

Narrative, Second-person Experience, and Self-perception: A Reason it is Good to Conceive of One's Life Narratively

By Grace Hibshman

Abstract

It is widely held that it is good to conceive of one's life narratively, but why this is the case has not been well established. I argue that conceiving of one's life narratively can contribute to one's flourishing by mediating to oneself a second-person experience of oneself, furnishing one with valuable second-personal productive distance from oneself and as a result self-understanding. Drawing on Eleonore Stump's theory that narratives re-present to their audiences the second-person experiences they depict, I argue that conceiving of one's life narratively facilitates taking on the second-person experience that an audience would have in hearing one's life narrative, mediating how someone from a second-person perspective might perceive oneself and as a result yielding valuable self-understanding. I conclude with some practical implications.

*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.
Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.*
(1 Cor. 13:13, NKJV)

1. Introduction

Consider the following scene from the *Lord of the Rings*:

'I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course, but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: "Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring!" And they will say: "Yes, that's one of my

favourite stories. Frodo was very brave, wasn't he, dad?" "Yes, my boy, the famousest of the hobbits, and that's saying a lot." ' "

'It's saying a lot too much,' said Frodo, and he laughed, a long clear laugh from his heart. Such a sound had not been heard in those places since Sauron came to Middle-earth. To Sam suddenly it seemed as if all the stones were listening and the tall rocks leaning over them. But Frodo did

not heed them; he laughed again. 'Why, Sam,' he said, 'to hear you somehow makes me as merry as if the story was already written. But you've left out one of the chief characters: Samwise the stouthearted. "I want to hear more about Sam, dad. Why didn't they put in more of his talk, dad? That's what I like, it makes me laugh. And Frodo wouldn't have got far without Sam, would he, dad?"'

'Now, Mr. Frodo,' said Sam, 'you shouldn't make fun. I was serious.'

'So was I,' said Frodo, 'and so I am.' (Tolkien 1965: 408)

It seems good for Frodo and Sam to conceive of their quest narratively, that doing so contributes to their flourishing. But why? What happens when they start talking about their quest as part of a narrative?

It is widely held that it is good to conceive of one's life narratively, but why this is the case has not been well established. Many philosophers suggest or assume so without explaining why, or at least not adequately. Others offer compelling ways that conceiving of one's life narratively contributes to one's flourishing but give no reason to suppose that the ways they have outlined are exhaustive or even the most significant ways, leaving open the possibility that they have left important aspects of the matter untouched.¹ Others deny altogether that it is good to conceive of one's life narratively.²

In this essay, I supplement the explanations on offer with a new explanation for why conceiving of one's life narratively can contribute to one's flourishing. I argue that conceiving of one's life narratively can contribute to one's flourishing by mediating to oneself a second-person experience of oneself, furnishing one with valuable second-personal productive distance from oneself and as a result self-understanding. Drawing on Eleonore Stump's theory that narratives re-present to their audiences the second-person experiences they depict, I argue that conceiving of one's life narratively facilitates taking on the second-person experience that an audience would have in hearing one's

¹ See Schechtman (2007: 113), Nelson (2001: 2 - 35), Dennett (1989: 3, 171 - 172), MacIntyre (2007: 204 - 225), Taylor (1989: 45 - 51), Rosati (2013: 42 - 47), Velleman (2006), and Meilaender (1991).

² See, for example, Strawson (2004).

life narrative, mediating how someone from a second-person perspective might perceive oneself and as a result yielding valuable self-understanding. I conclude by drawing out some practical implications of my argument.

