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Author(s): JEROME BRUNER

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Life as Narrative

BY JEROME BRUNER

I WOULD like to try out an idea that may not be quite ready, indeed may not be quite possible. But I have no doubt it is worth a try. It has to do with the nature of thought and with one of its uses. It has been traditional to treat thought, so to speak, as an instrument of reason. Good thought is right reason, and its efficacy is measured against the laws of logic or induction. Indeed, in its most recent computational form, it is a view of thought that has sped some of its enthusiasts to the belief that all thought is reducible to machine computability.

But logical thought is not the only or even the most ubiquitous mode of thought. For the last several years, I have been looking at another kind of thought,¹ one that is quite different in form from reasoning: the form of thought that goes into the constructing not of logical or inductive arguments but of stories or narratives. What I want to do now is to extend these ideas about narrative to the analysis of the stories we tell about our lives: our “autobiographies.”

Philosophically speaking, the approach I shall take to narrative is a constructivist one—a view that takes as its central premise that “world making” is the principal function of mind, whether in the sciences or in the arts. But the moment one applies a constructivist view of narrative to the self-narrative, to the autobiography, one is faced with dilemmas. Take, for example, the constructivist view that “stories” do not “happen” in the real world but, rather, are constructed in people’s heads. Or as Henry James once put it, stories happen to people who

¹ For example, J. S. Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

know how to tell them. Does that mean that our autobiographies are constructed, that they had better be viewed not as a record of what happened (which is in any case a nonexistent record) but rather as a continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience? Just as the philosopher Nelson Goodman argues that physics or painting or history are “ways of worldmaking,”² so autobiography (formal or informal) should be viewed as a set of procedures for “life making.” And just as it is worthwhile examining in minute detail how physics or history go about their world making, might we not be well advised to explore in equal detail what we do when we construct ourselves autobiographically? Even if the exercise should produce some obdurate dilemmas, it might nonetheless cast some light on what we might mean by such expressions as “a life.”

Culture and Autobiography

Let me begin by sketching out the general shape of the argument that I wish to explore. The first thesis is this: We seem to have no other way of describing “lived time” save in the form of a narrative. Which is not to say that there are not other temporal forms that can be imposed on the experience of time, but none of them succeeds in capturing the sense of *lived* time: not clock or calendrical time forms, not serial or cyclical orders, not any of these. It is a thesis that will be familiar to many of you, for it has been most recently and powerfully argued by Paul Ricoeur.³ Even if we set down *Annales* in the bare form of events,⁴ they will be seen to be events chosen with a view to their place in an implicit narrative.

My second thesis is that the mimesis between life so-called

² Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁴ See Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

and narrative is a two-way affair: that is to say, just as art imitates life in Aristotle's sense, so, in Oscar Wilde's, life imitates art. Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. "Life" in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as "a narrative" is. It is constructed by human beings through active ratiocination, by the same kind of ratiocination through which we construct narratives. When somebody tells you his life—and that is principally what we shall be talking about—it is always a cognitive achievement rather than a through-the-clear-crystal recital of something univocally given. In the end, it is a narrative achievement. There is no such thing psychologically as "life itself." At very least, it is a selective achievement of memory recall; beyond that, recounting one's life is an interpretive feat. Philosophically speaking, it is hard to imagine being a naive realist about "life itself."

The story of one's own life is, of course, a privileged but troubled narrative in the sense that it is reflexive: the narrator and the central figure in the narrative are the same. This reflexivity creates dilemmas. The critic Paul de Man speaks of the "defacement" imposed by turning around on oneself to create, as he puts it, "a monument."⁵ Another critic comments on the autobiographical narrator's irresistible error in accounting for his acts in terms of intentions when, in fact, they might have been quite otherwise determined. In any case, the reflexivity of self-narrative poses problems of a deep and serious order—problems beyond those of verification, beyond the issue of indeterminacy (that the very telling of the self-story distorts what we have in mind to tell), beyond "rationalization." The whole enterprise seems a most shaky one, and some critics, like Louis Renza, even think it is impossible, "an endless prelude."⁶

⁵ Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 84.

