

## *Narratives and Culture: The Role of Stories in Self-Creation*

Arran Gare

The postmodern condition is characterized not only by suspicion of meta-narratives, but by a depreciation of all narratives. Before WWII, Walter Benjamin noted that information was displacing stories.<sup>1</sup> Since then narratives have steadily lost status and, more recently, have even been attacked.<sup>2</sup> There is now a crisis of narrative in novels, while in film, narrative is being subordinated to images.<sup>3</sup> Literary theorists have reinforced this crisis by "deconstructing" discourses to undermine their cognitive claims.<sup>4</sup> More significantly, history has been in a crisis for some time,<sup>5</sup>

---

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov," in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, tr. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 87.

2. See Christopher Nash, "Literature's Assault on Narrative," in *Narrative in Culture*, ed. by Christopher Nash (New York: Routledge, 1990).

3. See Scott Lash, "Discourse or Figure? Postmodernism as a 'Regime of Signification'," in *Sociology of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 172-198.

4. As Tzvetan Todorov characterized the views of the deconstructionists, "The world itself is inaccessible; discourse alone exists, and discourse refers only to other discourse. . . . Even so, we are not to believe that discourse is better endowed than the world: the latter may not exist, but the former is necessarily incoherent. Deconstructionist commentary always consists in showing that the text studied is internally contradictory. . . . As no discourse is exempt from these contradictions, there is no reason to prefer one sort over another, or to prefer one value over another. In fact, in the deconstructionist perspective, any value-oriented behaviour (criticism, the struggle against injustice, hope for a better world) becomes subject to ridicule." *Literature and Its Theorists*, tr. by Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 184.

5. See William H. Dray, ed., *Philosophical Analysis and History* (New York: New York University Press, 1966). See also the introduction to Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

with both historians and philosophers questioning the relation between narrative coherence and life as it is lived. These crises are associated with the decline within schools and universities of the significance of the humanities, particularly literature and history, which are most closely related to narrative forms.<sup>6</sup> According to Fredric Jameson,<sup>7</sup> the depreciation of narratives is a symptom of something fundamentally amiss in culture; it expresses the breakdown of the temporal organization of people's lives.

This general crisis has been accompanied by an extraordinary development of narratology — the systematic study of narratives.<sup>8</sup> Jerome Bruner argues that narrative stands alongside logic and science as a mode of organizing experience, knowing the world and constructing reality.<sup>9</sup> If so, what is the relation between these two modes of cognition? Is it possible to do without narratives? Or are narratives more primordial than logic, theoretical reasoning and scientific thought? In this case, it would be contradictory to *defend* theoretically the primacy of narratives, since this would presuppose that theoretical reasoning is the ultimate judge — precisely what is being questioned. An alternative is to construct a history of the notion of culture and then, through this narrative, to show the relative significance of narratives and theoretical reasoning within culture. The history of the term "culture" has already been traced.<sup>10</sup> What needs to be discussed, instead, is the *notion* of culture, which pre-existed the term and is associated with only one possible meaning. This means constructing a narrative going back to Greece.<sup>11</sup>

The first clear antecedent to the modern notion of culture emerged with the transformation of the concept of *nomos* associated with the development of the notion of *physis* (nature). As Carl Schmitt has argued, *nomos* originally meant decision and order in earthbound locations related to land-appropriation, having a foundation in God and containing a concrete order and a community. With the development of the notion of rationally knowable *physis*, *nomos* was reconceived in opposition to it as the

6. See J. H. Plumb, ed., *Crisis in the Humanities* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).

7. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 26f.

8. See Khachig Tololyan, "Telling the Event, Telling as Event: The Theory of Narrative," in *Choice* (July-August, 1990), pp. 1791-1799.

9. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). See also "The Narrative Construction of Reality," in *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Fall 1991), pp. 1-21.

10. See Raymond Williams, "Culture," in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1988), pp. 87-93.

11. For a broader account, see Arran Gare, *Nihilism Inc. Environmental Destruction and the Metaphysics of Sustainability* (Sydney: Eco-Logical Press, 1996).

laws imposed by people or created by agreement, connoting custom, convention and arbitrariness.<sup>12</sup> An early articulation of this opposition, revealing how it led to an appreciation of the diversity of customs and conventions (and a tendency to denigrate such diversity), was Xenophanes' argument that some views vary from society to society, while others transcend any particular society.<sup>13</sup> Xenophanes was trying to defend a monotheistic theology where one God, "in no way similar to mortals either in body or thought," is discoverable through reason, and, correspondingly, disparaged Homer's epic poetry and Hesiod's "mythical" cosmogony. Parmenides, Xenophanes' student, further distinguished illusion from truth reached through reason. Parmenides argued that truth deals with what is, being, which alone is real. Change implies coming into being from not-being, and since not-being is not, there can be no becoming. Thus, the appearance of becoming must be an illusion. This argument was incorporated into Plato's philosophy, with poetry, drama and mythology being dismissed for dealing in illusions, emotions and becoming, in contrast to mathematics and philosophy, which have the eternal as their objects — mathematical objects and the forms — all deriving from one ultimate form: the Good.<sup>14</sup> Reinterpreted by Neoplatonists, Plato's thought was then synthesized with Hebraic thought,<sup>15</sup> with the Good being identified with the Hebraic God. Arguably, it was the Hebrews' primitive historical narratives that provided Christianity with its appeal,

12. Wolfgang Palaver, "Carl Schmitt on *Nomos* and Space," in *Telos* 106 (Winter 1996), pp. 105-127. See also G.L. Ulmen, "The Concept of *Nomos*' Introduction to Schmitt's 'Appropriation/Distribution/Production'," in *Telos* 95, (Spring 1993), pp. 39-52; and W.K.C. Guthrie, "The 'Nomos'-'Physis' Antithesis in Morals and Politics," in *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 55-134.