2. What it Means to Conceive of One's Life Narratively

By a life narrative, I mean a representation of a series of some of the significant temporal events of one's life (whether it be a live retelling, book, letter, song, film, play, poem, prayer, series of pictures, etc.) that organizes, interprets, and colors these events and mediates an experience of them to its audience. I cannot digress into a defense of what is necessary and sufficient for something to count as a narrative. Fortunately, I do not need to. What is important for my argument is that my reader recognizes that characteristically narratives mediate to their audiences an experience of the events they depict. Narratives do not just report events; they have a special immersive quality. Narratives re-present to their audiences the second-person experiences they depict (as I will explain in more detail later). I leave open the possibility that a non-narrative presentation of a life could also perhaps mediate an experience of the events it depicts. However, the capacity to mediate experiences is not characteristic of non-narrative forms, whereas narratives mediate experiences in virtue of being good *qua* narratives and (all other things being equal) tend to do so more acutely than non-narrative forms.

The ability to mediate experiences comes in degrees. What I say about narratives in my argument will often apply to a particular narrative to the extent that it possesses this feature. For simplicity's sake, I do not keep bringing up this caveat in the course of my argument. I speak without nuance of narratives and non-narratives. Nonetheless, what I say about narratives is often true to the extent that a narrative (or sort-of-narrative) possesses this characteristic feature, and what I say about non-narratives is often true to the extent that a non-narrative (or sort-of-narrative) lacks this characteristic feature.

By the phrase 'conceiving of one's life narratively', I mean a presentation of one's life narrative, whether presented by oneself or someone else. To conceive of one's life narratively, one need not be able to sit down and spit out one's life story. One does not have to be a storyteller to conceive of one's life narratively. However, to conceive of one's life narratively, one needs to have at least glimpses of what it would be like to have one's life narrative presented, and to live out one's life with an implicit understanding of one's life as belonging to and informed by narratives, even if one could not tell these narratives oneself. Up to a certain point, a more robust imagining would more strongly

facilitate the benefits I describe in the paper. Articulacy about one's life narrative intensifies the benefits I outline. Nevertheless, even a relatively thin imagining of what it would be like to have one's life retold can go a long way, as it seemed to for Sam when he wondered if he would ever be put into the songs and tales.

3. The Value of a Second-Person Experience of Oneself

Knowing thyself is difficult. In *Lost in the Cosmos*, Walker Percy takes up the strange case of the self trying to knowing herself, or rather failing to know herself. He writes,

You have seen yourself a thousand times in the mirror, face to face. No sight is more familiar. Yet why is that the first time you saw yourself in a clothier's triple mirror – from the side, so to speak – it comes as a shock? Or the first time you saw yourself in a home movie: were you embarrassed? What about the first time you heard your recorded voice – did you recognize it? Why is it that when you are shown a group photo you always (and probably covertly) seek yourself out? To see what you look like? Don't you know what you look like? ... Why is it that in your entire lifetime you will never be able to size yourself up as you can size up somebody else – or size up Saturn – in a ten-second look? (1983: 7-8)

Percy accounts for the self's struggle to know herself by appealing to semiotics. He argues that when we use words (for example, the word *water*), we engage in an irreducibly triadic event between ourselves, the object signified, and the signifier. Percy supposes that when a whistle signals to a dolphin to blow water, we can understand what is going on as a dyadic, causal relationship between the whistling and the dolphin's action; however, when Helen Keller understands for the first time that the word *water* means the liquid flowing on her hand, we cannot understand the event as a sequence of dyadic relationships between any two of the parts. Rather, in her act of understanding, she, the water, and the word *water* stand in an irreducibly triadic relationship to one another. If this is the case, then what happens when we try to name ourselves, that is when the person and the object signified are one and the same? Would that collapse the triad? Percy argues that since, semiotically speaking, to name an object is to relate to it in an irreducibly triadic way, and we can only relate to an object in a triadic way if it is separable from us, we cannot name ourselves. Consequently, Percy supposes we can never find a sign that fully captures ourselves, nor can we know ourselves in the way that we know objects that are separable from us. We are like an eye trying to see itself. As he puts it,

The fateful flaw of human semiotics is this: of all the objects in the entire Cosmos which the sign-user can apprehend through the conjoining of the signifier and signified (word uttered and thing beheld) there is one which forever escapes his comprehension – and that is the sign-user himself. Semiotically, the self is literally unspeakable to itself. One cannot speak or hear a word which signifies oneself, as one can speak or hear a word signifying anything else, e.g., *apple*, *Canada*, *7-up*. The self of the sign-user can never be grasped . . . (1983: 106)

It is perhaps hyperbole to say that the self is literally unspeakable to itself. However, if there is a grain of truth to Percy's theory, then we should not be surprised to find that we are sometimes too close to ourselves to perceive ourselves fully, and as a result, that productive distance from ourselves can facilitate self-understanding.