⁶ Louis Renza, "The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography," in James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

Yet for all the shakiness of the form, it is perfectly plain that not just any autobiography will do—either for its teller or for his listener, for that matter. One imposes criteria of rightness on the self-report of a life just as one imposes them on the account of a football game or the report of an event in nature. And they are by no means all external criteria as to whether, for example, one did or did not visit Santander in 1956. Besides, it may have been Salamanca in 1953 and by certain criteria of narrative or of psychological adequacy even be “right” if untrue. There are also internal criteria relating to how one felt or what one intended, and these are just as demanding, even if they are not subject to verification. Otherwise, we would not be able to say that certain self-narratives are “shallow” and others “deep.” One criterion, of course, is whether a life story “covers” the events of a life. But what is coverage? Are not omissions also important? And we have all read or heard painfully detailed autobiographies of which it can be said that the whole is drastically less than the sum of the parts. They lack interpretation or “meaning,” we say. As Peter Winch reminded us a long time ago, it is not so evident in the human sciences or human affairs how to specify criteria by which to judge the rightness of any theory or model, especially a folk theory like an account of “my life.”⁷ All verificationist criteria turn slippery, and we surely cannot judge rightness by narrative adequacy alone. A rousing tale of a life is not necessarily a “right” account.

All of which creates special problems, as we shall see, and makes autobiographical accounts (even the ones we tell ourselves) notably unstable. On the other hand, this very instability makes life stories highly susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences. This susceptibility to influence may, in fact, be the reason why “talking cures,” religious instruction, and other interventions in a life may

⁷ Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958).

often have such profound effects in changing a person's life narrative.

Given their constructed nature and their dependence upon the cultural conventions and language usage, life narratives obviously reflect the prevailing theories about "possible lives" that are part of one's culture. Indeed, one important way of characterizing a culture is by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life. And the tool kit of any culture is replete not only with a stock of canonical life narratives (heroes, Marthas, tricksters, etc.), but with combinable formal constituents from which its members can construct their own life narratives: canonical stances and circumstances, as it were.

But the issue I wish to address is not just about the "telling" of life narratives. The heart of my argument is this: eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very "events" of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives. And given the cultural shaping to which I referred, we also become variants of the culture's canonical forms. I cannot imagine a more important psychological research project than one that addresses itself to the "development of autobiography"—how our way of telling about ourselves changes, and how these accounts come to take control of our ways of life. Yet I know of not a single comprehensive study on this subject.

How a culture transmits itself in this way is an anthropological topic and need not concern us directly. Yet a general remark is in order. I want to address the question of how self-narratives as a *literary* form, as autobiography, might have developed. For the issue may throw some light on how more modest, less formulated modes of self-telling have emerged as well. Autobiography, we are told, is a recent and a not very

widely distributed literary genre. As the French historian Georges Gusdorf remarks, it is

limited in time and space; it has not always existed nor does it exist everywhere. . . . [Its] conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life is the late product of a specific civilization. . . . Autobiography becomes possible only under certain metaphysical preconditions. . . . The man who takes the trouble to tell of himself knows that the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future.⁸

Gusdorf sees the birth of literary autobiography as issuing from the mixed and unstable marriage between Christian and classical thought in the Middle Ages, further inflamed by the doubts kindled in the Copernican revolution. Doubtless the Reformation also added fuel to the passion for written self-revelation.

While the act of *writing* autobiography is new under the sun—like writing itself—the self-told life narrative is, by all accounts, ancient and universal. People anywhere can tell you some intelligible account of their lives. What varies is the cultural and linguistic perspective or narrative *form* in which it is formulated and expressed. And that too will be found to spring from historical circumstances as these have been incorporated in the culture and language of a people. I suspect that it will be as important to study *historical* developments in forms of self-telling as it is to study their ontogenesis. I have used the expression “forms of self-telling,” for I believe it is form rather than content that matters. We must be clear, then, about what we mean by narrative form. Vladimir Propp’s classic analysis of folktales reveals, for example, that the *form* of a folktale may remain unchanged even though its content changes.⁹ So too self-told life narratives may reveal a common

⁸ Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” in Olney, *Autobiography*.

⁹ Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

formal structure across a wide variety of content. So let us get to the heart of the matter: to the forms of self-narrative or, indeed, of narrative generally, of which self-narrative is a special case.

