Unravelling human meaning-making
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And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss, has Shakespeare Juliet say. And we believe her because we know that if there is anything that makes the metaphor of holding hands as kissing possible and believable, it is the thunder of first love. First love does not compare to anything else that happens thereafter. All loves after first love, it has been said, bear the traces of disappointment that the first was not the only one. I think the success story of the first decade of London’s Center for Narrative Research, which is part of the success story of social sciences and narrative studies over the last three decades, is not the story of a first love. It is the story of a relationship that emerged out of a profound disappointment: the disappointment over the narrow limits and restrictions of traditional academic attempts to understand the complexities of lived and experienced human reality.

To be sure, efforts to understand the subjective dimension of human reality are all but new. It did not need narrative theorists to discover that it is subjectivity what makes us human. Neither have narrative theorists revealed that meanings and processes of meaning-making are essential for human subjectivity, and that these processes are tied up with manifold actions and interactions, in fact, that their principal residence is humans’ cultural forms of life, as Wittgenstein put it. What narrative research, both literary and social-scientific, has developed is the argument that the more these acts of meaning become complex, that is, the more they become constructive, creative, and interpretive, the more they are inextricably intertwined with language, with narrative language.

There is nothing that captures the complexities of human meaning-making more appropriately than narrative. Appropriately means: intelligently, sensitively, sympathetically. What is the reason for this elective affinity? It is because the intricacies of human meaning-making are not just represented or expressed by narrative; they only come into being through and in narrative. I call this the strong narrative thesis. The strong narrative thesis applies to a set of phenomena that only exist due to narrative, to this most comprehensive and subtle of language forms that has

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evolved in a long and intimate interplay with human actions, emotions, and intentions, manifesting itself in many variations in many different linguistic and cultural worlds.

Yet make no mistake, the universe of human existence, of action and interaction, of mind and culture, is of course much wider than the realm of language. In many human activities language does not play a major role or no role at all – although there may be fewer than we think (considering that every human activity always takes place as a socially and culturally mediated act within a symbolic space, and this space does not exist without language).

Still, there is one domain where language and, in particular, the constructive, imaginative, and creative potentials of narrative, of narrative world-making, are crucial – whether it is labelled in terms of fiction or nonfiction, literary or everyday discourse. This area emerges whenever our attempts to give meaning to and interpret the meaning of the world in which we live become complicated, troubled, and messy; and some say the human condition as such is complicated, troubled, and messy. To come to terms with this complexity we can’t do without the options of narrative – or only in restricted and further complicated ways, as in the case of physical and mental illnesses that break our narratives and often even silence them.

It is here, in this privileged access to human subjectivity and its intentional, emotional, and social fabric where I see the very strength of the narrative approach, a strength that distinguishes it from other approaches; and there are, as we know, quite a number of them which are certainly not at all disappointing. It is here, then, where I see the genuine contribution of narrative research and thus its most promising potential for the future.

How do phenomena look that owe their existence to narrative world-making, that only exist in this unique linguistic form? Consider this little story. When I wake up tomorrow morning and reflect over what I’m trying to explain right now, I might think I should have put more emphasis on the meaning the story of Romeo and Juliet had in Shakespeare’s world where it was not at all a touching story about first love, as most nineteenth and twentieth century audiences saw it – and as Juliet’s kissing metaphor suggests – but about the impossibility of true passions in a hostile political environment: a story about violence, brutality, hopelessness, and the desperation of people who see no way out other than suicide.

This is the story. Now let me outline a thumbnail narrative analysis. What we find in this story is not only a number of quick time shifts – flashforwards (me waking up tomorrow morning) and flashbacks (thinking back to today; from this moment in my talk to my previous quote of
Juliet; from today’s to Shakespeare’s world). It also includes an excursion, a comparison of three interpretations of Shakespeare’s play against the backdrop of different ways of narrative and dramatic understanding (in the Renaissance, the nineteenth and twentieth century, and the one I just sketched). In this way it interweaves a number of different moments in the time of my life – after all, this is a little autobiographical story: it’s about me remembering an event in my life – with a number of historical times. And what’s more, all of it is carried out in the subjunctive, playing through a *possibility* that might come up in the future (“tomorrow morning I might feel…”).

By strong narrative thesis I mean the claim that temporal scenarios of such multilayered and pluri-temporal complexity are only possible in narrative; in fact, they are only *imaginable* in narrative. There is no other sign or symbol system and certainly no pure thought or cognition that would be able to evoke a complexity that even comes close to this little story which, let’s not forget, took not even a minute to be told.†

Much of what is at stake in autobiographical stories, big and small, in discursive presentations of self and identity, in the experience of the healthy and the sick, and, more generally, in the landscape of fictive imagination which is so much part and parcel of our life, is made of such narrative fabric. It is likewise complex, likewise messy, and likewise sophisticated. And it likewise would not exist without narrative.

The point is not whether these storyworlds are developed and coherent. All happy and coherent stories are alike; every unhappy and incoherent story is unhappy and incoherent in its own way, to change Tolstoy’s sentence only a little. After all, we know exactly how it would look if Juliet’s story ended happily, and why Shakespeare didn’t go for it; why he went for a unhappy version, full of complication and messiness. Because it is here where the narrative imagination, our furthest reach for meaning, is at its best.

In a nutshell, in unravelling the complexity, messiness, and sophistication of human meaning-making I see one of the most promising challenges for future narrative research.

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† There is, perhaps, only one exception to this strong narrative claim: music. But then, most musical compositions in the European tradition since Monteverdi have a strong narrative charge.