As an example, consider how the prophet Nathan convicts King David of his adultery and murder in the second book of Samuel. He describes David's actions in the form of an allegory. David hears Nathan's allegory as the story of some other person and immediately condemns the man: 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this shall surely die!' To which Nathan replies, 'You are the man!' (2 Samuel 12:5, 7, *NKJV*). Only then does David perceive his actions for what they are and repent accordingly. In this way, Nathan's allegory gives David just enough productive distance from himself for David to see himself for what he has become.

One gains productive distance from oneself when one escapes the first-person perspective and takes on either a second or third person perspective of oneself. Of these two, however, it is especially valuable for self-understanding to gain a second-person perspective of oneself. Whereas one normally acquires in the course of life an understanding of various third-person descriptions about one's features and circumstances, one does not ordinarily acquire an understanding of what it would be like to have a direct I-thou experience of oneself, and as I discuss more later, there is reason to think that there are important aspects of oneself that cannot be understood outside of a direct I-thou experience of oneself. Therefore, second-personal sources of productive distance in particular prove especially valuable for self-understanding.

Returning to the example of King David and the prophet Nathan, the difference between the third-person perspective and second-person perspective is the difference between understanding a third-person description of a murderer qua murderer that one then realizes describes oneself and actually encountering a murderer in the act of murdering and subsequently realizing that that murderer is oneself. As I argue in the

rest of this paper, narratives about oneself mediate to oneself an experience of oneself like the second-person case. As a result, they mediate to oneself aspects of a direct I-thou experience of oneself, furnish one with valuable second-personal productive distance from oneself, and facilitate self-understanding.

4. Eleonore Stump on Narratives as Second-Person Accounts

It is going to take some unpacking, but Eleonore Stump's analysis of narratives as second-person accounts helps explain why conceiving of one's life narratively could help one take up a second-person perspective of oneself. To motivate her understanding of narratives as second-person accounts, Stump considers a variation on Frank Jackson's thought experiment about Mary the captive and ideally brilliant neuroscientist. Instead of spending her life studying the neurophysiology of color from a black and white room, Mary spends her life studying all first and third-person accounts about the world without ever directly interacting with another person, i.e. she has never participated in or been a bystander to a conversation, nor consumed a second-person account of a conversation. Then, Mary meets another person for the first time, her mother who loves her dearly. Stump takes it that when Mary meets her mother, she would learn something new. Moreover, since by hypothesis Mary already knows everything that can be expressed about the world in a first or third person account, what Mary learns must be the sort of the thing that can only be expressed without remainder in a second-person account (2013: 51-53).

Stump argues that a story would constitute such a second-person account, an idea that makes sense of the intuition that Mary probably would have learned less when she met her mother for the first time had she in her isolation read the collected works of Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Twain, etc. (2013: 77-80). According to Stump, a story is a second-person account in that it re-presents a second-person experience. As she explains it,

A story takes a real or imagined second-person experience and makes it available to a wider audience to share. It does so by making it possible, to one degree or another, for a reader or listener to simulate what it would have been like for her if she had been an onlooker in the second-person experience represented in the story. That is, a story gives a person some of what she would have had if she had had unmediated personal interaction with the characters in the story while they were conscious and interacting with each other, without actually making her part of the story itself. The re-presenting of a second -person experience in a story

thus constitutes a second-person account. It is a report of a set of second-person experiences that does not lose (at least does not lose entirely) the distinctively second-person character of the experiences (2013: 78).