Forms of Self-Narrative

Let me start my account with the Russian formalists, who distinguished three aspects of story: *fabula*, *sjuzet*, and *forma*—roughly theme, discourse, and genre. The first two (*fabula* and *sjuzet*) have been described by modern literary theorists as, respectively, the *timeless* and the *sequenced* aspects of story. The timeless *fabula* is the mythic, the transcendent plight that a story is about: human jealousy, authority and obedience, thwarted ambition, and those other plights that lay claim to human universality. The *sjuzet* then incorporates or realizes the timeless *fabula* not only in the form of a plot but also in an unwinding net of language. Frank Kermode says that the joining of *fabula* and *sjuzet* in story is like the blending of timeless mystery and current scandal.¹⁰ The ancient dilemmas of envy, loyalty, jealousy are woven into the acts of Iago, Othello, Desdemona, and Everyman with a fierce particularity and localness that, in Joyce's words, yield an "epiphany of the ordinary." This particularity of time, place, person, and event is also reflected in the mode of the telling, in the discourse properties of the *sjuzet*.

To achieve such epiphanous and unique ordinariness, we are required, as Roman Jakobson used to tell his Russian poets, to "make the ordinary strange."¹¹ And that must depend not upon plot alone but upon language. For language constructs what it narrates, not only semantically but also pragmatically and stylistically.

¹⁰ Frank Kermode, "Secrets and Narrative Sequence," in Mitchell, *On Narrative*.

¹¹ See J. S. Bruner, in *A Tribute to Roman Jakobson* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1983).

One word about the third aspect of narrative—*forma* or genre, an ancient subject dating from Aristotle's *Poetics*. How shall we understand it? Romance, farce, tragedy, *Bildungsroman*, black comedy, adventure story, fairy tale, wonder tale, etc. That might do. A genre is plainly a type (in the linguist's sense) of which there are near endless tokens, and in that sense it may be viewed as a set of grammars for generating different kinds of story plots. But it cannot be that alone. For genre also commits one to use language in a certain way: lyric, say, is conventionally written in the first person/present tense, epic is third person/past tense, etc. One question we shall simply pass over for the moment: Are genres mere literary conventions, or (like Jung's alleged archetypes) are they built into the human genome, or are they an invariant set of plights in the human condition to which we all react in some necessary way? For our present purposes, it does not matter.

We may ask then of any self-told life what is its *fabula* (or gist, or moral, or leitmotiv); how is it converted into an extended tale and through what uses of language; and into what genre is it fitted. That is a start, but it does not get us very far.

There is widespread agreement that stories are about the vicissitudes of human intention and that, to paraphrase Kenneth Burke's classic, *The Grammar of Motives*, story structure is composed minimally of the pentad of an Agent, an Action, a Goal, a Setting, an Instrument—and Trouble.¹² Trouble is what drives the drama, and it is generated by a mismatch between two or more of the five constituents of Burke's pentad: for example, Nora's Goals do not match either the Setting in which she lives nor the Instruments available to her in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. The late Victor Turner, a gifted anthropologist who studied Western theater as carefully as he studied the Ndembu in West Africa, locates this "trouble" in

¹² Kenneth Burke, *The Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945).

the breaching of cultural legitimacy: an initial canonical state is breached, redress is attempted which, if it fails, leads to crisis; crisis, if unresolved, leads eventually to a new legitimate order.¹³ The crisis, the role of agents in redress, the making of the new legitimacy—these are the cultural constituents of which the variety of drama is constructed in life as in literature. That is to say, Burke's dramatis personae are, for Turner, individual embodiments of deeper cultural crises.

We had better get on to a closer characterization of Agents in stories, since our interest is in self-told life narratives. Narrative studies began with the analysis of myth and folktale. And it is indeed the case that, in these genres, the plot even more than motive drives the Agent. You will find little about the doubts, desires, or other intentional states of either Beowulf or Grendel, nor do you get a clear sense from recorded myth about how Perseus decided to get involved with the Gorgon. Even Oedipus is not so much driven by motives as by plight. As Vladimir Propp put it, the *dramatis personae* of the classical folktale fulfill a function in the plot but do not drive it. But that is only one version of character: Agent as carrier of destiny, whether divine or secular.

