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“Life as Narrative” Revisited

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Jerome Bruner is undoubtedly one of the most influential and debated narrative theorists in cultural studies and an important figure in the exchange of ideas between literature, cultural studies, and psychology. Recently (2002), his work on narrative cognition and “folk psychology” (1990) has gained new vitality in David Herman’s work (2002); whereas Galen Strawson (2004: 428–46) has foregrounded Bruner’s thought by targeting him, among others, in his own criticism of narrativity. The purpose of this article is not to evaluate either the whole debate or Bruner’s whole contribution to cultural psychology or narrative theory but to study one single article, “Life as Narrative” (Bruner 1987), and especially one of its key arguments. I want to try out the idea that this article, far from expressing some permanent core of Bruner’s thought, remains a rare exception and largely unendorsed in Bruner’s later work. More specifically, I shall claim, *first*, that Bruner’s position within “the metaphoric discourse on narrative” (which interprets human life, experience, action, identity, or self *as* narrative) is not nearly as unambiguous as the title of the article might imply and, *second*, that Bruner’s later work does not endorse but rather challenges the radical thesis, according to which telling autobiographical stories and experiencing the world through these stories allows us to “become the narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (Bruner 1987: 15). Above all, his later thoughts on the play of folk psychological “canonicity” and its “breach” in actual narratives challenge the easy continuity between life and narrative.

Narrative as a metaphor for life has been a vital part of theorizing narrative in social research at least since Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1984 [1981]). There is no modesty or hesitation in MacIntyre’s famous argument that it is “because we all *live out narratives* in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of *the narratives that we live out* that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the

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actions of others” (212; italics mine). It is worth noticing that this argument already presents narrative as a cognitive method of “understanding the actions of others.” In MacIntyre’s moral philosophy, narrative has the special task of rescuing contemporary culture from the reign of fragmentary individualism and providing us with life-long ethical coherence and identity. In the years that followed, the “story metaphor,” characterized as “disarmingly simple” by Dan P. McAdams (1988 [1985]: 17), became, in its different formulas, an important part of the emerging discipline of narrative psychology and, more generally, of narrative studies within the social sciences (e.g., Sarbin; Carr; Polkinghorne; Rosenwald and Ochsberg; Somers; Bamberg 2004; Hänninen; Hyvärinen).

Typically, the early use of this metaphor either relied on a fairly thin basis of narrative theory (with only a few theorists trying to draw ideas from literary or linguistic theories of narrative), or else adopted “narrative” or “story” as everyday terms, widely known and thus in need of no further specification. The focal point of the metaphoric discourse was to revolutionize the way human action, identity, and life were understood, and here narrative provided an important combination of temporal change and continuity. A self, for example, was no longer considered in terms of a fixed store of characteristic features, but rather as something that evolves, changes, and adapts because of life occurrences. To make matters more complicated, the metaphoric discourse was not primarily interested in the study of narratives as such, but rather in their use as a perspective and analytical models for the study of lives. For example, the basic narratological distinction between “story” (as an equivalent of the presumed sequence of events) and “narrative discourse” (as something actually told, written, or textually produced) is almost nonexistent within this discourse and in the social sciences in general; hence narratives and lives can be the more easily understood as homologous sequences of events.

There is little doubt, then, that this metaphoric discourse, taken as a whole, includes an array of one-sided theses (e.g., on narrative coherence, conventionality, and normativity), which have in turn generated criticism (e.g., by Sartwell, Strawson, and Tammi). When Strawson frames his argument by maintaining that there is a “widespread agreement that human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories” (428), he greatly exaggerates the scholarly importance and uniformity of narrative studies. Jerome Bruner’s work, for example, has not represented the mainstream of psychological research. The question who actually shares

in the "agreement" cited above, or where such a consensus has been expressed, remains unanswered.