By classifying narratives as re-presentations of second-person experiences, Stump explains the common feeling that one has been right there alongside the characters in the story, that is the feeling that characteristically comes from having had a second-person experience. It is worth noting that because of the immersive quality of narrative, a story may transport the reader to the scene of the events, re-present a second-person experience to the reader as Stump describes, and so count as a second-person account, even if a story is written in the voice of a first or third person narrator.

Stump hypothesizes that stories might do the work of mediating second-person experiences partly by triggering something called mirror neurons. The mirror neuron system causes one to quasi-experience the mental states of another person by causing the same kind of neurons to fire both when one has an emotion and also when one sees another person experience that same affective emotion. To use Stump's example, when Paula sees Jerome cut himself with a knife, Paula quasi-feels Jerome's pain because some of the same neurons are firing in Paula that would fire if Paula had cut herself. As a result, Paula experiences an affective state that resembles Jerome's pain (2013: 67 – 71, 2018: 129 – 130). Likewise, when we read a story that masterfully mediates a second-person experience of someone cutting himself, we quasi-experience the pain, quite possibly because the story engages the mirror neuron system in a similar way that perceiving someone's cutting himself engages the mirror neuron system (2013: 78 – 80).

5. Expanding Stump's Account of Narratives and the Second-Personal

Stump develops her understanding of narratives as second-person accounts in the interest of defending her use of narratives as unique sources of knowledge of persons within her work on the problem of evil. It makes sense therefore that she writes about narratives with an interest in what kind of knowledge the *reader* of a narrative gains. That way she can claim that philosophers can gain special knowledge from reading narratives, like the ones she references in her work. However, I wonder, if pressed, whether Stump might also suppose that the *author* of a narrative also gains some kind of knowledge from *writing* a narrative and anticipating its reception, for instance whether Tolkien through trying to write *The Lord of the Rings* and through

imagining his friend Lewis reading it as he writes it, might gain some kind of insight into what he is creating.

The process of carefully getting everything out on paper so that Lewis could read it would have forced Tolkien to nail down his characters in more detail and thus would have, in this simple sense, given Tolkien new insight into his characters. However, I am interested in exploring whether in another, more interesting sense Tolkien, simply by thinking about what he was writing from Lewis' perspective, would have gained new insight into his characters over and above all the details he nailed down. In other words, I am interested in exploring whether additional insights into his characters would have emerged, not by discovering or inventing new details about his characters but rather by seeing the details that were already there through Lewis' eyes.

This seems plausible to me. In general, when one describes something to another person, it prompts one to consider how what one says is coming across, what picture one's audience is forming, and this process of imagining how someone else sees what one is saying can itself be a source of knowledge, even if one's audience does not say anything. I take it that this is partly why people pay hundreds of dollars to have a therapist mostly listen to them. I myself have experienced this phenomenon in two other contexts. First, when I became an Orthodox Christian, I had to make a life confession. My priest did not comment on the content of my confession, but nonetheless the process itself of making the confession, and even more so of imagining making the confession as I was preparing for it, profoundly changed how I thought about my sin, even though I had thought at length about my sin before, just not in the context of preparing to confess it to someone else. Second, one time I had a student who after spending hours on a math problem and failing to get the answer in the back of the book asked me what she was doing wrong. I suggested that she go back through the problem and explain her work to me. Three or so sentences into her explanation, she caught her own error without my saying a word. Marilynne Robinson paints a similar interaction in her novel *Gilead*. Halfway through delivering a sermon that he carefully wrote, John notices Jack in the pew, Jack who had always seemed 'to see right through' him. Suddenly, John feels ashamed of what he has written, but afraid to go off-script he forces himself to 'mouth these dead words while he sat there smiling at me.' (2004: 223)

As these kinds of situations illustrate, it seems that sometimes when one explains something to someone else (or even imagines explaining it to someone else), it is natural to gain new knowledge about what one is explaining. I take it that this is the case because when we are aware of another person listening to us (or even imagine another

person listening to us), it prompts us to consider how he perceives (or would perceive) what we are saying, but also because when we explain something to someone else, we naturally have to gauge what picture he is forming of what we are saying in order for us to know what more we need to say for him to understand what we are trying to communicate. So, describing something to someone else prompts us to hear what we are saying as he would hear it, and that can be a source of new knowledge.