As literary forms have developed, they have moved steadily toward an empowerment and subjective enrichment of the Agent protagonist. The most revealing single analysis of this transformation is, I think, to be found in an essay by Amelie Rorty, in which she traces the shape of agency in narrative from the folktale *figure* "who is neither formed by nor owns experience," to *persons* defined by roles and responsibilities in a society for which they get rights in return (as, say, in Jane Austen's novels), to *selves* who must compete for their roles in order to earn their rights (as in Trollope), and finally to *individuals* who transcend and resist society and must create or

¹³ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

“rip off” their rights (as, say, in Beckett).¹⁴ These, you will see, are characterizations of the forms of relationship between an intention-driven actor and the settings in which he must act to achieve his goals.

Another word, then, about Agents. Narrative, even at its most primitive, is played out on a dual landscape, to use Greimas’s celebrated expression.¹⁵ There is a landscape of *action* on which events unfold. Grendel wreaks destruction on the drinking hall and upon its celebrating warriors in *Beowulf*. But there is a second landscape, a landscape of consciousness, the inner worlds of the protagonists involved in the action. It is the difference between Oedipus taking Jocasta to wife before and after he learns from the messenger that she is his mother. This duality of landscape, Greimas tells us, is an essential ingredient of narrative and accounts in some measure for the ubiquitousness of deceit in tales throughout history. In the modern novel—in contrast to the classic myth or the folktale—there is a more explicit treatment of the landscape of consciousness itself. Agents do not merely deceive; they hope, are doubting and confused, wonder about appearance and reality. Modern literature (perhaps like modern science) becomes more epistemological, less ontological. The omniscient narrator (like the prerelativity “observer”) disappears, and with him so does hard-core reality.

As narrative has become “modernized,” so too has its language changed. Since, say, Conrad, Proust, Hardy, and Henry James, the language of the novel has accommodated to the perspectivalism and subjectivism that replaced the omniscient narrator. In another place, I have used the term “subjunctivizing” to characterize this shift from expository to perspectival narrative language, a shift from emphasis on actuality to the evocation of possibility marked by the greater

¹⁴ Amelie Rorty, “A Literary Postscript: Characters, Persons, Selves, Individuals,” in A. O. Rorty, ed., *The Identity of Persons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

¹⁵ A. Greimas and J. Courtes, “The Cognitive Dimension of Narrative Discourse,” *New Literary History* 7 (Spring 1976).

use of unpackable presuppositions, of subjunctive discourse, of Gricean conversational implicatures and the like. In the end, the reality of the omniscient narrator disappears into the subjective worlds of the story's protagonists.¹⁶ Linguistically and in spirit as well, the modern novel may be as profound (and perhaps out of the same cradle) as the invention of modern physics.

One last point, for I have lingered too long introducing my subject. Jean-Paul Sartre remarks in his autobiography, "a man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him *in terms of* these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it."¹⁷ His point is a telling one: life stories must mesh, so to speak, within a community of life stories; tellers and listeners must share some "deep structure" about the nature of a "life," for if the rules of life-telling are altogether arbitrary, tellers and listeners will surely be alienated by a failure to grasp what the other is saying or what he thinks the other is hearing. Indeed, such alienation does happen cross-generationally, often with baleful effects. Later, we shall return to the issue of "life-story meshing" in a more concrete way.

Four Self-Narratives

Let me turn now to the business of how a psychologist goes about studying issues of the kind that we have been discussing. Along with my colleagues Susan Weisser and Carol Staszewski, I have been engaged in a curious study. While it is far from done (whatever that may mean), I would like to tell you

¹⁶ For those of you interested in this type of linguistic analysis, I refer you to Tzvetan Todorov's *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) and to my own recent volume, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*.

¹⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words* (New York: Braziller, 1964).

enough about it to make what I have been saying a little more concrete.

