Pursuing Truth in Narrative Research

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ABSTRACT  In substituting aesthetic criteria for the time-honoured yardsticks of reliability, validity and generalization, narrative researchers are sometimes criticized for devaluing the notion of truth. This paper suggests that what is an issue here is not so much empirical quantitative truth as rather artistic literary truth. The latter notion of truth is characterized in terms of ‘authenticity’ and the ramifications of authentic truth for narrative research are posited and explored. Only such an understanding of truth and the resolve seriously to apply it will garner narrative researchers the epistemic respectability they seek.

In ‘Gone with the wind? Evidence, rigor and warrants in educational research’, D.C. Phillips (1993) focused on the rise of the narrative method in educational research and the justifications that are given for it. Phillips charged devotees of the method with devaluing the importance of truth by employing criteria that are not epistemically relevant. What is valued in narrative, according to Bruner, is “not truth but verisimilitude... A story (allegedly true or allegedly fictional) is judged for its goodness as a story by criteria that are of a different kind from those used to judge a logical argument as adequate or correct” (Bruner, 1986, pp. 11–12). Good narrative leads to “good stories, believable (though not necessarily ‘true’) historical accounts” (Bruner, 1986, p. 13).

Neither is Bruner the only one to speak thus of the narrative method. Seeking to answer the question “What makes a good narrative?” Connelly and Clandinin argue that we have to “go beyond reliability, validity and generalizability” and identify “apparenctuy, verisimilitude and transferability”, as well as “adequacy and plausibility”, as possible alternative criteria (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, pp. 7–8). Spence (1982) writes that “narrative truth” consists of “continuity”, “closure”, “aesthetic finality” and a sense of “conviction” (p. 31). Van Manen cautions those entering the field of human science research that “the very meanings of ‘knowledge’, ‘science’, ‘theory’ and ‘research’ are based upon different assumptions” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 20). And he suggests that the aim in narrative research is to construct an “animating, evocative description (text) of human actions, intentions, behaviors and experiences as we meet them in the life world” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 19). Then most recently there is Tom Barone’s statement that “accessibility, compellingness and moral persuasiveness will serve as criteria for judging the professional worth of educational stories” (Barone, 1992, p. 21).

Phillips has serious reservations about the substitution of such criteria for the time-honoured yardsticks of reliability, validity and generalization. And he argues strongly that narratives need to be made “epistemically respectable”, which entails dealing more thoroughly with the issue of the truth of narrative before widespread use can be condoned.

Phillips has undoubtedly raised a thorny issue here, one which pertains to the ongoing debate between quantitative research and its affiliation with scientific rigour and qualitative research with its oft-stated affiliation with the literary arts and criteria of aesthetic quality.
Moreover, it highlights yet again the strict division that is perceived to exist between the ‘hard’ sciences and the supposedly ‘softer’ arts areas, an orientation that comes through very strongly at times in Phillips’ paper. One gets the impression that devotees of the narrative method endorse, even promote, the use of woolly, fuzzy criteria. And while this latter charge is not entirely without foundation, it is “played up” just a little in Phillips’ paper. For although Phillips does concede in the case of Bruner that “it is not the case that [this] latter scholar has abandoned objectivity in the search for truth as ideals of inquiry, but rather that many of . . . [his] . . . readers have misinterpreted [him] in this way” (Phillips, 1993, p. 4), he makes no such concessions for the other writers he mentions. Van Manen’s acknowledgement of “the danger that an individual of insufficient talent and inadequate scholarly experience may try to hide his or her lack of insight behind an obfuscating, flowery or self-indulgent discourse” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 17) is never mentioned. Neither is Connelly and Clandinin’s warning (1990, p. 10) that

Falsehood may be substituted for meaning and narrative truth by using the same criteria that give rise to significance, value and intention. Not only may one ‘fake the data’ and write a fiction but one may also use the data to tell a deception as easily as a truth.

Instead one is given the impression that narrative researchers operate with a kind of cavalier disregard for the notion of truth, asking glibly “what does it matter if it is true or not so long as it is a compelling accessible story that evokes a certain kind of moral response?”