If we alter the examples slightly so that the speaker in each case does not have a second-person experience of the listener but is just aware of the listener's listening- say by stipulating that the congregant, therapist, confessor, and teacher each listened through a one-way mirror and that the patient, penitent, student, and homilist knew that the listener was listening on the other side - my guess is that the outcome in each case might have been weakened somewhat but would not be qualitatively different. I suspect that in each case, the speaker would have likely still learned something new through her awareness of the listener's listening. To take things a step further, if in each case the listener were in fact not on the other side of the one-way glass, but the speaker mistakenly thought that they were such that from the speaker's perspective the event was experientially identical, it seems plausible that the effect on the speaker would be the same. To take things another step further, if the speaker knew that there was no one on the other side of the glass but imagined that there were, I suspect again that the effect might be somewhat weaker but not qualitatively different. To take another variant, it seems reasonable that if the speaker actively imagined speaking to the person on the other side of the glass (but did not actually say anything), the effect would be similar. To take things one final step further, if the speaker imagined someone else saying for her what she would have said, it seems plausible that although the effect might be weakened, she would still learn something new through anticipating the listener's perception of what she would say. So, it seems that what is crucial for the speaker to acquire a new perspective on what she is saying is that the speaker imagine the listener's perception of what she or someone speaking for her would say, not that she necessarily have a second-person experience of the listener's having a second-person experience of her.

This is significant because reading a story is like witnessing a series of events through a one-way mirror, and telling a story is like speaking about a series of events on the opaque side of a one-way mirror. As a result, if an author writes her work imagining it actively read and considered, an author can gain a similar kind of knowledge to what the patient, penitent, student, and homilist gained in my examples. Just as a masterful story can mediate to a reader a second-person experience of the characters in the story,

so writing a narrative can mediate back to an author aspects of her readers' second-person experience of the characters in her story. When Paula feels Jerome's pain via mirror neurons when he cuts himself, Jerome feels Paula's care and attention via mirror neurons when she responds compassionately. In this way, Paula and Jerome in a sense mind-read each other as they jointly attend to Jerome's cut. In a similar way, a storyteller and his live audience in a sense mind-read each other as they jointly attend to the contents of the story as it is told. Or, in the case where the audience is only imagined, an author mind-reads how her imagined audience would likely perceive her story as she authors it.

6. How Conceiving of One's Life Narratively Facilitates a Second-Person Experience of Oneself

If, as I have argued, telling a story can mediate back to the storyteller aspects of the second-person experience that the listener has of the characters in the story, then conceiving of one's life narratively emerges as a powerful tool for taking on a second-person perspective of oneself. As I have described, writing a narrative can give one a glimpse into how a reader from a second-person perspective might perceive one's narrative. In the case of Tolkien writing about Frodo and Sam, a glimpse of what Lewis might think about the narrative can help Tolkien by giving him another perspective on Frodo and Sam. But in the case of Tolkien writing about himself, a glimpse of what Lewis might think about what he is writing is not just another perspective, it is a fundamentally new kind of perspective. It is a second-person perspective on Tolkien, a rare commodity for Tolkien who inevitably experiences himself in the first-person (or perhaps occasionally the third-person), with the limitations of those perspectives. Lewis' second-person perspective offers Tolkien a valuable means of productive distance. So, unlike in the case where Tolkien writes about Frodo and Sam, in the case where Tolkien writes about himself, getting a glimpse into Lewis' second-person perspective gives Tolkien a source of valuable second-personal productive distance from himself.