The Circle of Imitation

Bruner's short, powerful, and partly emblematic 1987 article "Life as Narrative" has been widely read, and yet it has often proved difficult to grasp.¹ Bruner seems to have an established, unchallenged, and widely quoted position within the metaphoric discourse ("life" as "narrative"); however, on closer examination, it is only in this article that he takes up metaphoric discourse unambiguously. Moreover, all other key authors in this strand of thinking seem to be absent, not only before and after "Life as Narrative" but even from the article itself.² Such "metaphoric" writers as MacIntyre, David Carr, or Dan McAdams (1988 [1985], 1993), for example, do not appear at all in Bruner's work. Bruner's writing contains no explicit recognition of the earlier (and clearly non-constructionist) theories on life as narrative. By contrast, there is ample reference to authors such as Hayden White, Roland Barthes, or Paul Ricoeur, who represent different and contrasting positions. Bruner has also explicitly anchored himself to narratology: "the ancestry of many of the ideas that will concern me can be traced back directly to the debates that have been going on among literary theorists over the last decade or two" (1991: 5).

Bruner begins his article invitingly, by maintaining that he "would like to try out an idea that may not be quite ready, indeed may not be quite possible" (1987: 11). The rhetorical confidence characteristic of MacIntyre's contribution seems to be entirely lacking in this opening. One of Bruner's first moves is to take, as he puts it, "philosophically speaking," a constructivist point of view, which is oriented towards "world making." He then once again points out that the telling of one's life story is always "a cognitive achievement" rather than a "recital of something univocally given" (13). There is, then, an original distance or even gap between "life" and "life story." Here, life is not viewed as such a seamless "living out" of narrative as in MacIntyre. But the very

¹ In the history of my own reading, the article has appeared to me at least as i) an argument for a constructionist view of autobiography; ii) as an argument for life as narrative, and iii) as an argument for the cognitive power of self-narration.

² There are, of course, references to such thinkers as philosopher Charles Taylor and psychoanalyst Donald Spence, but not directly in the sense of endorsing the metaphoric discourse. However, the affirmative quotes from Roy Schafer and in particular Donald Polk-Inghorne in Bruner (1990: 112–16) may be said to contradict my general claim.

next twist is to consider critically the constructivist “view that ‘stories’ do not ‘happen’ in the real world but, rather, are constructed in people’s heads” (11). The issue now is both the extent of the gap just outlined and the order of things. Do life stories always just follow the “lived life” and “life experience”? At this point, for example, the reader might expect a reference to the previous metaphoric discourse on “living” narratives, but there is none. This may be just a curious contingency, but it may also imply that Bruner rather saw himself testing an idea that departed from the earlier formulations of living out narratives.

Following the ideas that Paul Ricoeur explores in *Time and Narrative*, Bruner suggests that we “seem to have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of narrative” (12).³ However, he does not stop here, but also adopts another element of Ricoeur’s theory on mimesis (Ricoeur 1984: 54–86). Rephrasing Oscar Wilde, Bruner suggests that “[n]arrative imitates life, life imitates narrative” (1987: 13). At this point of his argumentation, we thus have a mutual *relationship of imitation*. “Life” might then learn something vital from different narratives, from their story-level structures and possibilities of action and configurations of plots; it might also learn from characters and their different plights and decisions. On the level of discourse, individual “life” might possibly learn even from different genres, for example, by giving up visualizing one’s further action in terms of romance, and assuming instead the attitude of comedy or irony. Lisa Zunshine (16–22) argues that people often enjoy “pretending” to be someone else — we all probably know the endless “pretend” games of children of a certain age — and that much of the enjoyment of reading fiction comes from this ability to pretend to be in someone else’s mind and life.

Such imitation is well known in literature, from Don Quixote to Madame Bovary, and there are writers such as Ian McEwan or Kazuo Ishiguro who almost constantly explore the ways in which characters rely on narrative models in fashioning their lives and choices (see, e.g., Uddén). Bruner (2002: 96) takes one further step in this play of imitation and invokes the work of the prominent neuroscientist Merlin Donald, who “suggests that the increase [in the size of the human brain] led not only to an improvement in hominid intelligence but, more specifically,

³ It is noteworthy, however, that Bruner and Ricoeur understand temporality in different terms. For Bruner (1990: 43), *sequentiality* is what constitutes the core of temporality, whereas Ricoeur (1981, 1984) systematically criticized this understanding as a trivialization.

to the emergence of a human 'mimetic sense,' a form of intelligence that enabled our ancestors to reenact or imitate events in the present or past." Learning by imitation is a much more effective way of spreading cultural ideas than any formal procedure of trial and error, and imitation by narrative effectively transcends the limits of the immediate situation. Understanding narrative imitation as a key form of human learning, however, has important consequences for Bruner's earlier argument; I shall return to this shortly.