But while Phillips is not entirely fair in evaluating the stance of narrative researchers thus, he is justified in arguing that they tend to skirt around the notion of ‘truth’ and rarely enough allude to it directly, preferring instead to employ vague if edifying aesthetic-type justifications in endorsing their softer, sensitive, subtle criteria. Yet in an interview on Irish television’s *Writers in Profile* (April, 1993) novelist Doris Lessing stated unequivocally “a writer must above all else speak the truth”. Likewise, Irish Murdoch in *The Black Prince* asserts “Good art speaks truth, indeed ‘is’ truth, perhaps the only truth” (Murdoch, 1973, p. 11). Even more evocatively, in *An Accidental Man* she declares “You may know a truth but if it’s at all complicated you have to be an artist not to utter it as a lie” (Murdoch, 1971, p. 90). And all of these statements shed a somewhat different perspective on the ‘artistic’ justifications employed by narrative researchers. Truth would appear to play a much more central role in literary narrative writing than they appear to acknowledge. Indeed the very criteria employed by them—“compellingness, accessibility and moral persuasiveness”—might all be seen to serve that very notion of truth. And if that indeed is the case and narrative researchers unwittingly perhaps have blurred the importance of that connection, then Phillips’ critique is salient indeed and his challenge must be answered.

But while I am sympathetic with Phillips’ general position (his tendency to play up evidence notwithstanding), I think his critique somewhat misses the mark by holding up empirical quantitative truth and its attendant virtues, reliability, validity and generalizability, as the hallmarks of epistemic respectability. For, however venerable these criteria, they are simply not relevant in the case of a research method whose express purpose is “to stand up for the uniqueness and significance of the notion to which they have dedicated themselves . . . by aiming for interpretive descriptions that exact fulness and completeness of detail” (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 17–18). They are not pertinent where a research method, far from eschewing subjectivity, instead openly endorses it, endeavouring to give the practitioner who has long been silenced in the research relationship “the time and space to tell her or his story so that it too gains the authority and validity that the [quantitative] research story has long had” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). What seems to be at issue here is not so much empirical quantitative truth as artistic literary truth. For while empirical objections may all too easily be dismissed with derisive charges of ‘positivism’, the issue of artistic truth is much less easily deflected. It is this notion of truth and its ramifications
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for narrative research that most urgently needs to be explored if narrative research is to
garner the authority and validity—the epistemic respectability—it seeks. It is this notion of
truth that I propose to explore in the following study.

So what does Doris Lessing mean when she says “A writer must above all else speak
the truth”? At first glance this seems like an extraordinary statement from a novelist. For
as we all know very well, novels are essentially fictional—contain imaginary characters,
events, places and things. We understand that sentences in them about such characters,
events and so forth are not to be read straightforwardly as ‘true’ statements about the real
world. Indeed, even where real places, historical persons and events are mentioned in
novels, e.g. Russia and Napoleon in Tolstoy’s War and Peace, we grasp intuitively that they
are still merely part of the story, function as the ‘setting’ for the fictional characters and
events and not as in a typographical or historical setting. “Russia as the setting for the
Rostovs differs from the Russia which Napoleon invaded which did not contain the
Rostovs” says Margaret MacDonald (1969, p. 628). We grasp the difference because we
gasp the convention of pretending basic in all story telling. In Weitz’s aptly chosen words:

We know that the things that are being talked about do not exist or that their
existence or non-existence is not relevant in the context of pretending; and
consequently . . . [in order to get the point of and to get the most from the story
telling activity] . . . we shift our orientation from belief and disbelief to make-bel-

Weitz, 1969, p. 216)

But granted that in reading a novel we typically do deliberately waive the existence or
non-existence of the persons, places and events mentioned and consequently the truth and
falsity of such talk, does this settle the issue of truth in literature? Weitz (and obviously
Lessing) think not. For although all of the above is true, literary works can and frequently
do yield ‘truths’ about human nature and about life. That is to say, whether through the total
delineation of character, dialogue and plot and/or through interspersed reflections on the
created experiences of the invented characters and/or through the use of the universal ‘one’
or ‘we’ plus our own cultural tradition of reading some novels with those commentaries in
mind, most literary works contain printed or suggested truth-claims which we “are called
upon to take as serious commentaries upon life” (Weitz, 1969, p. 221).

