. In narrative, then, though it is the incidents that give shape and that dominate our sense of time, the regularity of abstract time, which is also an integral part of all our lives, unavoidably adds its own counterpoint to the time structured by incidents. Both of these kinds of time have been with us as far back as history can trace. We have always been aware of the recurring cycles of the sun, moon, and seasons, and at the same time, we have always been shaping and reshaping time as a succession of events, that is, as narrative. This unique

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human ability to take control of time has been useful to us in many ways and shall continue to be. But it is also, quite simply, a great pleasure in itself. The South African novelist J. M. Coetzee put this well:

For the reader, the experience of time bunching and becoming dense at points of significant action in the story, or thinning out and skipping or glancing through nonsignificant periods of clock time or calendar time, can be exhilarating – in fact it may be at the heart of narrative pleasure. As for writing and the experience of writing, there is a definite thrill of mastery – perhaps even omnipotence – that comes with making time bend and buckle, and generally with being present when signification, or the will to signification, takes control over time.¹⁰

Narrative Perception

Narrative is so much a part of the way we apprehend the world in time that it is virtually built into the way we see. Filmmaker Brian De Palma put this idea even more strongly: “People don’t see the world before their eyes until it’s put in a narrative mode.”¹¹ Even when we look at something as static and completely spatial as a picture, narrative consciousness comes into play. Is it possible, when “reading” Illustration 1.1, to resist narrative structuring?

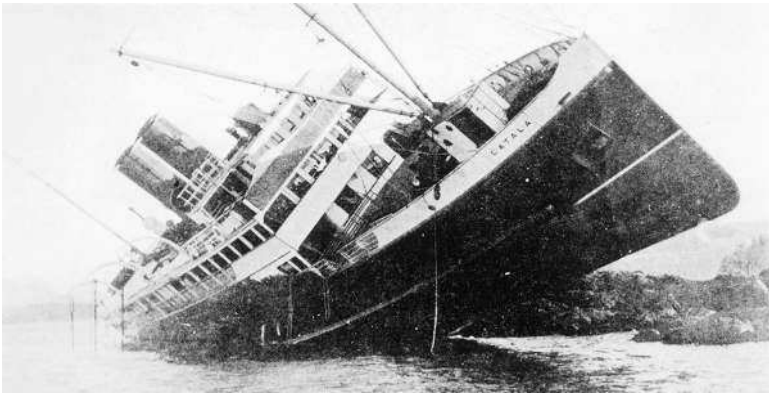


Illustration 1.1 Photograph of a shipwreck.

We may not see a full, clear story in abundant detail (a storm arises, a ship flounders and runs aground). But we do see more than a ship; we see a *shipwreck*. In other words, included in the present time of the picture is a shadowy sense of time preceding it and specifically of narrative time – that is, time comprised of a succession of necessary events that leads up to, and accounts for, what we see.

This human tendency to insert narrative time into static, immobile scenes seems almost automatic, like a reflex action. We want to know not just what is there but also what happened. Artists have often capitalized on this tendency. In the Renaissance, it was common to depict a moment in a well-known story from mythology or the Bible. In Illustration 1.2, we see action in progress. The painting draws on the Old Testament story of Belshazzar's feast, told in the Book of Daniel (Chapter 5). Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon, arranged a great feast and ordered that the golden vessels that his father, Nebuchadnezzar, had plundered from the temple in Jerusalem, be set out and filled with wine. At the height of the feast, when his princes and wives and concubines were drinking from the holy vessels, a divine hand suddenly appeared and wrote on the wall mysterious words in Aramaic ("Mene mene tekel upharsin"). Belshazzar was struck with fear. Eventually, Daniel was called for to interpret the words, which he did: "Thou art weighed in the balance, and found wanting." That very night, Babylon fell to Darius, and Belshazzar was slain. In his painting, Rembrandt has caught the climax of the narrative: the moment when Belshazzar, with less than twenty-four hours to live, sees the handwriting on the wall. Everything appears to be in motion, from Belshazzar's horrified gaze to the wine pouring from the golden vessels as his concubines also gape at the words. We grasp it all in the context of a story in progress.



Illustration 1.2 Rembrandt, *Belshazzar's Feast* (c. 1635).

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But even when we don't already know the specific story depicted in a picture, we can still be tempted to look for a story. We have many narrative templates in our minds, and, knowing this, an artist can activate one or another. Looking at Illustration 1.3, is it even necessary to prompt ourselves to ask what is happening? It would appear, in fact, that we begin right away, in the act of perception itself, to answer this question. We may never know who is being depicted or what specific story they may be a part of. But we do, nonetheless, have narrative formulas stored in our memory that emerge quickly as we try to provide a narrative context for what is happening. We may first see a bow in the young woman's hand and assume that she has been playing an instrument – playing it so well, in fact, that she has intoxicated the young man now pulling on her dress and looking imploringly. Will she hit him with her bow? But, wait, where is her violin? The only instrument in the picture is a guitar, which is not only played without a bow but is also the instrument of choice for an eighteenth-century would-be seducer. So, it was probably he who was playing and no doubt has become so aroused, perhaps by his own performance, that he has crossed the line from seduction to force. Then what is that in her hand? Ah, it's a bell-cord, its tassel barely visible beneath her hand. A twenty-first-century viewer may not have any mental template for a bell-cord, but the eighteenth-century viewer would recognize the cord that rings a bell in the servant quarters, summoning the young woman's maid. This gives us some expectation as to how the story will develop. But here again there is a range of possibilities, just as there is in the middle of any good story. Can she fend him off, pushing (as we note) against his chest? How long will it take her maid to get there? Will she arrive in time? If she does, what then? If she doesn't, what then? The painting can only capture a moment of narrative time. But it appears that the mind sends out tenuous conflicting narrative threads ahead of the action – what I have called *shadow stories* (see Chapter 13). However this works, it is these narrative uncertainties that give the painting much of its energy.¹²