13. See G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 169. According to Xenophanes: "The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair. But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the works that men can do, horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves."

14. On this see Jaakko Hintikka, "Knowledge and its Object in Plato," in *Knowledge and the Known* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974).

15. As St. Augustine put it: "The education of the human race, represented by the people of God, has advanced, like that of an individual, through certain epochs, or, as it were, ages, so that it might gradually rise from earthly to heavenly things, and from the visible to the invisible." See St. Augustine, *The City of God*, tr. by Marcus Dodds (New York: Random House: 1950), Bk 10, Ch. 14. For the identification of the heavenly, invisible things with the eternal, see St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Bk I, XXII, 20; tr. by D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), p.18.

but such narratives were regarded as subordinate to the eternal.

Through history, people were educated to see the futility of the realm of change and to live for what is eternal. In Christian culture, which became the foundation of European civilization, the opposition between becoming (dealt with by myths) and the eternal (revealed through reason or revelation) held until the Renaissance. The 16th and 17th century revival of Pythagorean Neoplatonism by Kepler, Galileo, Descartes and Newton associated with the new mechanical philosophy — what has come to be seen as the birth of modern science — can be regarded as a reaffirmation of eternal knowledge in the face of growing interest in change. Descartes claimed to have come up with a new method for acquiring knowledge instead of tradition, dogma, faith, superstition and prejudice. Modeled on mathematical thinking, and analytical geometry in particular, this new method was combined with a rejection of dialectical thought as a means of reasoning from reputable opinions to conclusions, of the use of metaphor and other rhetorical devices, and of the claims of history and historical narratives to knowledge.<sup>16</sup> The rise of the new science was also associated with the quest for a perfect language that would accurately represent the world.<sup>17</sup> Retrospectively, this is equated with the move not only beyond myth, but also beyond philosophy, and the attainment of truly objective knowledge of the eternal laws of the motion of immutable matter.

Hobbes took Descartes' mechanical view of the world to its logical conclusion, representing people as complex machines in which all thinking is calculation in the service of control of the world to satisfy appetites and avoid aversions. Language is a means to extend the power of such thinking, to register the causes of things and to convey this knowledge to others. Science is the extension of such knowledge. Societies are mechanical aggregations of egoistic individuals who have entered into a contract to obey the covenants of society, and who, through their constrained egoism, keep the cogs of society turning. The only basis for ethics is enlightened egoism. Along with poetry and drama, narratives were given a place, "to please and delight our selves, and others, by playing with our words,

16. See René Descartes, "Rules for the Direction of the Mind," especially Rule Ten, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, tr. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Vol. 1, pp. 34-37. On the significance of this, see Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

17. See Mary Slaughter, *Universal Languages and Scientific Taxonomy in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

for pleasure and ornament, innocently.”<sup>18</sup>

In the 18th and 19th centuries, this worldview became even more popular with the addition of a simulated narrative of development — economic progress generated by self interest and, more broadly, progress in nature and history through the generation of various organizations of matter and their selection through the struggle for survival. Today’s reductionist science (which seeks to develop mathematical equations to account for everything in the universe), logical empiricism, neo-classical economics, socio-biology, and forms of cognitive psychology that model human thinking on computers, are merely the latest developments of this worldview. In this scheme of things, customs, conventions and traditions are of little significance unless they can be used to promote tourism or sell commodities. Narratives are even less important. They are nothing more than decorations surrounding factual statements about the past. Hobbes’ philosophy reigns supreme.

This does not mean that narratives have not played an important role throughout the history of European civilization.<sup>19</sup> Aristophanes ridiculed Socrates while extolling drama. Unlike Plato, Aristotle respected narratives, but only as subordinate to philosophy. More importantly, various narratives in various forms have been crucial to all societies, and the history of European civilization is characterized by continuous innovation in both historical and fictional narrative. The term “narrative” originated in rhetoric and originally had no connection with storytelling. Its development into storytelling was a development in the form of narrative.<sup>20</sup> Even through rhetoric, narratives did not gain a status equal to discourses aiming at knowledge of the eternal. Narrative was first defended convincingly in the 17th century by Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), one of the leading opponents of mechanical philosophy, after the rise of this philosophy and its denigration of narrative knowledge.

Vico not only opposed the dismissal of metaphor and rhetoric, of history

18. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* [1651] (Harmonsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), Part I, Ch. 4, p. 102.

19. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948) is still one of the best general histories of history. The rise of the novel from earlier forms of narrative have been described in Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968). For a shorter history from a different perspective, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, tr. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981).

20. See C. Jan Swearington, “Narration of Dialogue and Narration Within Dialogue: The Transition from Story to Logic,” in *Narrative Thought and Narrative Language* (Hillside, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1990), pp. 173-97.

and imagination, but focused precisely on those aspects of reality dismissed by mainstream European culture — customs, conventions, traditions and stories. To the extent that he rejected the view of society as an atomistic collection of mechanical egoists and defended a view of individual minds as the product of historically developing societies, Vico was the founder of the science of culture.<sup>21</sup> In opposition to Descartes' science of nature and his concept of the mind as thinking substance, Vico claimed to have created a New Science of the socio-historical world, and argued for the superiority of historical knowledge. Man can only know what he has made, i.e., "from the inside" rather than the outside.<sup>22</sup> Mathematics is transparent not because it is part of a supersensible realm of being behind appearances, but because it is a human construction. For the same reason, artworks, political schemes, legal systems, history, purposes, etc. can also be known. Rejecting the view of language as a means to accurately represent reality, Vico considered it the key to social and cultural life. Ideas are inseparable from the symbols by which they are expressed. Mental processes can be inferred from words and the way they are used, for "genius is the product of language, not language of genius."<sup>23</sup> It is possible to enter the mentality of very different people through *fantasia* — imagination — which allows for more than one way to categorize reality. By contrast, it is only possible to describe nature, to predict how it will behave in different situations. It is not possible to know why it behaves as it does.