Just as Tolkien's writing about himself naturally prompts him to imagine how Lewis might perceive him, so imagining a presentation of one's life narrative (without necessarily writing it out) can also naturally prompt one to imagine what it would be like for someone to hear one's life story. This is the case even if one imagines the storytelling done by someone else, as in Sam's imagination of future generations telling his tale by the fireside out of a great big book with red and black letters. (Recall the variation with the one-way mirror in which instead of speaking for oneself the speaker imagines someone else saying what she would have said.) Likely a more robust, articulate

imagining of a presentation of one's life would more intensely mediate the audience's second-person perspective, but even a relatively thin imagining like Sam's can facilitate the taking on of a new perspective. So, imagining a presentation (whether presented by oneself or someone else) of one's life narrative - that is, conceiving of one's life narratively - is like being in the case where Tolkien is writing about himself. As a result, just as writing to Lewis about himself can give Tolkien a productively distant second-person perspective on himself, so conceiving of one's life narratively can give one a productively distant second-person perspective on oneself, enabling one to escape the semiotic trap of the first-person perspective that Percy outlines, and by extension enjoy valuable self-understanding. In this way, conceiving of one's life narratively emerges as a helpful tool for acquiring aspects of a direct I-thou experience of oneself, reshaping one's perception of oneself and one's life.

Returning to my opening example, notice that when Sam starts conceiving of his quest narratively, he does so by imagining how posterity would perceive his quest. He says,

'I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course, but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: "Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring!" And they will say: "Yes, that's one of my favourite stories. Frodo was very brave, wasn't he, dad?" "Yes, my boy..." (Tolkien 1965: 408)

Catching a glimpse of how posterity would perceive his quest reshapes his own perception of his quest and gives him the strength to go on without turning back.

As another example, consider the courtroom scene from *Till We Have Faces* by C.S. Lewis. From the beginning, Orual (who is the narrator of *Till We Have Faces*) tells us that she is writing a case against the gods for all the injustices they have committed against her. Starting with her earliest memories, she writes a life narrative as evidence against them. After finishing her case, she is brought in a dream before an assembly of the gods and the dead and is asked to read her complaint. She laments for some time that they stole her sister from her, that they acted as thieves and seducers, etc. until she is interrupted:

"Enough," said the judge.

There was utter silence all round me. And now for the first time I knew what I

had been doing. While I was reading, it had, once and again, seemed strange to me that the reading took so long; for the book was a small one. Now I knew that I had been reading it over and over - perhaps a dozen times. I would have read it forever, quick as I could, starting the first word again almost before the last was out of my mouth, if the judge had not stopped me. And the voice I read it in was strange to my ears. There was given to me a certainty that this, at last, was my real voice. There was silence in the dark assembly long enough for me to have read my book out yet again. At last the judge spoke.

"Are you answered?" he said.

"Yes," said I.

The complaint was the answer. To have heard myself making it was to be answered. ...When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the center of your soul for years, which you have, all that time, idiot-like, been saying over and over, you'll not talk about the joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?" (1957: 292 - 294)

Even though the judge hardly said a word, just the process itself of finding the speech that had lain at the center of her, coming before the judge, and telling her narrative prompts Orual to perceive her narrative from the judge's perspective. The encounter profoundly changes Orual's perception of herself and her life, so much so that Orual suggests that it is then that she at last receives her face.