Experience, Interpretation, and Revision

Just as we have arrived at the point where life imitates narrative, Bruner again cunningly blurs the relative clarity of this idea: "There is no such thing psychologically as 'life itself.' At the very least, it is a selective achievement of memory recall; beyond that, recounting one's life is an interpretive feat" (13). At the end of the article he reformulates the point by maintaining that "a life as led is inseparable from a life told" (31). "Inseparable" is still a relatively broad analytic category, ranging from empirical overlapping to a total confluence of categories. In any case, there is thus no pure moment of experience, as Joan Scott so poignantly asserts, because experience is "at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation" (69). If one substitutes "narrative" for Scott's "interpretation" (as one version of the latter), Scott's and Bruner's positions will not appear to differ substantially.

These positions distinctly clash with those of historians Louis Mink and Hayden White. "But to say that the qualities of narrative are transferred to art from life seems a *hysteron proteron*. Stories are not lived but told," writes Mink, adding that thus "it seems truer to say that narrative qualities are transferred from art to life" (60), a relocation that is radically challenged in Bruner's thought. White repeats Mink's statement almost verbatim in maintaining that "stories are not lived; there is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found" (1999: 9). This is certainly true for the distant historical past, yet much more dubious in the case of individual lives and actually experienced history. What Mink and White have postulated is indeed a pre-existing "real," a real event, a real and undistorted historical experience, which only later on becomes interpreted or moralized by beginnings, middles, and ends (White 1987). Bruner, instead, maintains that for an individual, at least, there is no equivalent of this pure "real" of existence devoid of interpreta-

tion. As he concludes: “Mind is never free of precommitment. There is no innocent eye, nor is there one that penetrates aboriginal reality” (32).

At the core of Bruner’s and Scott’s interpretation of experience is that it is neither a single, limited moment of time nor a moment of culturally and psychically pure rawness; it is not foundational. Strawson, instead, seems to play with such an option while foregrounding the theme of narrative revisionism: “According to *the revision thesis* Narrativity⁴ always carries with it some sort of tendency to revision, where revision essentially involves more merely [*sic*] than changing one’s view of the facts of one’s life” (443). This tendency is far from innocent; it is ethically suspect because at least some “think that revision is always charged . . . always motivated by an interconnected core group of moral emotions including pride, self-love, conceit, shame, regret, remorse, and guilt” (444). No doubt this kind of morally and emotionally charged revisionism is always at work in autobiographical narration, in one form or another, and of course Bruner’s original idea of autobiography as a cognitive achievement highlights this very aspect. But from Bruner’s perspective, the revision thesis is both all too narrow (revision cannot be evaded, for example, by resorting to Strawson’s “Episodic” consciousness — see below) and all too broad if one attaches the dubious aspects of autobiographical revision to narrativity in general, without any qualification. In Bruner’s thought, experience is unavoidably a temporally extended phenomenon, making “revision” an integral element of interpretation and the process of experiencing itself.

In his critical 2004 essay, Strawson suggested that the “Episodic and Diachronic styles of temporal being are radically opposed” (430), without being absolute or exceptionless. He also believes that “being Diachronic is at least necessary for being Narrative” (432). The “basic form” of Diachronic self experience implies that “one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future,” whereas in the Episodic mode, “one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future” (430).

There is no doubt that Strawson succeeds in foregrounding profound differences in the human understanding of temporality, and also in portraying some problems inherent to narrative studies, problems that have perhaps not been discussed in sufficient depth. I have no difficulty in

⁴ Strawson uses the “word ‘Narrative’ with a capital letter to denote a specifically psychological property or outlook” (428).

tracing many Episodic features in myself; for example I cannot claim an access to my authentic thoughts and feelings in my “further past,” and I could rather easily portray “myself” as a line-up of different personalities. But from a constructionist point of view, one that Bruner shares, nothing can stop the contemporary person from editing the features of those “past selves,” from adding odd or even objectionable features to those past figures. But most importantly, if we do not reserve the concept of narrative only for conventional, sequential, and continuous narratives — as Strawson (439) does — the Episodic style can be characterized as one end of the narrative continuum⁵ (see Herman 2002 for such scales of narrativity).