At the same time, Vico attacked Descartes' quest for perfect, timeless truths that could be expressed in universally intelligible symbols, at any time and under any circumstance. In its place he proposed a "genetic" approach to knowledge, arguing that the validity of all true knowledge, even that of mathematics and logic, can only be demonstrated by showing how it has been created, by retracing its genesis through historical narrative. Natural law and social contract theorists have gone astray in trying to demonstrate the ethical basis of law through abstract reasoning based on some eternal human nature. This human nature is a developing process, constantly generating new needs and categories. Modern law, along with justice, rights and obligations, is the outcome of a long history of cultural

21. This is not to say that Vico had no antecedents. See Bruce Haddock, *An Introduction to Historical Thought* (London: Edward Arnold, 1980), Ch. 6.

22. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* [3rd ed., 1744], tr. by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), § 331, p. 96.

23. Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time* [1709], tr. by Elio Gianturco (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 40.

evolution, and the validity of these concepts (and of the ethical claims based on them) can only be determined through the study of their historical genesis. For Vico, notions such as "universal reason," the "social contract," or the "calculation of self-interest," are implausible myths.

More broadly, Vico began the schism between those primarily concerned with the specific and the unique, and those in the Cartesian tradition interested in the repetitive and the universal. This opposition is related to concern for the concrete rather than the abstract, with change rather than rest, with inner rather than outer reality, with quality rather than quantity, with what is culture-bound rather than timeless principles, with self-transformation rather than eternal peace, order and harmony. Vico did not reject Cartesian concerns entirely. He allowed them a legitimate, though subordinate place, to be justified historically.

Vico was virtually ignored until very similar ideas were developed independently by Herder (1744-1803) in Germany.<sup>24</sup> However, while Vico was concerned only with European history, Herder wrote on the history of humanity, and provided an alternative view of nature. To defend human diversity, Herder appropriated the term "culture," and used the plural to emphasize the differences between societies. In opposition to Hobbes, he argued that people are both formed by and participants in the creation of their particular cultures. To justify his rejection of the mechanistic view of humanity,<sup>25</sup> Herder also rejected the mechanistic view of nature, which he saw as a unity where dynamic, teleological forces, flow into each other, clash, combine and coalesce.

Life was still understood in reference to its physical environment, but at the same time it was seen as striving to actualize unique natures. The challenge for society is to discover its center of gravity and to actualize its potential. All aspects of a particular people, especially their language, were seen to express qualities unique to their cultures so that every aspect of a culture reflects the whole. In opposition to Enlightenment individualism, Herder argued that individuality is only achieved by participation in the particular culture through which one's humanity has been attained.<sup>26</sup>

24. See Johann Gottfried Herder, *On World History*, ed. by Hans Adler and Ernest A. Menze, tr. by Ernest A. Menze (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997). See also Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976).

25. For Herder's views on nature, see Hugh Barr Nisbet, *Herder and the Philosophy and History of Science* (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1970).

26. To speak and think requires language: it is to "swim in an inherited stream of images and words; we must accept these media on trust: we cannot create them." Cited in Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

All human activity was seen as expressing the total personality, with self-realization being the most harmonious form of self-expression, which is what all people live for, whether they are aware of it or not. This notion of humanity emphasized the creativity of people living in worlds they themselves had created. The most important members of society are its artists.<sup>27</sup> The reason for studying societies is not to control people but to appreciate their uniqueness, and at the same time to inspire them to realize their own unique potentials. Along with the mechanical worldview, the egoistic individualism of Enlightenment philosophers was seen merely as the culture of one defective society.<sup>28</sup>

These views inspired the comparative study of language, literature, folktales and myths, and the development of hermeneutics in 19th century Germany.<sup>29</sup> Herder also inspired the *Naturphilosophen* and Hegel, who rejected Kant's notion of the preformed ego, the "I" represented as a pure unity relating to itself, and portrayed it as something which developed through participation in social and cultural life. Early on he argued that the formative process of culture through which people transcend their immediate engagement in the world to become egos, consists in three interdependent dialectical patterns: symbolic representation, which operates through language; interaction on the basis of reciprocity of recognition, which operates through moral relations; and labor, which operates through tools.<sup>30</sup> The interweaving of these dialectical patterns,<sup>31</sup> neither reducible to nor

27. According to Herder, "A poet is a creator of a people; he gives it a world to contemplate. . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 203.

28. As Herder wrote in *Letters on the Advancement of Mankind* (1793-7): "Our part of the earth should be called not the wisest, but the most arrogant, aggressive, money-minded: what it has given [the rest of humankind] is not civilization but the destruction of the rudiments of their own cultures wherever they could achieve this." *Ibid.*, p. 160.

29. See Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Development of Hermeneutics," in *Dilthey: Selected Writings*, ed. and tr. by H.P. Rickman (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 247-263 and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., tr. and revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1993), Ch. 1.

30. G.W.F. Hegel, *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1979), pp. 206-234 and *Hegel and the Human Spirit*, (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1983). See Jürgen Habermas, "Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel's *Jena Philosophy of Mind*," in *Theory and Practice* [1971], tr. by John Viertel (London: Heinemann, 1974), pp. 142-169.