The narrative form is particularly conducive to the kind of realizations that Sam and Orual have because, as Stump argues, narratives re-present second-person experiences and because, as I argue, an audience's second-person experience of oneself in a story about oneself can prompt in one an awareness of being perceived that brings with it the kind of second-personal productive distance that Sam and Orual experience. This is not to say that one cannot gain self-understanding from imagining one's life described in a non-narrative way. However, to the extent that narrative forms more acutely re-present second-person experiences than non-narrative forms, imagining one's life presented in a narrative way facilitates awareness of the audience's more acute second-person experience of oneself, and as I suggest more second-personal productive distance as a result.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that conceiving of one's life narratively can contribute to one's flourishing by facilitating taking on the second-person experience of oneself that an audience would have in hearing one's life narrative, mediating how someone from a second-person perspective might perceive oneself. This process can yield valuable second-personal productive distance from oneself, enabling one to acquire aspects of a direct I-thou experience of oneself and as result self-understanding. I have not shown that conceiving of one's life narratively ensures a second-person experience of oneself (only that doing so facilitates its acquisition), nor have I shown that a second-person experience of oneself is the only or most significant benefit to be had from conceiving of one's life narratively. I also have not shown that narrative is the only valuable form through which to conceive of one's life, or that it is better to conceive of one's life narratively than to conceive of one's life through another form, or that conceiving of one's life narratively is the only way to gain a second-person experience of oneself. (For instance, I find it plausible that certain kinds of intense I-thou encounters (like meeting God face-to-face) might also yield second-person knowledge of oneself.) Nonetheless, I have shown that conceiving of one's life narratively can contribute to one's flourishing by mediating to oneself a second-person experience of oneself, and moreover that conceiving of one's life narratively accomplishes this in virtue of a feature of narrative that is characteristic of the narrative form, i.e. the capacity of narrative to mediate second-person experiences. This phenomenon helps explain what happened when Sam asked, 'I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales...' But moreover, this phenomenon elucidates what happens when we tell stories in general, how stories so powerfully (re)shape our perceptions of reality, both for the writer and for the reader. It's a mysterious business, telling a story, and never more so than when it's about oneself.

My argument has at least two practical implications. First, if imagining how an audience would hear our life narratives can transform how we ourselves see ourselves, then we must choose carefully which people we regard as the audience of our lives. If Sam in the Nameless Lands had kept at the front of his mind how someone like Denethor would see his quest, Denethor who had called it 'madness' and 'beyond all but a fool's hope,' he may have despaired of his quest after all (Tolkien 1955: 81). Instead, his imagination of how the hobbits in the shire would retell his adventure gave him new hope for his pilgrimage, reshaped how he experienced it, and gave him the strength to in fact bring his quest to a successful completion.

A second practical implication is that if the kind of life narratives we imagine having can shape how we perceive and experience ourselves, then we must choose carefully what narratives to steep ourselves in. The narratives we internalize shape what kind of narrative arcs we can envision for our lives. By steeping himself in the noble tales of old, Sam equipped himself to imagine his life unfolding in a similarly noble fashion, which in turn transformed his experience of the arduous parts of his journey and helped him set his mind on becoming the kind of person who would not turn back. Sam inherited his way of understanding what he was experiencing from a great web of narratives handed down to him by his community. The web of narratives in which we choose to immerse ourselves can similarly shape our understanding of our lives. It is worth asking: *What stories do we tell ourselves? What stories do we tell those we love?*

References

- Dennett, D. C. (1989) 'The Origins of selves', *Cogito*, 3/3: 163–173.
- Lewis, C. S. (1957) *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, Brace.
- MacIntyre, A. C. (2007) *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edn. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Meilaender, G. C. (1991) 'Theology in Stories: C. S. Lewis and the Narrative Quality of Experience', In Schakel, P. J. and Huttar, C. A. (1991) *Word and Story in C.S. Lewis*. University of Missouri Press.
- Nelson, H. L. (2001) *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Percy, W. (1983) *Lost in the Cosmos: the Last Self-Help Book*. New York: Picador.
- Robinson, M. (2004) *Gilead: A Novel*. New York: Picador.
- Rosati, C. S. (2013) 'The Story of A Life', *Social Philosophy & Policy*, 30/1-2: 21–50.
- Schechtman, M. (2007) *The Constitution of Selves*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Strawson, G. (2004) 'Against Narrativity', *Ratio* 17/4: 428–52.
- Stump, E. (2013) *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stump, E. (2018) *Atonement*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1989) *Sources of the self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Tolkien, J. R. R. (1955) *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Tolkien, J. R. R. (1965) *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Velleman, J. D. (2006) "The Self as Narrator." In Velleman, J.D. (2006) *Self to Self: Selected Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.