Partly because of the flexible interpretive process and the impossibility of finding and fixing the moment or “reality,” of “life itself,” life stories and autobiographies become, in Bruner’s analysis, “highly susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences” (14). Indeed, they are susceptible to emotionally and/or morally charged revision as well. While many early qualitative studies drew attention to the presumed “subjective meaning-making” or persons’ “own voices” in biographical interviews,⁶ Bruner’s cultural psychology unambiguously foregrounds the *shared* and *conventional* character of life stories. He explicitly challenges the view that “the narrative forms and the language that goes with them in our four subjects are . . . simply expressions of their internal states, ways of talk that are required by those internal states” (31). Revision of autobiographical telling is thus both charged and culturally conditioned.⁷

Let us now take one step backwards in Bruner’s argumentation. “Life as led,” as we have just learned, is inseparable from “life as told.” Life stories are, in turn, not just expressions of internal states but “highly sus-

⁵“As noted earlier, not all narratives are conventional. . . . It is curious that theorists who know much better nonetheless seem to assume the most conventional form of narrative (particularly nineteenth-century realism read in a rather limited way) when they generalize about the nature of narrative, often to criticize its conventionality or ideological nature” (LaCapra 2001: 63). Strawson’s rhetorical strategy is to list all non-conventional narratives under his heading of “Episodic” style. I disagree with this strategy but admit that it can bring into relief some problems and varieties of narrative studies.

⁶ See Gubrium and Holstein’s 2001 criticism of the romantic idea of one’s “own voice.”

⁷ Which does not mean that these documents were, by any means or automatically, inferior to other documents of history. Here I follow Dominick LaCapra (2004) who writes about the “transferential” relationships between the historian on the one hand, and traumatizing events and historical documents on the other. LaCapra would not, therefore, encourage us to investigate our personal past “objectively,” without taking into account the complex emotional attachments to past events, persons, and situations.

ceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences” (14). If this is true, what happens to experience — is it also culturally and interpersonally constituted, and if so, how thoroughly? Indeed, Bruner seems to take a definite culturalist position here:

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.* (15; italics mine)

At the center of this argument, we have the cognitive processes. These processes are culturally shaped, but to what extent and depth is not specified. These cognitive processes guide the self-telling of lives, but they also have the power to structure “perceptual experience” and to “organize memory.” The general style of this structuring, in Strawson’s terms, can be either Narrative or Episodic. Finally, they “segment” and emotionally charge or color the events of a life, and so “we become the autobiographical narratives” we are telling. The argument is not so modest after all. However, it does not leave much space for Strawson’s “ethical Narrativity thesis,” which maintains that “experiencing or conceiving one’s life as a narrative is a good thing; a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life” (428). Bruner’s argument is thoroughly descriptive in the sense of trying to capture how things are, not how they should be. His central point is that the revision of experience takes place, in many important ways, already before and during the experience, meaning that Strawson’s “Narrative” and “Episodic” persons face similar problems of the relativity of experience. “Experience is a subject’s history” and therefore “not the origin [or foundation] of our explanation, but that which we want to explain” (Scott 69).

I am somewhat puzzled by the outcome of Bruner’s argumentation. When he challenges the purity of experience and “life itself,” when he outlines the cognitive pre-shaping of experience, he opens a rich and reflexive conceptual network and helps to resist what Scott calls a foundationalist⁸ view of experience (cf. LaCapra 2004: 35–38). By maintaining

⁸ Scott argues that experience “is one of the foundations that have been reintroduced into historical writing in the wake of critique of empiricism; unlike ‘brute fact’ or ‘simple reality,’ its connotations are more varied and elusive” (60). It is easy to recognize that “experience” may receive a similar foundational and unquestioned position within cultural studies as well.

that we *become* the autobiographical narratives we tell, he may, it seems, be betraying this dialectic for a kind of narrative totalization. Quite astonishingly, a flexible and reflexive network seems to be reversed to resemble a closed-circuit argumentative model. The argument even opens up the possibility of reading the title of the article in the strong form “Life as *a* Narrative.” Of course it is technically possible to unpack the original plural expression into a singular-cum-plural proposition: “A person becomes the autobiographical narratives he or she is telling”; however, had this been Bruner’s original intention, he would probably have formulated the argument less ambiguously. Instead of providing *multiple sets* of cognitive resources, narrative, indeed, seems to impose a fixed and quasi-deterministic form.