Like all truth-claims these are of the order of universal generalizations. Ruth’s
comment in The Life and Times of a She-Devil:

And how, especially, do ugly women survive, those whom the world pities? The
dogs, as they call us. I’ll tell you. They live as I do, out-facing truth, hardening
the skin against perpetual humiliation, until it’s as tough and cold as a crocodile.
And we wait for old age to equalize all things. We make good old women.
(Weldon, 1983, pp. 10-11)

manifestly refers not just to the novel’s ugly woman (Ruth) but to the common experience
of ugly women in general. Similarly Margaret Atwood’s chilling depiction of the ‘friend-
ship’ of four young girls in Cat’s Eye (Atwood, 1988) resonates with an eerie, disturbing
familiarity, conjuring up images of childhood many women (and indeed some feminists in
particular) would much rather forget.

But although comments and depictions such as those of Weldon and Atwood partake
of the character of universal generalizations, they are not like those arrived at scientifically
in that their denial seldom involves total rejection of them. Instead, Weitz insightfully
characterizes them as belonging to that “larger family of claims” whose members include
“epigrams, apérgus . . . [perceptions] . . . and the like” and which “we tend to convert into
limited and partial claims about certain phenomena” (Weitz, 1969, pp. 219–220). Such
partial claims leave room for the irreducible complexity of the world while yet offering
penetrating insights as to our experience of it. There is much more to young girls’
friendship and the experience of female ugliness than can possibly be enunciated in a single novel. Yet Atwood and Weldon give us a start, articulating aspects of those phenomena that strike us as startlingly ‘true’, strike us as accurate, compelling if incomplete renditions of commonly lived experiences. As Weitz suggests, echoing Aristotle, among other things we learn from literary works the truth that “human life is too complex, too inexhaustibly variegated ever to be reduced to a single pattern” (Weitz, 1969, p. 222).

Now it is of truths such as those mentioned above that I believe Doris Lessing and others speak. Moreover, it is precisely at this point that we may reintroduce narrative researchers for while they, unlike novelists, do not invent imaginary characters, events, things and places, they do share with literary artists a certain outlook upon life. They contend that life in the classroom is too complex, too inexhaustibly variegated ever to be reduced to a single pattern, hence their avowed aim to stand up for the uniqueness and significance of events experienced there, “to do justice to this particular episode that happened to a particular teacher at a particular time and place” (Jardine, 1992, p. 51). Neither are they always reluctant to link their aims to the notion of truth. “There is a ‘truth’ to be had, an understanding to be reached in the unmethodical incidents of our lives”, says Jardine, “a truth which is despoiled and thus left out of consideration by the methodical severances requisite of empirical work” (ibid., pp. 54–55).

But how do literary artists (and thereafter narrative researchers) speak these truths? I will argue that they do so through espousing the notion of ‘authenticity’. Indeed, I think the criteria of good narrative identified by narrative researchers, e.g. “animating, evocative descriptions”, “compellingness and moral persuasiveness” all take on a sharper, less fuzzy focus when viewed within the context of the latter concept. Situated thus, they achieve epistemic relevance and so respectability. Situated outside it they are patently epistemically insufficient. Accordingly, it is to the notion of authenticity and its ramifications for narrative truth that we must now turn our attention.

Authenticity is often connected with genuineness, e.g. an authentic Rembrandt is a genuine one, the ‘real’ thing as it were and not a reproduction. Similarly, one’s grief at the loss of a parent is said to be ‘authentic’ if it is ‘genuine’—truly and honestly felt and expressed. Honesty and truthfulness then are connected to the notion of ‘authenticity’. So, according to my interpretation, when Lessing says “a writer must above all speak the truth” she is basically saying a writer above all else must be “honest and truthful”. But honest and truthful in regard to what?