We were interested in how people tell the stories of their lives and, perhaps simplémindedly, we asked them to do so—telling them to keep it to about half an hour, even if it were an impossible task. We told them that we were not interested in judging them or curing them but that we were very interested in how people saw their lives. After they were done—and most had little trouble in sticking to the time limits or, for that matter, in filling up the time—we asked questions for another half hour or so, questions designed to get a better picture of how their stories had been put together. Had we followed a different procedure, we doubtless would have obtained different accounts. Indeed, had we asked them to tell us their lives in two minutes, perhaps we would have obtained something more like a *fabula* than a *sjuzet*. But such variations will get their innings later. Many people have now sat for their portraits, ranging in age from ten to seventy, and their stories yield rich texts. But I want to talk of only four of them now: a family—a father, a mother, and their grown son and grown daughter, each of their accounts collected independently. There are two more grown children in the family, a son and daughter, both of whom have also told their stories, but four are enough to handle as a start.

We have chosen a family as our target because it constitutes a miniature culture, and provides an opportunity to explore how life stories are made to mesh with each other in Sartre's sense. Beyond that, of course, the individual autobiographies provide us the opportunity to explore the issues of form and structure to which I have already alluded.

If you should now ask how we propose to test whether these four lives "imitated" the narratives each person told, your question would be proper enough, though a bit impatient. The position I have avowed, indeed, leaves entirely moot what could be meant by "lives" altogether, beyond what is contained in the narrative. We shall not even be able to check, as

Professor Neisser was able to do in his studies of autobiographical memory,¹⁸ whether particular memories were veridical or distorted in some characteristic way. But our aim is different. We are asking, rather, whether there is in each account a set of selective narrative rules that lead the narrator to structure experience in a particular way, structure it in a manner that gives form to the content and the continuity of the life. And we are interested, as well, in how the family itself formulates certain common rules for doing these things. I hope this will be less abstract as we proceed.

Our family is headed by George Goodhertz, a hard-working heating contractor in his early sixties, a self-made man of moral principles, converted to Catholicism in childhood and mindful of his obligations, though not devout. Though plainly intelligent and well informed, he never finished high school: "had to go to work." His father was, by Mr. Goodhertz's sparse characterization, "a drinker" and a poor provider. Mr. Goodhertz is neither. Mrs. Goodhertz, Rose, is a housewife of immediate Italian descent: family oriented, imbedded in the urban neighborhood where she has lived for nearly thirty years, connected with old friends who still live nearby. Her father was, in her words, "of the old school"—arrogant, a drinker, a poor provider, and unfaithful to her mother. In the opening paragraph of her autobiography she says, "I would have preferred a better childhood, a happier one, but with God's influence, I prayed hard enough for a good husband, and she [*sic*] answered me."

Daughter Debby, in her mid-twenties, is (in her own words) "still unmarried." She graduated a few years ago from a local college that she never liked much and now studies acting. Outgoing, she enjoys friends, old and new, but is determined not to get "stuck" in the old neighborhood with the old friends of her past and their old attitudes. Yet she is not ambitious, but

¹⁸ Ulric Neisser, "Autobiographical Memory," unpublished manuscript, Emory University, 1987.

caught, rather, between ideals of local kindness and of broader adventure, the latter more in the existential form of a desire for experience than by any wish to achieve. She lives at home—in Brooklyn with her parents in the old neighborhood. Her thirty-year-old brother, Carl, who is about to finish his doctorate in neurophysiology at one of the solid, if not distinguished Boston-area universities, is aware of how far beyond family expectations his studies have taken him, but is neither deferential nor aggressive about his leap in status. Like his sister Debby, he remains attached to and in easy contact with his parents though he lives on his own even when he is in New York working at a local university laboratory. At school Carl always felt “special” and different—both in the Catholic high school and then in the Catholic college he attended. The graduate school he chose is secular, and a complete break with his past. He is ambitious to get ahead, but he is not one to take the conventional “up” stairway. Both in his own eyes and, indeed, by conventional standards, he is a bit eccentric and a risk taker. Where his sister Debby (and his mother) welcomes intimacy and closeness, Carl (like his father) keeps people more at arm’s length. Experience for its own sake is not his thing. He is as concerned as his sister about not being “tied down.”