The decisive passage seems to enable at least two contradictory interpretations with regard to the limits of agency. According to the darker, deterministic reading, the culturally shaped cognitive-cum-linguistic processes take control over individual life, making life follow the model of an articulated autobiography. The optimistic reading, by contrast, empowers the individual at the moment of telling, giving the individual narrator profound powers to create his or her life with the help of cultural resources of self-narration. Of course we may think that Bruner, as a constructionist, simply argues that life cannot be experienced and interpreted except discursively, and thus through narrative forms. If so, why only autobiographical narratives, and why only the autobiographical narratives “we” are already telling?

I shall now locate the background of this strong argument that we “become” the autobiographical narratives we are telling and consider ways of unpacking the obvious determinacy of the model; I shall then try to identify some of the ways in which Bruner himself revised this idea in his later work, in particular by introducing the notion of folk psychology as an every-day explanatory model.

The Formalist Legacy

One of Bruner’s undeniable merits — as a psychologist — is his extensive reading of literature and literary theory. During the period when he originally surveyed literary theories of narrative, structuralist thought dominated the field. In *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, he introduces the idea of narrative form very powerfully: “Literary theorists as various as Victor Turner (an anthropologist), Tzvetan Todorov, Hayden White (an historian), and Vladimir Propp (a folklorist) suggest that there is *some*

such constraining deep structure to narrative, and that good stories are well-formed particular realizations of it” (1986: 16; my italics). Bruner is alert enough to see that not all writers share this view, but I assume that the structuralist emphasis on narrative form and deep structure is quite decisive for his argument in general. The end of the above quote leads up to a particularly alarming conclusion — that “good stories” are “well-formed realizations” of the narrative deep-structure. Are we then entitled to develop normative criteria for good life stories, and perhaps for lives as well?

In “Life as Narrative,” Bruner repeats the same theme of a strong narrative form. Now he takes Vladimir Propp’s (1968 [1928]) *Morphology of the Folktale* as his blueprint:

Vladimir Propp’s classic analysis of folktales reveals, for example, that the *form* of a folktale may remain unchanged even though its content changes. So too self-told life narratives may reveal a common formal structure across a wide variety of content. (1987: 17)

The Russian wondertale, the only category of data Propp (1984 [1966]) claims to have theorized, is, of course, generically quite distant from contemporary self-narration and consequently subject to more pressing and different conventions than the life story. Bruner’s oeuvre is full of references to modernist literature, much more so than is usual in the social sciences, yet at this point of his argument he takes the forms of the sub-genre of folktales as the pilot case of his analysis. Indeed, if we first assume the existence of a “constraining deep structure to narrative,” believe in its realization in “well-formed” and “good” stories, and assume the Proppian idea of the permanence of form through a variety of narratives, the grand vision of autobiography’s formative power is not necessarily surprising. Even though the ideas of cultural psychology and the early cognitive revolution permeate Bruner’s work, it is as revealing and relevant to recognize within it the significant remains of structuralist and formalist thought.

The Self in Early Narrative Psychology

The way we understand narrative conceptually (for example, as the realization of a permanent structure or as a relatively open multitude of options) is vital for a further understanding of narrative’s cognitive role. In my analysis, the key formulation of Bruner’s article suggests a problematic integration of “cognitive processes” with “autobiographical nar-

rative.” If the statement really held water, the importance of the study of autobiography would of course be momentous. The argument encompasses, I think, a good quantity of the “narrative imperialism” that James Phelan (2005) has criticized. Bruner is working to explore the momentous cognitive role of narrative, and autobiographical narrative in particular, and the ambitious scope of his project deters him from hedging in his claims.