In order to answer this we need to take a brief but I hope fruitful diversion into the realm of existentialism and in particular the notion of existential freedom [1]. According to this latter notion, human beings are controllers of their own destiny, that is to say they do not have specific fixed qualities, predetermined life-styles or goals. Rather it is up to them which styles of life they embrace, which goals they set themselves, which values they espouse. In the thought of Nietzsche, human beings are “self-legislating” and “self-creating” and it is their responsibility to decide what form their lives will take.

But although human beings are indeed ‘free’ to determine what form their lives will take, their choices are not unlimited. Rather they find themselves abandoned or thrown into a particular world and time with ‘this’ body and ‘these’ attributes, and all of these limit the options available to them, make ‘this’ choice and not ‘that’ a viable alternative. Factual limitations notwithstanding, however, human beings are nevertheless free to formulate their own projects and attitudes concerning those givens. Thus, the pianist Paul Wittgenstein, confronted after the First World War with the calamity of an amputated right arm, resolutely taught himself to play using only his left hand, so managing to maintain his career as a concert pianist (Monk, 1990). While unable to wish away the ‘fact’ of his amputated arm, Wittgenstein was nevertheless free to formulate his own attitudes and projects concerning his amputation, hence his quite extraordinary feat of accommodation. That is to say, he envisioned and successfully realized an alternative life-style to that suggested by his situation. As it was for Paul Wittgenstein, so it is for all human kind. As
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a human being one can always envision further possibilities, always conceive of alternative life-styles, alternative goals, alternative values. Hence Heidegger’s insistence that “man is his possibility” (1962, p. 42), Sartre’s assertion that “man is freedom” (1956, p. 439).

But human being is possibility not only because it ‘has’ a range of possibilities open to it. It is ‘its’ possibilities in that ultimately it and it alone is accountable for the values, life-styles, goals it espouses. There were no a priori grounds for Paul Wittgenstein making the choice he did. Rather there was simply his own decision. And precisely because there are ultimately only our own decisions and choices, because we are as human beings free from divine, moral, rational or naturalistic impositions of goals and values and are instead free to formulate our own, free to decide what matters in our lives, it follows that we and we alone are responsible for those formulations.

Now to live one’s life ‘authentically’ is to live it in a way that is true to oneself as this kind of being, someone essentially free in the sense of not being predetermined but someone whose choices are circumscribed nevertheless by facts and realities that limit the options available to one, have a necessary impact upon the decisions one makes. In short, we are speaking here of what Cooper (1990) aptly describes as a kind of “reactive freedom”, one “released from the illusions of the ‘they’, yet within the limitations of its thrownness” (Heidegger, 1962, in Cooper, 1990, p. 156). Here, contained within the latter statement, one finds possibilities for falsehood and dishonesty all of which speak directly to concerns mentioned by Phillips (1993) in his paper. Accordingly, it is to these possibilities and their pertinent ramifications for writing and narrative research that we must now turn our attention.

People can be inauthentic or untrue to themselves in at least two ways. First, they can choose to ignore or shrug off the facts that delimit them—“the limitations of their thrownness”—and deceivingly conceive of themselves, their situations or their goals, in terms that are utterly unrealistic, that indulge a tendency towards fantasy or wishful thinking. An academic, for example, may indulge in “delusions of grandeur”, may self-deceivingly convince herself that her scholarly writings place her at the cutting edge of academic research endeavour. In reality, however, she may have failed to keep up with contemporary research trends and innovations. And her writing, far from being cutting edge material, may instead be stuck with an outdated if once innovative paradigm. Insofar as the academic refuses to acknowledge this fact, and delusively clings to the belief that her work is indeed at the forefront in current academic endeavour, she is essentially being dishonest and the genuineness of her commitment to pursuing innovative research may be called into question.

Literary writers too, depending on the particular genre they embrace, are bound by certain limitations. Writers of realistic or naturalistic novels, for example, who deliberately place their characters within specific historical/geographical settings (as Margaret Atwood does her young girls in post-war Toronto), are bound to honour, with at least reasonable accuracy, the norms and mores of that particular time and place. For if they fail to do so, if their depictions of the time and/or place depart wildly from historical ‘facts’, then their novels will likely not have the verisimilitude that appears to be their object and that contributes in no small way to their conviction as stories.