And that, I now want to assure you, is the end of the omniscient auctorial voice. For our task now is to sample the texts, the narratives of these four lives—father’s, mother’s, son’s, and daughter’s—to see not what they are *about* but how the narrators *construct* themselves. Their texts are all we have—though we may seem to have, so to speak, the hermeneutical advantage of four narratives that spring from a common landscape. But as you will see, the advantage that it yields is in narrative power and possibility, not in the ontology of verification. For one view of the world cannot confirm another, though, in Clifford Geertz’s evocative phrase, it can “thicken” it.

Let me begin the analysis with Kenneth Burke’s pentad, his

skeleton of dramatism, and particularly with the setting or Scene of these life stories. Most psychological theories of personality, alas, have no place for place. They would¹ not do well with Stephen Daedalus in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for he is inexplicable without the Dublin that he carries in his head. In these four life narratives too, place is crucial and it shapes and constrains the stories that are told or, indeed, that could be told. Place is not simply a piece of geography, an established Italian neighborhood in Brooklyn, though it helps to know its "culture" too. It is an intricate construct, whose language dominates the thought of our four narrators. For each, its central axis is "home," which is placed in sharp contrast to what they all refer to as "the real world." They were, by all their own accounts, a "close" family, and their language seals that closeness.

Consider the psychic geography. For each of our narrators, "home" is a place that is inside, private, forgiving, intimate, predictably safe. "The real world" is outside, demanding, anonymous, open, unpredictable, and consequently dangerous. But home and real world are also contrastive in another way, explicitly for the two children, implicitly and covertly for the parents: home is to be "cooped up," restricted by duties and bored; real world is excitement and opportunity. Early on, the mother says of the children, "We spoiled them for the real world," and the father speaks of "getting them ready for the real world." The son speaks of its hypocrisies that need to be confronted and overcome to achieve one's goals. It is a worthwhile but treacherous battlefield. The daughter idealizes it for the new experience to be harvested there. Each, in their way, creates a different ontological landscape out of "the real world" to give it an appropriate force as the Scene in the narratives they are constructing.

One thing that is striking about all four narratives is the extent to which the spatial distinction home–real world concentrates all four of them on spatial and locative terms in their autobiographical accounts. Take Carl. His account is

laden with spatial metaphors: *in/out, here/there, coming from/going to, place/special place*. The movement forward in his story is not so much temporal as spatial: a sequential outward movement from home to neighborhood to Catholic school to the library alone to college to the Catholic peace movement to graduate school and then triumphantly back to New York. In his *Bildungsroman* of a life story, the challenge is to find a place, the right place, and then a special place in each of these concentric outgoings. For Carl, you get involved *in* things, or you feel “*out of place*.” You “go to” Boston or to a course or a lab, and fellow students “come from” prestigious schools. Or “I started gaining a fairly special place in the Department,” and later “I ended up getting a fairly privileged place in the Department.” The “special places” *allow, permit, make possible*. “After about six months I really started settling in and enjoying the program and enjoying the opportunities it gave me.” And later, about the students who get a special place, “The faculty are committed to shielding their graduate students from negative repercussions of failure.”

Two things are both surprising and revealing about Carl’s language. One is the extent to which his sentences take self as object, and the other is the high frequency of the passive voice. With respect to the latter, some 11 percent of his sentences are in the passive voice, which is surprisingly high for such an action-oriented text. But they both are of a piece and tell something interesting about his world making. Recall the importance for Carl of “place” and particularly of the “special place.” Whenever he recounts something connected with these places, the places “happen” and then he acts accordingly. His sentences then begin with either a passive or with self-as-object, and then move to the active voice. At a particular colloquium where he knew his stuff, “It allowed me to deal with the faculty on an equal footing.” Or of his debating team experience, “It taught me how to handle myself.” Occasions in these “special places” are seen as if they had homelike privileges: allowing and permitting and teaching. It is as if Carl manages the “real

world" by colonizing it with "special places" that provide some of the privileges of home.

With Debby, thirty-seven of the first hundred sentences in her life narrative contain spatial metaphors or locatives. The principal clusters are about her place in the family (the *gap* or *span* in ages); the life layout ("the house I was brought home to is the house I live in now"; or "I traveled, my relatives are all over the country"; or "I've been coming to the city by myself ever since I was fourteen"); the coming-back theme ("everybody except me has gone out and come back at one time or another").