31. In Hegel's mature work, this division was subordinated to the division between Subjective, Objective and Absolute Spirit. Contrary to Habermas' claim, Hegel continued to give a central place to these struggles — particularly the struggle for recognition. See Robert R. Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); and Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, tr. by Joel Anderson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).



autonomous from each other, constitutes social dynamics. At the same time, Hegel used these historical narratives to legitimate the political institutions and cultural achievements of his own time, by showing how they provided the perspective from which past cultural developments could be understood and evaluated.

Each of these three dialectical patterns has been proposed as the basis of all cultural dynamics.<sup>32</sup> Structuralists (and some post-structuralists) have attempted to reduce cultural dynamics to the "dialectic or representation" (the operation of language and other systems of signs), Marxists have focused on the labor process, while symbolic interactionists and neo-Marxists, following George Herbert Mead, have located the social dynamics in the struggle for recognition.<sup>33</sup>

Not all studies of culture have their roots in Hegel, or in Vico and Herder. The French tradition, from Montesquieu through Durkheim to Lévi-Strauss, and the Anglophone tradition, from the Scottish philosophers through Herbert Spencer, developed independently of German thought. There have been no developments in the study of culture, however, which cannot be seen as elaborating on one or another of the dialectical patterns identified by Hegel, or on some aspect of the relationship between these patterns. This does not mean that all aspects of life can be understood in terms of the weaving of these three patterns. Thus, Marx showed<sup>34</sup> how the economic categories that English economists claimed to be part of the natural order were actually part of a particular, historically transient, culture. But Marx also argued that, while based on culture, the market system had dynamics of its own, irreducible to cultural dynamics, and Georg Simmel generalized this insight to other domains.<sup>35</sup>

Simmel sought to examine the micro-forms which transcend dialectical processes, and others since then have identified the dynamics of a variety of such formations (from Robert Michels's "iron law of oligarchy" to Michel Foucault's "discursive formations" and Pierre Bourdieu's "cultural fields"). Conceiving of history as "innumerable different rivers of time" in which a diversity of processes and structures evolving over a range of durations act as supports and limits for each other, Fernand

32. Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, *op. cit.*, p. 157f.

33. See Hans Joas, *G. H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-Examination of His Thought*, tr. by Raymond Meyer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

34. See Karl Marx, "Introduction," in *Grundrisse*, tr. by Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 83-111. As Aleksandr Bogdanov has argued, the dialectic of labor is itself a cultural process. See K. M. Jensen, *Beyond Marx and Mach: Aleksandr Bogdanov's Philosophy of Living Experience* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978).

Braudel provided the means to consider and analyze the relationships between such diverse formations.<sup>36</sup> None of these social theorists, however, do full justice to human complexity. Individuals are more than products of biological, cultural and socio-economic dynamics. The view that people are cultural beings implies that they only become individuals through socialization into these emergent forms. But at least in some cases, individuals become more than the conditions of their emergence dictate: they become self-determining. This is what has been emphasized by existentialists, from Kierkegaard to Merleau-Ponty.

This account is clearly at odds with the tradition originating with Xenophanes, in which "culture" is denigrated as illusion in opposition to truth — knowledge of God, the forms, or scientific laws. Until recently, there has been an opposition between the humanities, concerned with understanding, appropriating and reflecting on cultural heritage, in which people are seen as cultural beings, and the sciences, concerned with acquiring objective knowledge. This is an opposition between those committed to acknowledging people's uniqueness, and those committed to reductionist explanations enabling predictions and control. There is a yet more fundamental opposition between those who see the world as a creative process of becoming and those who seek timeless truths. In the past, efforts to defend a distinctive humanistic approach (such as Wilhelm Dilthey's defence of hermeneutics or Heinrich Rickert's and Ernst Cassirer's neo-Kantian defences of the autonomy of history and the "cultural sciences") have not been taken very

---

35. "Whenever life progresses beyond the animal level of culture, an internal contradiction appears. . . . We speak of culture whenever life produces certain forms in which it expresses and realizes itself. . . . But although these forms arise out of the life process, because of their unique constellation they do not share the restless rhythm of life, its ascent and descent, its constant renewal, its incessant divisions and reunifications. . . . They acquire fixed identities, a logic and lawfulness of their own; this new rigidity inevitably places them at a distance from the spiritual dynamic which created them and which makes them independent. . . . This characteristic of cultural processes was first noted in economic change." See Georg Simmel, "The Conflict in Modern Culture," in Donald N. Levine, ed., *George Simmel on Individual and Social Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 375-393.

36. "Science, technology, political institutions, conceptual changes, civilizations (to fall back on that useful word) all have their own rhythms of life and growth, and the new history of conjunctures will only be complete when it has made up a whole orchestra of them all. . . . Some structures, because of their long life, become stable elements for an infinite number of generations: they get in the way of history, hinder its flow, and in hindering it shape it. Others wear themselves out more quickly. But all of them provide both support and hindrance." See Fernand Braudel in "History and the Social Sciences," in *On History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 25-54.

seriously, because if the "scientific" approach were valid, then the humanities can only deal with illusions.<sup>37</sup>

Now, however, the natural sciences are undergoing a transformation. Herder's anti-mechanistic concept of nature is coming of age.<sup>38</sup> This revolution involves recognizing the priority of becoming over being, of the irreducibility of complexity, and that, as conscious subjects, people are part of the reality being investigated.<sup>39</sup> Where does this leave science's claim to be objective truth? Partly this was based on the commitment to prediction and to representing what Bergson and Whitehead called "creative becoming" as a sensory illusion which could be overcome by reason and mathematics, i.e., by grasping eternal reality behind changing appearances. What is the status of claims to knowledge which extol the limits to

37. See Dilthey, "The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies," in *Dilthey: Selected Writings, op. cit.*, pp. 170-207, Heinrich Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science: A Logical Introduction to the Historical Sciences*, tr. by Guy Oakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Ernst Cassirer, "The Philosophy of History," in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935-1945*, ed. by Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 121-141.