Now, no less than literary writers, narrative researchers too are bound to honour the settings inside which their research stories occur. Indeed given that their genre is narrative ‘research’ and not narrative ‘fiction’, they are even more bound than literary writers. For, the narrative prefix notwithstanding, the notion of ‘research’ carries with it connotations of careful systematic study of some area of knowledge—in this case classroom practice. And while narrative researchers may employ the style of fictional narrative (which style lends itself to the development of classroom ‘stories’), they are yet not writers of fiction. Rather they are engaged in interpreting a particular event or series of events that occurred in a particular classroom at a particular time. In other words they are engaged in interpreting situations that actually occurred, not imaginary ones. And that being the case, the researcher
is bound to honour details and incidents that in fact happened. To do otherwise, to ignore or repress certain happenings in the interests of creating a better, more coherent story or to portray the teacher as a certain kind of educator—a progressive one, for example—is to be dishonest, to “fake the data”.

The employment of literary narrative style however does not in itself indicate a propensity towards manipulating the data. Phillips may be right in asserting that the fact that a research story is credible and coherent, has an enticing plot, induces feelings of familiarity and comfort, “tells us nothing—absolutely nothing—about whether it is true or false” (Phillips, 1993, p. 8), but the fact that we are speaking here of ‘research’ stories does tell us something. They tell us that the incidents described actually occurred. And while we have all heard of researchers faking the data in order to get a better, more desired, result, it is not their choice of research method that brings this about but the fact that they are dishonest researchers. One can ‘cook the data’ in both quantitative and qualitative studies—the fact that a research study uses numbers of itself does not tell us whether the study is true or false. In both styles of research, one ultimately has to trust in the integrity of the scholar. One has to have faith in the authenticity of their commitment to educational research.

But there is yet another very important way that people can live inauthentically. They can totally abdicate responsibility for situations, attitudes and directions in which they immerse themselves or find themselves immersed. They can pretend that external realities entirely circumscribe them, and that they have no choice but to go along with the beliefs, values and interpretations perpetuated and endorsed by external society and/or relevant communities.

Before we go on to consider a pertinent example of this kind of inauthenticity, however, it is perhaps necessary to emphasize that we are speaking here of ‘unquestioning’ adherence to norms, roles, attitudes and so forth perpetuated by external society. Contrary to popular belief, existentialist philosophers are more than cognizant of the communal character of existence—the necessity of the ‘they’ in all our chosen endeavours. These provide us with the historical traditions—the languages, disciplines of thought, modes of enquiry, and so on—utilization of which enables us to pursue those projects that matter to us, and without which we would be condemned to solipsistic unintelligibility. Existential freedom, in short, is not to be confused with a kind of Dadaist total overthrowal of all convention. Rather it is something we ‘win’ from ‘thrown’ existence in the ‘they’. As David Cooper so lucidly describes it, the possibilities which the authentic person makes her own cannot be plucked out of thin air . . . [but] must instead be sought in the traditions of a people, its heritage . . . the recovery of self from the ‘they’ necessitates a search for alternatives to ‘their’ ways within a larger historical tradition. (Cooper, 1990, p. 161)

Careless, undiscerning originality, or unrestrained creativity, is not what existential freedom is all about. Rather it takes the form of what Cooper, after Buber, delineates as an ‘open confrontation’ with sedimented ways that have become ‘adverse’ to the emergence of new meanings (ibid., p. 156).

Now people all too easily back away from such ‘open confrontations’. Deeply committed to a particular ideological outlook, a Marxist or feminist one for example, and bent on convincing others of the worthiness of its ideals, a writer may produce what purports to be a realistic novel but which is in fact a highly idealized piece of propaganda. For, rather than portraying the outlook ‘realistically’, going beyond the rhetoric and probing its actual meaning in real life, the writer may instead present an undiscriminating, idealized version of it, one in which potential or known discrepancies between theory and practice are carefully expunged or glossed over, where characters exist only as mouthpieces for the ideals endorsed and so forth.