At first, Bruner’s key argument presents “cognitive processes” that guide the “self-telling of life narratives”; later we *become* these narratives as self-guiding elements. However, a large and decisive amount of our cognitive processing through narrative involves the *reception* of an almost unending multitude of different narratives.⁹ Many of the received narratives are incoherent, unfinished, and episodic, sometimes portraying the weak narrativity of “a boring story” (see Tammi). This is of course also at the core of the idea of narrative as a method of imitation and learning that Bruner (2002) uses in his later work, because imitation is not a very powerful intellectual tool if we imitate the same narrative (form) we have already used. Much of the cognitive power of narratives also derives from the non-actual options they offer, and from the imagination they are able to facilitate. As Zunshine’s book argues, precisely this imagining and pretending to be someone else is a key reason why we want to read fiction. Fictional narratives offer the option to be someone else and to assume the perspective of this someone, at least for a moment.

The other side of this conflation of cognition and autobiography seems to bestow an unwarranted privilege on autobiographical narratives, those encompassing an entire life. The early days of narrative psychology often witnessed this generalization: narrative for the human self and the human self as a narrative specifically mean life-long narratives. Donald E. Polkinghorne lucidly expresses this bias (in Strawson’s terms, a “Narrative” against “Episodic” understanding of the self):

⁹Here variety pertains to both form and content. When Strawson, for example, says that “the paradigm of a narrative is a conventional story told in words. I take the term to attribute — at the very least — a certain sort of *developmental* and hence temporal *unity* or *coherence* to the things to which it is standardly applied — lives, part of lives, pieces of writing” (439), he oddly seems to share Bruner’s problematic conception of a “good story.” If we remove the necessary conditions of “conventionality” and “temporal unity” from the model, much of Strawson’s binary opposition between “Narrative” and “Episodic” understandings collapses as well. See for example Herman (2007: 7) for an entirely different model of narrative.

we achieve our personal identities and self concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories¹⁰ and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. (150; my italics)

This idea of being “in the middle of our stories” conceptualizes life problematically as a continuous and singular story in a way Strawson strongly resists. Could we, indeed, be in the middle of several stories, not quite knowing which ones of them will turn out to be relevant in the future? Do we only see much later the “true story” we were a part of? As many authors have suggested in recent years, identities are also formed and played out in numerous kinds of “small” and naturally occurring narratives (Ochs and Capps; Bamberg 2004, 2006; Georgakopoulou). Even autobiographical narration can be theorized as a much more situational and collaborative endeavor than simply a controlled repetition of a complete autobiographical narrative in different versions. This pluralist view of self-narration of course explodes the vision of a compelling, complete narrative that starts to dominate human perception, experience, and the understanding of one’s own agency. However, there are still important schools in the study of biography which see it as a necessary context for the smaller stories, and argue that studies of partial stories “first take place after the entire life story’s structure or Gestalt and the whole life narrative has been taken into consideration” (Rosenthal 917). If I understand Strawson correctly, he would argue that precisely this “entire life story structure or Gestalt” is a purely contingent phenomenon, typical of “Narrative” characters. But within this early horizon of a narrative self, Bruner’s radical argument apropos of “to become” may simply indicate the way in which the individual’s psychological reality and autobiographical narrative will be conflated. Unfortunately, this too would still be a narrow view on the level of psychological reality and the functions of self-narration.

¹⁰ In terms of narratology, this does not make much sense. “Story” is indeed a cognitive achievement in narratology, something that is always only *inferred* based on the information offered in the narrative discourse. In the metaphoric discourse, by contrast, we can have direct contact with “our story.”

Canonicity and Breach

To my knowledge, Bruner explicitly returned neither to the phrase “life as narrative,” nor to the key thesis of that article — that “we become” the narratives we tell about our own lives. His *Acts of Meaning* (1990) gives a fuller account of his study of the Goodhertz family, introduced as his primary research material in “Life as Narrative”; in this sense, the book seamlessly continues his earlier work. *Acts of Meaning* broadly endeavors to rehabilitate the ideas of what he regards as the early Cognitive Revolution — before the concept of “information processing” replaced the original role of “meaning-making.” Bruner now locates the cognitive role of narrative primarily on the level of “folk psychology,” maintaining that people ordinarily presume that other people have minds, purposes, and desires, and are thus read against the background of inherited narratives. People suffering from autism, at least in the case of Asperger syndrome, suffer in particular from the lack or inadequacy of such folk psychological resources (see Zunshine 6–12; Freißmann). Daniel Hutto likewise describes folk psychology as “the practice of making sense of intentional action by means of a special kind of narrative, those that are about or feature a person’s reasons” (2008: 7).