38. As Ilya Prigogine put it, this is "a period of scientific revolution — one in which the very position and meaning of the scientific approach are undergoing reappraisal — a period not unlike the birth of the scientific approach in ancient Greece or of its renaissance in the time of Galileo." See Ilya Prigogine, *From Being to Becoming: Time and Complexity in the Physical Sciences* (San Francisco, CA: Freeman, 1980), p. xiif.

39. See Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, "The New Alliance," in *Scientia* 112 (1977), pp. 319-332. The original title of Prigogine and Stenger's book *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984) was *The New Alliance*, implying that natural sciences are now aligned with the humanities. Such developments have been taking place mainly in the physical sciences, giving rise to the odd situation described by David Bohm: "... just when physics is moving away from mechanism, biology and psychology are moving closer to it. If this trend continues it may well be that scientists will be regarding living and intelligent beings as mechanical, while they suppose that inanimate matter is too complex and subtle to fit into the limited categories of mechanism." See David Bohm, "Some Remarks on the Notion of Order," in *Towards a Theoretical Biology, 2 Sketches*, ed. by C. H. Waddington (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), p. 34. Inspired by Prigogine's work and fueled by developments in complexity theory, there has been an increasingly strong stream of anti-mechanistic, anti-reductionist thinking in biology and neuro-physiology. For an overview of the history of theories of evolution showing recent advances in anti-reductionist thinking, see David J. Depew and Bruce H. Weber, *Darwinism Evolving* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996). Similarly, Gerald Edelman has argued for the reality of consciousness, and conceived this as not only an emergent phenomenon of the brain (as did Roger Sperry) but also of culture. See Gerald Edelman, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1992). See also Brian Goodwin, *How the Leopard Changed its Spots: The Evolution of Complexity* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994).

prediction and stress the reality of creative becoming?

To begin with, logical positivism which made prediction and the eternal realm of logical truths central to its celebration of science and denigration of the humanities failed in its attempt to ground mathematics in logic, or to find a form of logic beyond questioning. Then, its characterization of science was shown to be a misrepresentation of how science actually operates. It became evident that, not only were logical positivists not able to ground knowledge, but that what scientists do is much more like what humanists do. Firstly, they situate themselves in an historically developing tradition.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, they function as members of a community in which a central problem is interpretative understanding of people with different perspectives on the world.<sup>41</sup> Thirdly, they try to understand the world.<sup>42</sup> Critics of logical positivism thus confirmed the Vicovian insights of Benedetto Croce, that scientific activity is itself an historical process, with each experiment, each observation, each publication and each reading of a publication being historical events which must be appreciated as such for science to be possible.<sup>43</sup> And the ultimate goal of inquiry is to understand particular historical events and to bring them to life in the present. These insights generated a major problem, which, once understood, could be resolved by appeal to the same Vicovian tradition. How can one choose between different ways of understanding the world? Here one runs into the traditional charge of those committed to discovering eternal truths against convention, customs and narratives, and against the humanities: the charge of relativism. This relativism can be avoided through narrative. Elaborating Vico's claim that rhetoric is prior to logic and mathematical abstractions, Alasdair MacIntyre has shown how the acceptance of radically new theories depends on the ability of their defenders to use their theories to construct narratives. Since major

40. As Thomas Kuhn (following Michael Polanyi) famously argued in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

41. See Thomas S. Kuhn, "The Natural and the Human Sciences," in *The Interpretive Turn*, ed. by David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 17-24. See also Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

42. See Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), and Maurice Finocchiaro, "Scientific Discoveries as Growth of Understanding," in T. Nickles ed., *Scientific Discovery, Logic and Rationality* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980), pp. 235-255.

43. For a brief but excellent characterization of Croce's ideas, see Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, *op.cit.* pp. 190-204.

advances in knowledge transcend old assumptions and create new ways of arguing by changing the standards of relevance and proof, they cannot be evaluated in terms of existing criteria. The superiority of new theories is in that they facilitate an understanding of the achievements and limitations of the theories transcended.<sup>44</sup>

This means that all those who claim to have discovered some absolute object of or foundation for knowledge, from Plato to Descartes and Bertrand Russell, had been able to explain and defend their claims only through precisely the narrative forms they denigrated.<sup>45</sup> What distinguishes a discipline as a genuine "science," a body of knowledge and a research program, is that it has historians producing narratives through which various claims are evaluated, problems defined, and members of the discipline conducting research. The new science developed by Prigogine and others is defensible because it has provided the basis for a new narrative that reveals both the achievements and limitations of the previous natural science, and, therefore, how the new science has advanced beyond it.<sup>46</sup> From the perspective of cultural studies, this narrative can explain why, unlike those who have attempted to model their disciplines on their understanding of the natural sciences, those who have rejected such methods have achieved penetrating insights.