Insofar as the writer thus embraces uncritically a particular political stance and writes
about it accordingly, her novel is likely to assume a stilted, unconvincing air of unreality. Neither is this entirely surprising. For in cases like this the writer is essentially speaking in a way that is dishonest and untruthful. In the parlance of authenticity, she is losing her artistic self to the ‘they’ in that she is allowing external forces—in this case the ideals of the outlook in question—to determine the direction of ‘her’ writing, a situation dissident Soviet writers famously protested.

And here encapsulated in the above we find another inkling as to the meaning of Doris Lessing’s provocative comment. Her remark, among other things, cautions writers that, however deeply they hold particular ideological outlooks or beliefs, they must yet strive at all times to be authentic in their writing. That is to say, the worthiness of the ideals notwithstanding, they must not simply go along with an outlook however important, however fashionable. Rather they must grapple with it, bring real life to bear on it. And if that means probing and unveiling not only its savoury side but also its unsavoury one, they must not shrink from the task. To do less than this, to gloss over potential or actual discrepancies in the name of loyalty to worthy ideals, is to lose one’s artistic self to ideological fervour, to political correctness. It is to lose oneself to the ‘they’.

No less than writers, teachers are also subject to the directive influences of various ‘theys’ in their work in the classroom. A teacher, for example, immersed in the business of teaching children how to read, may embrace the whole-language approach to teaching reading as a kind of orthodoxy which she perforce must accept without question. And she may push aside any reservations she has about its application in her classroom by saying to herself such things as “it is Department of Education policy” or “people with far greater expertise than me have suggested that this is the best way to teach reading, therefore it must be so”. In behaving thus, the teacher is essentially allowing external realities to determine the direction of her teaching. She is conforming unquestioningly to an officially sanctioned view, one which fosters the illusion that there is ‘a’ best way to teach reading. Furthermore, insofar as conditions in the teacher’s classroom, and/or in her own preferred teaching style, call into question aspects of the officially sanctioned view, and she ignores these and, much against her better judgment, adheres to authoritative or fashionable expectations, she is essentially abdicating her professional responsibility and is teaching inauthentically. Rather than winning herself from the ‘they’—working with and through the whole-language approach—she is instead losing herself in it and thereby laying the groundwork for further inauthentic rationalizations. For, faced with less-than-successful learning results, the teacher is likely to blame the whole-language approach per se and conveniently forget or ignore her own reluctance to grapple with it.

Now it is precisely such a ‘forgetfulness’ that narrative researchers seek to dispel. Thus, in endeavouring to write the stories of classroom practice they do not just accept and record the practitioner’s first account of a particular event. Rather, they probe further. Adopting a cooperative, collaborative stance in which all participants feel equal and the central event is not so much an act of interrogation as rather “the act of affirming or entering into someone’s thinking or perceiving” (Elbow, 1986), they engage in a process of mutual telling, retelling and reliving stories. The point of the process, however, is not for researchers and practitioners to entertain each other with provocative, compelling stories from classroom practice. Rather it is to encourage practitioners to reflect deeply and discerningly on their teaching practice, to see it from a variety of perspectives, to uncover and bring to conscious awareness the multiple levels of presuppositions that inform their perceptions and which determine (often unconsciously) their interpretation of particular situations. Most of all the point of the process is to empower teachers to step outside of societal norms and expectations and to find themselves in the crucible of daily pedagogical practice. The point of the process, in short, is ‘authenticity’—to enable teachers to voice honestly and truthfully their perceptions of the events that occurred in their classrooms. Such ‘truths’ leave room for the irreducible complexity of classroom practice while yet offering penetrating, important insights into teachers’ experience of it.
Once again, we find in the above pertinent answers to some of the concerns raised by Phillips about narrative research. His hope, for example, that the educational researcher "would not swallow the teacher’s story without . . . [some] . . . type of critical reflection" is manifestly more than accomplished in the narrative approach. Similarly, his concerns about self-deceiving stories and rationalizations being unwittingly endorsed and perpetuated disappear upon close perusal of the method. As before, the personal integrity of the researcher takes centre stage in determining the merit and truth value of the particular piece of research. As before, the narrative approach in itself does not lead to the validation of such vices.