So much for Scene, at least for the moment. Come now to the agentive, to Burke's Actor. Rorty's typology turns out to be enormously useful, for in all four self-portraits the tale moves from Actor as figure, figure becoming a person, person becoming a self, self becoming an individual. Well into her fifties, even Mrs. Goodhertz has finally taken a job for pay, albeit working as secretary for her husband's heating-contracting business, motivated by the desire for some independence and the wish not to get "stuck" raising her eldest daughter's child. She remarks that it is "her" job and that she now "works." The transformation of her language as she runs through the chronology of her life is striking. When speaking of her childhood, self is often an object in such sentences as: "everything was thrown at us." But finally, by the time she takes her first job as a young woman, "I decided to take things in my own hands." Throughout her account, she "owns her own experience," to use Rorty's phrase. More than eight in ten of her sentences contain a stative verb, a verb dealing with thinking, feeling, intending, believing, praying. (This contrasts with five in ten for her more action-oriented husband.) One is easily deceived, reading Mrs. Goodhertz's self-portrait, into thinking that she is accepting of fate, perhaps passive. Instead, she believes in fate, but she also believes that fate can be nudged by her own efforts. And we rather suspect that the

style is cultivated. For a closer analysis of her language reveals a very high "subjectivity level" as carried in those stative verbs.

We must return again to Scene, or perhaps to what might better be called *mise-en-scène*. Both the elder Goodhertzes—unlike their children—construct their lives as if they constituted two sides of a deep divide. That divide is marked by an escape from childhood, an old life, indeed, an old *secret* life of suffering and shame as figures in unbearably capricious family settings. Personhood is on the other side of the divide. Mrs. Goodhertz gets to the other side, to personhood, by "praying for the right husband" and getting him, of which more in a moment. Mr. Goodhertz crosses the divide by work, hard work, and by the grace of "the owner [who] took me under his wing." To him, achieving mastery of your work and, as we shall see, helping others help themselves are the two dominant ideals. For her, it is somewhat more complex. The linguistic vehicle is the "*but . . .*" construction. She uses it repeatedly, and in several telltale ways, the most crucial being to distinguish what *is* from what *might have been*, as in talking about teenage drug taking, ". . . but I am blessed *my* kids didn't start in on it," or "I would have been stricter, but they turned out with less problems than others." The construction is her reminder of what *might* have been and, at the same time, a string on her finger to remind her that she is the agent who produces the better event on the other side of the . . . *but* Her courtship and marriage are a case in point. Yes, she was waiting for God to bring the right man, *but* in fact she decided the moment her eyes fell on Mr. Goodhertz that *he* was the man and knew not an instant's remorse in throwing over her then fiancé.

Their secret childhoods provide a unique source of consciousness for the elder Goodhertzes. It is a concealed secret that they share and that provides the contrast to what they have established as the organizing concept of "home." Mrs. Goodhertz's knowledge of her macho father as a bad provider, a drinker, and a philanderer is secret knowledge,

quickly and hintingly told in her narrative in a way that brooked no probing. It was there only to let us know why she prayed for a good husband and a better life for her children. Mr. Goodhertz goes into even less detail. But note the two following quotations, both about hopes for the children, each said independently of the other. Mr. Goodhertz: "I wanted to give them all the things I didn't get as a kid." And Mrs. Goodhertz: "To a point, I think, we try not to make our children have too much of what we had."

So Debby and Carl start on the other side of the divide. Each of them tells a tale that is animated by a contrast between a kindly but inert, entrenched, or "given" world and a "new" one that is their own. Carl is a young Werther. His tale begins with the episode when, as an aspiring young football player, he and his teammates are told by the coach to knock out the opposing team's star quarterback. He keeps his own counsel, quits football, and starts on his own road. For Debby the tale is more like the young Stephen Hero in the discarded early version of *Portrait*. She exposes herself to experience as it may come, "trying" in the sense of "trying on" rather than of striving. Her involvement in acting is in the spirit of trying on new roles. Of life she says, "I don't like doing one thing, . . . the same thing all my life, . . . shoved into a house and cooped up with four kids all day." If Carl's autobiography is a *Bildungsroman*, Debby's is an existential novel. His account is linear, from start to end, but it is replete with what literary linguists call *prolepsis*. That is to say, it is full of those odd flash-forwards that implicate the present for the future, like "if I had known then what I know now" and "learning to debate would stand me in good stead later." His narrative is progressive and sequential: the story tracks "real time." It "accounts" for things, and things are mentioned because *they* account for things. Privileged opportunities "happen to" him, as we have seen, and he turns them into ventures.