While narratives have been studied sporadically since Aristotle, only recently have sustained efforts been made to comprehend what narratives are (although they were foreshadowed by literary theorists in Russia in the 1920s). Structuralist semiotics has been partly responsible for this, because examination of the way components of communication

44. According to McIntyre: "Wherein lies the superiority of Galileo to his predecessors? The answer is that he, for the first time, enables the work of all his predecessors to be evaluated by a common set of standards. The contributions of Plato, Aristotle, the scholars at Merton College, Oxford and Padua, the work of Copernicus himself at last all fall into place. Or to put matters in another and equivalent way: the history of late medieval science can finally be cast into a coherent narrative. . . . What the scientific genius, such as Galileo, achieves in his transitions, then, is not only a new way of understanding nature, but also and inseparably a new way of understanding the old sciences' way of understanding. . . . It is from the stand-point of the new science that the continuities of narrative history are reestablished." See Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," in *Monist* 60 (1977), pp. 459-60 and 467.

45. J. M. Bernstein has shown how Descartes' defence of the suspension of narrative and historical legitimation is legitimated narratively. See his *The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism and the Dialectics of Form* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984), pp. 157-79.

46. Prigogine and Stengers, *Order out of Chaos, op. cit.*, and Depew and Weber, *Darwinism Evolving, op. cit.*, each provide such narratives. See also Gerry Webster and Brian Goodwin, *Form and Transformation* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

are organized demanded an examination of the way larger units are organized in discourses; and the most significant form of discourse is the narrative. In attending to narratives they also came to realize their ubiquity.<sup>47</sup> Yet, structuralists ultimately failed to characterize the nature of narratives in structuralist terms, and, more importantly, to explain their ubiquity or to reveal their importance.<sup>48</sup> They did, however, provide a point of departure for others, such as Paul Ricoeur. As Mario Valdés has noted, the corner-stone of Ricoeur's theory of interpretation "is the return to the world of action as the basis for all meaning . . . which gives literary criticism a contemporary philosophical argument in the tradition of Giambattista Vico, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Benedetto Croce."<sup>49</sup> Ricoeur argues that narrative is the fundamental structure of the experience of time.<sup>50</sup> Its ultimate referent is lived time. At the same time, narrative is central to creativity. Innovations are made by inventing plots by means of which "goals, causes, and chance are brought together within the temporal unity of whole and complete action."<sup>51</sup> A complete action

47. According to Roland Barthes: "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. . . . [N]arrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting . . . stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. . . . [N]arrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself." See Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 79-124.

48. This does not mean that the work on narrative by Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Greimas, Todorov and Genette has not been important, but only that it leaves out what is most important about narrative. See Art Berman, *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 122-132. The structuralists' shortcomings had already been identified in the Russian formalists by M. M. Bakhtin and P. N. Medvedev in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* [1928], tr. by Albert J. Wehrle (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), Ch. 6.

49. In Mario Valdés, ed., "Introduction: Paul Ricoeur's Post-Structuralist Hermeneutics," in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 9.

50. Ricoeur's theory of narrative encompasses almost all the insights of other theorists (with the possible exceptions of Bakhtin and Carr). For Ricoeur's response to structuralism, see "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and tr. by John B. Thompson (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1981). For a further development of this specifically in relation to narratology see his critique of and debate with Greimas, see "Greimas's Narrative Grammar" and "On Narrativity: Debate with A. J. Greimas" in *A Ricoeur Reader, op.cit.*, pp. 256-286 and pp. 287-299. Ricoeur's response to structuralism parallels and accords with the response to formalism by Bakhtin and his circle.

51. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 Vols. [1983-84] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-85), Vol. I, p. ix.

can consist of a number of other actions.<sup>52</sup>

According to Ricoeur there are three moments of mimesis in narrative — prefiguration, configuration and refiguration.<sup>53</sup> First, life is prefigured as an inchoate narrative. This is why there is a pre-understanding of what human action is, its semantics, its symbolism, its temporality. The second moment of mimesis involves the representation of action according to specific rules of emplotment, i.e., the making of a structure to configure this pre-understanding. Emplotment generates a quasi-world of action and characters. The third moment is the reception and actualization of that structure. People are drawn into the quasi-world, distancing them from their own life-worlds, challenging their taken-for-granted horizons of expectations to refigure their worlds.<sup>54</sup> They are provided with room to maneuver, to think about the way they construe the way they live, which allows them to refigure their lives by appropriating new structures.<sup>55</sup> The clearest example of the relation between these three moments in narrative occurred in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as novelists based their characters and stories on real people, and individuals openly modelled their lives on fictional characters and their stories.<sup>56</sup> Ricoeur's work on narratives, especially following his accommodation of Carr's arguments that individual and social actions are lived narratives, provides a basis for combatting the influence of the structuralists and deconstructionists in literary theory. It justifies an approach to literature that situates historically, culturally and materially both literary products and the cultural fields which make literary production and reception possible. More

---

52. It can be the action of an individual — from some particular achievement to having lived a whole life, or of a group, such as winning a war, founding a nation or establishing or destroying a civilization. For an account of how actions are integrated into broader actions, both of individuals and groups, and how they relate to narratives, see David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

53. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, *op. cit.*, Ch. 3. Mimesis as "imitation" is accorded a more creative function in Ricoeur's philosophy.

54. Derived from Husserl and Gadamer, the notion of "horizon of expectations" is developed by Hans Jauss in "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, tr. by Timothy Bahi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

55. See Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). While Ricoeur was concerned with refiguring people's worlds, he dealt with the refiguring of their lives only when challenged by David Carr. Carr is more forceful on the relation between narratives and action. See the debate between Ricoeur and Carr (which led Ricoeur to modify his views) in David Wood ed., *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1991).