The idea of folk psychology leads Bruner to argue for the role of narrative from an entirely new perspective: “Folk psychology is invested in [canonicity]. It focuses upon the expectable and/or the usual in the human condition. It endows these with legitimacy or authority” (1990: 47). Here we have an interesting dilemma: as Bruner and Hutto maintain, folk psychology is organized in a narrative rather than a conceptual form, and these “folk psychological narratives function as normalizing explanations” (Hutto 2008: 7). The role of real narratives with regard to these normative expectations is equally important. Bruner repeats his key idea: “[I]t is only when constituent beliefs in a folk psychology are violated that narratives are constructed” (39). Hutto sees the violation of norms already as a necessary precondition for the use of folk psychological explanations: “*sometimes* the actions of others cry out for explanation — sometimes they violate norms (or appear to do so) in ways that we can only make sense of by understanding them in a wider context; by acquiring the narrative that fills in or fleshes out the particular details of that person’s story” (2007: 45).

Even though Bruner himself does not follow all the potential trajectories of this argument, it radically undermines the power of the metaphorical discourse, and challenges the earlier discussion of autobiography.

“Living out a narrative” can only refer to the cultural-cum-personal level of narrative canonicity, and without the violation of expectations we indeed may be in the middle of a boring story, at a point that will be forgotten and erased from all told narratives. The concept of a “breach” once again introduces the unexpected openness of experience. True, actual narratives are told because not everything goes the way the canonical narratives presume and dictate. If we radicalize the new role of the “breach,” we may want to challenge the presumed, quasi-universal, and automatic role of autobiography as well, in the sense that the extent of experienced breaches may lead to diverse pressures for autobiographical processing.

A cultural script might be another name for particular and regional versions of the folk psychological canonicity (cf. Herman 2002). “Living out a narrative” (MacIntyre), or the idea of “becom[ing] the autobiographical narratives by which to tell about our lives” (Bruner), or “self as a narrative” (Polkinghorne) all foreground, quite obviously against the authors’ original intentions, the folk psychological canonicity, or the presumption that life follows the model of cultural-cum-personal scripts. The fundamental shortcoming of the metaphoric discourse, from this perspective, is that it analytically conflates the canonical, scripted narrativity with actual narratives and narration. Scripts, plans, and all other possible forms of canonical narrativity structure events, goals, intentions, desires, and outcomes in sequential, chronological order; in short, they make use of the cognitive resources of narrativity; but after all “they do not constitute narrativity itself” (Bruner 1991: 11). For these reasons, I conclude, Bruner’s ideas about folk psychology and the play of canonicity and its breach constitute a remarkable shift in his own thought, and open entirely new perspectives on many of the original ideas of narrative psychology.

As a matter of fact, Bruner (2002: 89) brings together his themes of imitation, becoming, and folk psychology. He repeats his key argument that our stories have a compelling impact on what we experience. Then he says: “In time, life comes not so much to imitate art as join with it.” At first sight, this may seem to repeat the original 1987 thesis on becoming. However, now “life” does not join with the person’s particular autobiographical narratives, but with “art” in its more abstract and plural form. More importantly, he also explicates the consequences of this joining: “It is ‘ordinary people doing ordinary things in ordinary places for ordinary reasons.’” In short, life following canonicity. Narrative, by contrast, is a “seeming breach in this ordinariness” that is “required to trigger the rich

dynamics of narrative — how to cope with it, to domesticate it, to get things back on a familiar track" (89). Life *as* narrative thus signifies a particular version of life as ordinary and harmonized. The new, fragmentary, creative, and uncanny is to be found at the moment of the breach, and in the ensuing attempts to re-tell the unordinary.

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