But we are not yet finished with the notion of truth. For although, in writing up their stories, narrative researchers may scrupulously avoid the errors and evasions mentioned earlier, they may yet not manage to speak the truth. Despite their best efforts they may yet manage, as Murdoch suggests in an *An Accidental Man*, "to utter a lie".

How might such a lie occur? It will be remembered earlier that existential freedom was cited as an 'open confrontation' with sedimented ways that have become ‘adverse’ to the emergence of new meanings (Cooper, 1990). Language constitutes such a sedimented, relatively stable system employing words and sentence structures with more or less established, shared meanings—meanings commonly agreed upon by the members of the relevant linguistic community. But although one finds oneself ‘thrown’ into a particular language, utilization of whose standing terms and linguistic structures enables one to formulate thoughts, to communicate meaningfully with others and so forth, one is not bound, nevertheless, to remain within the confines of meaning designated by those standing terms and linguistic structures. Instead, words with more or less fixed meanings can be put to novel work: “The expression of individual visions, the inspiring of images, the prompting of unsuspected analogies and new class creations and so on” (Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 163). In short, as well as being a system for the communication of information, language is also, indeed perhaps primarily, “articulation”—the individual’s “project[ing] himself towards a world . . . [his] taking up a position in the world of his meaning” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, in Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 162).

More than any other, we tend to associate the literary artist with pushing the limits of language, shaping it to articulate their personal vision of things, developing it to voice the world’s astonishing variety, its irreducible complexity and mysteriousness. As T.S. Eliot remarks in his essay on Dante: “In developing the language, enriching the meaning of words . . . [the poet] is making possible a much wider range of emotion and perception for other men, because he gives them the speech in which more can be expressed” (quoted in Hepburn, 1972). In a similar vein, referring to Henry James’ depiction of the terms of the novelist’s art as “alert winged creatures . . . look[ing] over the heads of standing terms and aspir[ing] to a clearer air” (James, 1907, p. 339), Martha Nussbaum describes those terms as “perceiving where the blunt terms of ordinary speech, or of abstract theoretical discourse, are blind, acute where they are obtuse, winged where they are dull and heavy” (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 5).

It is indeed to the literary artists that we owe much of the richness and complexity of our lived experience of things. Their texts activate our faculties of perception and processing, rendering them ever more sensitive and discerning, ever more finely attuned to subtle nuances of detail. Only language this dense, this concrete, this subtle can adequately and fittingly render the particularity and complexity of our lived experience. Stuart Hampshire elucidates the point succinctly when he states: “human creativeness in art prevents the recognized varieties of feeling, and established conceptions of the time, from ever hardening into a final pattern” (Hampshire, 1967, p. 246).

Anxious as they are to combat such “final patternings” and resolved “on standing up for the uniqueness and significance of the notion to which they have dedicated themselves” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 18), it is not surprising then to find narrative researchers adopting the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist. For only language this dense, this
concrete, this subtle can adequately and fittingly achieve their aim of interpretive descriptions that exact fullness and completeness of detail. Only language this perceiving, this acute, this compelling can adequately tell the reader what the researcher and practitioner believe to be true. Delineating the truths of classroom practice, in other words, requires the narrative researcher to espouse the stance of the narrative artist, to take up a position in the world of their meanings and to strive to articulate faithfully and precisely the realities of classroom situations.

And now, perhaps, it may already be obvious how a lie can be uttered in narrative research. The researcher may refuse to take up such a position.

In endeavouring to describe without offensiveness the joys and tribulations of working within a multicultural classroom, for example, a researcher may resort to generalizing clichés and may write up her story using terms that are hackneyed, blurred and banal. Such banalities, however fashionable, however politically correct, prevent the study from reflecting at all accurately how things actually stand in the practitioner's classroom. And suppressing thus with a mixture of self-deception and self-interest the complexities of the classroom situation, the researcher is essentially misrepresenting what in fact occurred there and so is not telling the truth, is uttering instead a lie.