56. See Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), Ch. 2, and Gare, *Nihilism Inc.*, *op. cit.*, Ch. 10.

importantly, it provides the basis for revealing and analyzing the relation between literature and life.<sup>57</sup>

Producing and telling stories is obviously a major component of the dialectic of representation, since life is already organized by narratives and people are already living their lives as inchoate narratives. As Vico pointed out, the human world can be understood better because it is a human creation. Thus, historical narratives are a major component of the dialectic of representation. More importantly, in light of the failure of efforts to solve epistemological problems through logic, and the recognition of the role of narrative in rationality, narratives must be regarded as the matrix within which all other forms of representation must be legitimated.<sup>58</sup>

Hegel and his followers emphasized that the dialectic of recognition and the medium of moral relations through which it operates are conditioned by the dialectic of representation. Following Emile Benveniste, Jacques Lacan has even claimed that the dialectic of representation is so basic to the formation of identity that it can be virtually reduced to it. For Lacan the subject is strung along by the unfolding of the signifying chain.<sup>59</sup> It is through names, pronouns and labels that individuals are constituted as subjects and moral agents. Yet, the relation between the dialectics of representation and recognition is much more complex than Lacan allowed.<sup>60</sup> One is not situated in

57. While Ricoeur's response to structuralism is well known, he also addressed the challenge of poststructuralism. For Ricoeur's response to Derrida, see Leonard Lawlor, *Imagination and Chance: The Difference Between the Thought of Ricoeur and Derrida* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992). This book contains a discussion between Derrida and Ricoeur in which Ricoeur challenges Derrida for remaining at the level of the semiology of signs, ignoring the semantics of discourse. Defending Derrida, Lawlor nevertheless reveals the difference between Derrida and his "deconstructionist" followers. This difference has been pointed out in more detail by Rodophe Gasché in *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

58. See Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

59. In *Écrits* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 316, Lacan claims that "A signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier."

60. See Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, *op. cit.* According to MacIntyre: "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters — roles into which we have been drafted — and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories . . . that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions and in their words." See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), 2nd ed., p. 216.



social space as a moral agent simply through individual words, but through narratives. Social groups through which individuals are recognized and granted identity, from friendships to nations, are constituted by narratives.

Finally, while the dialectic of labor is often taken to be not only independent of the other two patterns and sometimes as the sole basis of social dynamism, the kind of co-operation required for the use, let alone further development of all but the most elementary tools, would be impossible without the structuring of social relations through the dialectics of representation and recognition embodying narratives. Complex projects of joint action, involving the integration of a number of subordinate actions, take the form of a narrative and must be narrated by actors to coordinate their actions with each other. This precedes its recounting by the actors or by others to a broader public.

What is the relation between narratives and emergent forms that have taken on a life of their own? They are in constant tension. In taking on a life of their own, social forms transform the conditions of their emergence, by "dehumanizing" them into instruments of their own functioning. People participating in such forms might still define their participation in terms of narratives, but these will not be integrated into a narrative defining the goal of the formation, and are likely to be in irreconcilable conflict with the narratives of others. Thus, as organizations become bureaucratized, the narratives on which they are based tend to disintegrate, their goals lose definition, and careerists indifferent to these goals, interested only in their own personal advancement and power struggles, not only penetrate such institutions, but displace those who take the original goals seriously. People claiming to be "social scientists," who model their approach on the misrepresentation of an outmoded form of natural science (such as mainstream economists and reductionist psychologists) are instruments of such forms — and usually careerists. They stand in opposition to those struggling to reformulate narratives which will subordinate such forms to human ends — or at least enable people to free themselves from domination by these forms.

This drama is illustrated by the responses to the autonomous dynamics of capitalism. Modeling their discipline on physics, in the 19th century economists such as Malthus came to regard the economy as an end in itself, and people as relevant only if they were useful to the economy.<sup>61</sup>

---

61. See Andrew S. Skinner, *A System of Social Science: Papers Relating to Adam Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

Marx, on the other hand, produced a narrative which cast an economic system functioning according to dynamics transcending people's intentions as an aberration. In the 20th century, John Maynard Keynes provided an alternative narrative according to which the market need not be abolished, but could be reduced to an instrument for human ends. This does not mean that Marx and Keynes did not use abstract forms of reasoning (or, for that matter, engage in empirical research). They did not commit however, what Whitehead called "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness" by taking these abstractions for reality.<sup>62</sup> Their abstractions were ultimately subordinated to narratives that provided the possibility of taking responsibility for the future, for regaining control of social dynamics in the interests of human welfare.<sup>63</sup>

What is the relation between narratives and individuals? It is essentially through narratives that individuals become more than the conditions of their existence. Individuals who utilize the inherent reflexivity of the narrative form to question the stories they have been socialized into, to consider alternative versions of these stories, to refigure their lives in accordance with their chosen versions of the stories of which they are a part, who thereby take responsibility for their lives, are the creative agents of culture, society and history.<sup>64</sup> Such people are the "authentic" authors of their own becoming.<sup>65</sup> The kinds of narrative that can be developed depends on social conditions. As Lucien Goldmann noted, the first phase of capitalism had a place for a stratum of individuals who could play "an

62. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* [1925] (New York: Mentor, 1948), p. 52. Whitehead himself criticized this tendency in economics. (*Ibid.*, p. 179).

63. Neo-classical economists embracing a positivist philosophy of science and infatuated by mathematics and computer models are again construing humans as cogs of the economic machine, this time, of the global economic machine, debasing people to "human resources." See Philip Mirowski, "Shall I Compare Thee to a Minkowski-Ricardo-Leontief-Metzler Matrix of the Hicks-Mosak Kind?" in *Economics and Philosophy* 3 (1987), pp. 67-96. See also his *Against Mechanism: Protecting Economics from Science* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988); and *More Heat Than Light: Economics as Social Physics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Narratives that reconstruct the narratives of traditions and expose how they are being corrupted in the new order, such as Bill Reading's *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), are the first step in fighting such debasement.