The exception to this pattern is the dilemma of moral issues—as with the coach's murderous instructions or his

becoming a conscientious objector in the Vietnam war, inspired by the Berrigans. Then his language (and his thought) becomes subjunctive rather than instrumental, playing on possibilities and inwardness. In this respect, he is his father's son, for Mr. Goodhertz too is principally oriented to action (recall that half his sentences contain nonstative verbs) save when he encounters issues he defines as matters of morality. Don't condemn, he would say, "you never know the whole story." And in the same spirit, Mr. Goodhertz's self-portrait is laced with literally dozens of instances of the intransitive verb *to seem*, as if he were forever mindful of a feather edge separating appearance from reality. When Carl decided he would become a conscientious objector against the Vietnam draft, his father stood by him on grounds that Carl's convictions, honestly arrived at, were worthy of respect even though he did not agree with them. Carl unwittingly even describes his intellectual quest in the same instrumental terms that his father uses in describing his ducting work. Both emphasize skills and "know-how," both reject received ways of doing things. Theirs is "instrumental" language and thought, as well suited to talking about heat ducting as to Carl's strikingly procedural approach to visual physiology. The father confesses to having missed intimacy in his life. So, probably, will Carl one day. Their instrumental language leaves little room for it in their discourse.

Debby's highly stative language is specialized for the reception of experience and for exploring the affect that it creates. It is richly adjectival, and the adjectives cluster around inner states. Her own acts are almost elided from her account. The past exists in its own right rather than as a guide to the present or future. In recounting the present there are vivid analeptic flashbacks—as in an unbid memory of an injured chicken on the Long Island Expressway, the traffic too thick for rescue. Like so many of her images, this one was dense with plight and affect. It evoked her tenderness for helpless animals, she told us, then veering off to that topic. And so her

order of telling is dominated not by real time sequences but by a going back and forth between what happens and what she feels and believes, and what she felt and believed. In this, and in her heavy use of stative verbs, she is her mother's daughter—and, I suspect, both are locked in the same gender language. Finally, in Debby's self-story "themes and variations" are as recursive as her brother's is progressive, and hers is as lacking in efforts to give causes as his are replete with causative expressions.

Recipes for Structuring Experience

You will ask whether the narrative forms and the language that goes with them in our four subjects are not simply expressions of their inner states, ways of talk that are required by the nature of those internal states. Perhaps so. But I have been proposing a more radical hypothesis than that. I believe that the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future. I have argued that a life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not "how it was" but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold: Freud's *psychic reality*. Certain basic formal properties of the life narrative do not change easily. Our excursion into experimental autobiography suggests that these formal structures may get laid down early in the discourse of family life and persist stubbornly in spite of changed conditions. Just as Georges Gusdorf argued that a special, historically conditioned, metaphysical condition was needed to bring autobiography into existence as a literary form, so perhaps a metaphysical change is required to alter the narratives that we have settled upon as "being" our lives. The

fish will, indeed, be the last to discover water—unless he gets a metaphysical assist.

My life as a student of mind has taught me one incontrovertible lesson. Mind is never free of precommitment. There is no innocent eye, nor is there one that penetrates aboriginal reality. There are instead hypotheses, versions, expected scenarios. Our precommitment about the nature of a life is that it is a story, some narrative however incoherently put together. Perhaps we can say one other thing: any story one may tell about anything is better understood by considering other possible ways in which it can be told. That must surely be as true of the life stories we tell as of any others. In that case, we have come full round to the ancient homily that the only life worth living is the well-examined one. But it puts a different meaning on the homily. If we can learn how people put their narratives together when they tell stories from life, considering as well how they *might* have proceeded, we might then have contributed something new to that great ideal. Even if, with respect to life and narrative, we discover, as in Yeats's line, that we cannot tell the dancer from the dance, that may be good enough.