It is also this propensity to narrativize what we see that allows painters to achieve some of their most amusing and most troubling effects. Part (if not all) of the impact of Andrew Wyeth's *Dr. Syn* (Illustration 1.4) depends on our immediate effort to situate what we see not just in space but in time as well. Can you put together a narrative here that sufficiently accounts for the picture's anomalies? What, for example, happened to the figure's socks and his trousers? There are no vestiges of them on the floor. Was he not fully dressed when he sat down? And if not, why not? Or are we dealing with an entity that never went through the process of decay? Is this, rather, the picture of an animated skeleton? And who is Dr. Syn? Certainly, much of the effect of this painting lies in the way it arouses and then refuses to satisfy our narrative perceptions. You might call this “narrative jamming.”



Illustration 1.3 Michel Garnier, *La douce résistance* (1793).

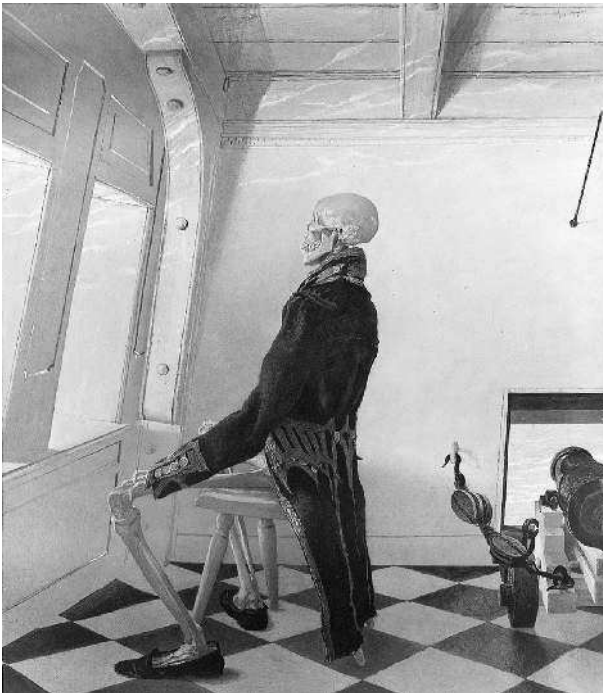


Illustration 1.4 Andrew Wyeth, *Dr. Syn* (1981).

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More disturbing in the way they jam our narrative response are paintings like Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962; Illustration 1.5). If we explore how our minds react as we look at these, one of the things we become aware of is the way certain narrative questions arise without leading to any clear understanding of what is going on. In the first panel, is that meat on the table? (is it a table?) and, if so, are those two men shocked, scared, intrigued, revolted? And why? In the center panel, that naked man with his shoes on certainly looks scared. But of what? Is that blood on his pillow? Was he shot? If so, who shot him? And why? In panel three, is that more meat hanging there, and, if so, what kind of animal was it? Or was it (I hesitate to ask) a human being and, if so, was he or she tortured? And for what? Finally, how might these scenes for a crucifixion relate to the well-known story of the Crucifixion? The viewer's reflexive impulse is to want to know the story that will answer these questions. But then, it has been argued that the power of the painting comes from its refusal to give answers. It keeps us on edge, wanting to know the story.

To sum up, wherever we look in this world, we seek to grasp what we see not just in space but in time as well. Narrative gives us this understanding; it gives us what could be called shapes of time. Accordingly, our narrative perception stands ready to be activated to give us a frame or context for even the most static and uneventful scenes. And without understanding the narrative, we often feel that we don't understand what we see. We cannot find the meaning. Meaning and narrative understanding are very closely connected, a point that is paradoxically driven home by both the Wyeth and the Bacon paintings. By jamming our narrative response, they frustrate our desire to get to the meaning of the pictures.

But the connections between narrative and meaning are many, and they will occupy us frequently over the course of this book. Hayden White pointed out in his book *The Content of the Form* that the word "narrative" goes back to the ancient Sanskrit *gna*, a root term that means "know," and that it comes down to us through Latin words for both "knowing" (*gnarus*) and "telling" (*narro*).¹³ This etymology catches the two sides of narrative. It is a universal tool for knowing as well as telling, for absorbing knowledge as well as expressing it. This knowledge, moreover, is not necessarily static. Narrative can be, and often is, an instrument that provokes active thinking and helps us work through problems, even as we tell about them or hear them being told. But, finally, it is also important to note that narrative can be used to deliver false information; it can be used to keep us in darkness and even encourage us to do things we should not do. This, too, must be kept in mind.