Another very common way to misrepresent linguistically our lived experience of things is 'sentimentality'. Deeply committed to the ideals of multicultural education, a researcher may couch her story in terms that allow her to indulge her feelings—that exaggerate or aggrandize desirable features, diminish or play down less desirable ones. But as Hepburn suggests, sentimentality is "essentially undiscriminating" (Hepburn, 1972, p. 97). And in being thus undiscriminating—in being unperceptive of and insensitive to the detailed nature of her situation and allowing herself instead to wallow self-indulgently in positive undiscerning sentiment, the researcher is again suppressing the complexities of her lived experience and is uttering an untruth.

But there is yet another way for a researcher to misrepresent linguistically lived experience. And it is here that we may take up Phillips' critique and cite the stated criteria of good narrative research, e.g. evocative, animating description, accessibility, compellingness and moral persuasiveness—as epistemically insufficient. Coached as to the aims and linguistic practices of qualitative research, a researcher may embrace unreflectingly and uncritically the language and forms of the narrative artist, so replacing one set of clichés with another, in the end (as Hepburn argues) "no more or less flexible, discriminating or fit to cope with the complexities of real life than the clichés they displace" (Hepburn, 1992, p. 103). This is perhaps the most troubling linguistic misrepresentation, for the writer may appear to make all the right moves—may produce a document that is animating and evocative in its depiction of detail, compelling and morally persuasive in its general effect, yet the document itself may be the product of a series of artistic clichés, a trite, generalized albeit high-sounding poetization of a particular, complex, lived experience. And no matter how animating and evocative the language, no matter how compelling and morally persuasive the text, insofar as the terms employed do not accurately and fittingly articulate the actual lived experience, then the document is untrue, the writer is uttering a lie.

Phillips' criticism, in other words, cannot be dismissed as mere positivistic prejudice. If narrative research is indeed to garner the authority and validity it seeks, narrative researchers cannot afford to skirt the issue of truth. Rather they need to situate their stated criteria clearly within the confines of 'authenticity', connecting them thereby to that notion of truthfulness and honesty that authenticity entails. Situated thus, their relevance is without question for they delineate a way of rendering in exacting, rigorous detail the particularities and complexities of everyday 'lived' classroom practice. Situated outside it, not only are they epistemically insufficient, they are capable of perpetuating an elaborate if well-intentioned lie. And insofar as narrative researchers are committed to articulating with honesty and truthfulness the lived experience of classroom teachers, they cannot pretend to exonerate such a lie.
The lie, moreover, has serious consequences for the practice of classroom teaching. For if narrative research (like most research) is conducted with the ultimate intention of improving our perception and understanding of classroom practice, thereby suggesting ways we can enrich it, then it is part of a larger moral endeavour, one that leads towards action. As Aristotle rightly saw, however, wise responsible action ultimately depends not so much on general rules and principles of conduct (although these play an essential part), as rather on ‘perception’—the ability attentively to take into account uncharted particulars and so, after keen deliberation, to decide the right course of action. Now what is at issue here is the obligation of the moral agent to render reality precisely and faithfully. Only such a rendering will give one the information one needs to make the right choice. Only such a fine awareness will generate the appropriate response.

And now finally one may begin to understand Phillips’ concern that essentially inaccurate stories may be used to further students’ ‘knowledge’ of the exigencies of classroom practice. For if teachers’ stories are indeed to be used as texts to guide the uninitiated, then they must be more than accessible, compelling and morally persuasive, they must offer more than animating, evocative descriptions of classroom events. In short, they must above all else be true and reliable, they must render faithfully and precisely the realities of classroom practice, and ‘compellingness’, ‘animation’, and so on, must serve only as means towards that end. As Nussbaum has pertinently observed, however: “We live amid bewildering complexities. Obtuseness and refusal of vision are our besetting vices. Responsible lucidity can be wrested from that darkness only by painful, vigilant effort, the intense scrutiny of particulars” (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 148). Narrative researchers are to be commended for undertaking the task. We can only encourage them to live up to the notion of truth entailed.

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NOTE


REFERENCES

Pursuing Truth in Narrative Research