64. See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, tr. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also Katherine Nelson, ed., *Narratives from the Crib* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Habermas has identified the ability to organize one's own life as a biography as the highest stage of moral development. See "Moral Development and Ego Identity," in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* [1976] (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), p. 87.

65. Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-94.

active and responsible role in economic, social and political life, and therefore in cultural life."<sup>66</sup> *Bildungsroman* — a narrative of self-development and self-education — developed within this environment.<sup>67</sup> As social reality became increasingly irrational, Franz Kafka and the existentialist revealed the *angst* of attempts to give narrative coherence to one's life in a world dominated by incomprehensible social forms and mindless functionaries. To construct historical or fictional narratives about this is to rebel against such incoherence.<sup>68</sup> People struggling for both coherence and adequacy to the world through narratives oppose decadence, the decay of the narratives being lived out, and the domination of emergent social forms inimical to creativity and dignity. They regenerate institutions and societies by reformulating and reviving old, or creating new narrative forms.

### Conclusion

This presentation has been an emplotment — a unification of a diversity of events, ideas and developments into one action. This action consists of a number of other constituent actions:

First, Greek philosophy, defining "culture" negatively as the changing ephemeral aspects of society, thought and beliefs in opposition to knowledge of what is eternal, and its consolidation with the development of modern science;

Second, Vico's inversion which made "culture" the privileged object of inquiry and saw science as part of culture;

Third, Herder's "naming" of culture and the development of the notion of diverse "cultures," along with the suggestion that it is the understanding of nature which needs to be brought into line with this notion of people as cultured, creative beings;

Fourth, the elaboration of Herder's ideas by Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, with Hegel postulating three dimensions of culture, and the subsequent development of the humanities, further elaborating the concept of culture — although without succeeding in displacing the mechanistic

66. Lucien Goldmann, *Sociology of the Novel*, tr. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Tavistock, 1975), p. 169.

67. See Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987).

68. In a world that has rendered people totally powerless within a global market, "postmodern" narratives such as Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage, 1991), have attempted to portray life where there is not only no coherence in the social order, but all attempts by individuals to achieve narrative coherence in their own lives have been abandoned.

view of humans promulgated by the "hard" sciences;

Fifth, the breakdown within science of the project of gaining knowledge of eternal reality and the development of a concept of nature as a process of creative becoming justifying the view of people developed in the humanities, along with the resolution of epistemological problems in the natural sciences by recourse to narrative;

Sixth, the development of narratology which is now further enriching the understanding of all dimensions of culture, individuality, and of what it means to be human.

The presentation of this narrative has also been an evaluation of the recounted events, suggesting that, since it assumes there is only one truth, a culture which celebrates the eternal will tend to be aggressive, intolerant, domineering and oppressive towards other cultures. More significantly, this celebration is wrong. To the extent they are successful, narratives not only compel agreement with the value judgments being made, but they address how people live.

At this stage of history, one of the most important tasks is to defend the narrative. This is being undertaken not only by literary critics, but also by psychologists such as Donald Polkinghorne and Jerome Bruner, philosophers such as Ricoeur, MacIntyre and Carr, and literary theorists such as Ross Chambers and Gary Saul Morson.<sup>69</sup> Rather than reducing people to objects, narratologists tackle social problems by studying the narratives dominating people's lives, and showing how they can become authentic agents by reflecting on their narratives, gaining access to new ones and by participating in the creation of their own.

What is more important, and more problematic, is the crisis of narrative in art and life associated with the postmodern condition that has engendered such concern about the nature of narrative. This crisis is at least partly the consequence of the success of logical and reductionist scientific forms of thinking with their quest for the eternal, their orientation

69. See Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), Chambers, *Room for Maneuver*, *op.cit.* and Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994). See also Thomas R. Flynn and Dalia Judovitz, eds., *Dialectic and Narrative* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993); Bill Martin, "Analytic Philosophy's Narrative Turn: Quine, Rorty, Davidson," in *Literary Theory After Davidson*, ed. by Reed Way Dasenbrook (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and Hans Robert Jauss, *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding*, ed. and tr. by Michael Hays (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

to control and their denial of human freedom. However, the more fundamental problem is that people have been so disempowered by the autonomous dynamics of social forms (pre-eminently, the global economy) that they have given up the effort to live authentically. The loss of interest in narrative is typical of societies in which people believe they have no power to shape their lives.<sup>70</sup> It is for this reason that narratives, especially grand narratives of progress, have lost their meaning.<sup>71</sup> With the subsequent fragmentation of experience, art, literature and history have been reduced to mere forms of entertainment or amusement. The crisis of narrative is a crisis of the imagination<sup>72</sup> — a failure of people to even attempt to overcome their debasement and powerlessness. What is most called for in the present age is storyspinners, that is, historians, writers and artists who can give people back their future

---

70. On this, see Donald E. Brown, *Hierarchy, History and Human Nature: The Social Origins of Historical Consciousness* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1988).

71. On this, see Arran Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (London: Routledge, 1995), Ch. 1.

72. On the connection between postmodernity and the failure of imagination, see Richard Kearney, "Postmodern Culture: Apocalypse Now?" in *The Wake of Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), Ch. 8; and "Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutic Imagination," in *The Narrative Path: The Later Works of Paul Ricoeur* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 1-31.



Copyright of Telos is the property of Telos Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.