

STORY AND REAL LIFE

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Why should we be concerned about the fate of literature as we move from a book culture to a screen culture in the digital age? Not primarily because we are losing our sense of story, but because we are losing our sense of the central importance of linguistic narrative. There is a difference. The technologies creating the digital revolution seem to devalue language and increasingly to do away with boundaries, celebrating instead speed and boundless exhilaration. The visual trumps the linguistic, the image and the screen trump the word and the book. As a result, we no longer seem to engage deeply with others or ourselves. We are beginning to move, in other words, from “a reading brain” to “a digital brain,” from a brain capable of deep reading and deep thinking to a brain increasingly addled by spectacle and surface sensation. We are losing our standing as “linguistic beings.”

Several years ago (1994), Sven Birkerts coined the term “deep reading.” As he said: “Reading, because we control it, is adaptable to our needs and rhythms. We are free to indulge our subjective associative impulse. The term I coin for this is deep reading: the slow and meditative possession of a book. We don’t just read the words; we dream our lives in their vicinity.” Birkerts argued that the change from a print culture to an electronic culture was flattening out human identity, threatening our understanding of the complexity and wonder, the interior depths of both our emotional and conceptual lives.

Dreaming our lives through linguistic narrative, as Birkerts indicated, was an important way to explore the unknown territory in the interior of the embodied self, to connect with the tacit knowledge that we can best experience and understand through literature. The deeper we journey into ourselves through deep reading, Birkerts seemed to suggest, the more we learn about who we are and where we are located in the midst of the complexities of the world. Unlike watching television or engaging in other types of screen entertainment, deep reading is not an escape from the confusions of daily life, but a way of discovering meaning in that life through linguistic narrative. Deep reading is a risky but rewarding encounter with our rhythms and needs, our own feelings and emotions, and it offers a way of making sense of that encounter. Through such reading, we discover how we are all connected to others and to our own evolving stories. We experience our own plots and stories unfolding through the imaginative language and voice of others, and we desire to move on.

Unlike electronic icons manipulated on a screen, literary language can be lived in. It is not a sealed off reduction, an object to be controlled or consumed; rather it is always opening and closing, calling to our imaginations, beckoning us to question, to quest on, to doubt our fixed assumptions, to recognize the complexity and sense of the mystery of the human experience. As Socrates knew, every answer is temporary, evoking another question. And that is the truth of deep reading. Like an adventurous journey, it is always questing, stirring desire and reflection, revealing and concealing, moving us, in an attempt to deepen understanding of our uniqueness and our connectivity.

Several years after Birkerts, Nicholas Carr (2010) took up this argument, expanding its implications for the digital age. For Carr, we were already living in a fragmented and flattened out world (“the shallows”). As he put it: “The Net seizes our attention only to scatter it.” The more often we used the Web (and other electronic devices), the more distracted we became. We were losing our ability to sustain attention and focus. Instead of remembering, we were learning to forget.

The digital culture today has become the mainstream culture, creating a revised sense of time (a fragmented sense of the present without past or future) and a revised sense of space (everywhere

being nowhere). It has hollowed out the human self, privileging surfaces (the shallows) and the visual image to be consumed like a commodity as fast as possible.

Like Carr, Paul Virilio (2010) sounds a similar warning. For him, all the boundaries of the world are collapsing, suppressing both the depth of our experience as temporal beings as well as the depth of our connections with the world that surrounds us. As Virilio says:

“The whole world stage is turned upside down...to the point where ‘representations’ gradually lose their pertinence...What is promoted instead is ‘presentation’, an untimely out-of-place presentation that suppresses the depth of time for shared reflexion every bit as much as the depth of field of action and its displacement.”

For Virilio, we now live in an endless now, even the present moment has become hallucination. When we journey out on an electronic screen, we forget our “conscious interiority,” the narrative and historical sense of self rooted in the depths of our embodied experience. Instead, we crave instant gratification to the detriment of the tacit knowledge of organic and vital life. Refusing the challenge of slow and thoughtful discovery, we become instinctual nodes in a network, thinly connected, at best, to other nodes flickering on the screen.

We might call this experience of an endless present the new electronic unconscious replacing the linguistic unconscious. It is a consciousness flowing without origins or horizons, devoid of the traditional human sense of temporal duration or spatial rootedness. As we naturalize this new electronic consciousness, we, too, begin to float in cyber-time and cyber-space. In such a process, we lose the common ground of our human nature, our embodied connection to ourselves and other mortal human beings. When we walk we no longer feel our feet on the ground. We focus on the screen in front of us. When we talk, we no longer look at the eyes or the wrinkles of the face before us. We focus on pixels demanding recognition. Virtual and disembodied selves, we begin to float at the surface of the electronic grid, no longer curious about our beginnings or our end.

The digital age increasingly collapses the boundary between illusion and reality, the original and the copy, fiction and ordinary life, and in the process, it also celebrates electronic consciousness as the new human consciousness, naturalizing it and privileging it, reinforcing its mainstream success. The “on-line-life” becomes the favored model for “off-line-life.” We begin to behave as if we were always surfing on the screen and that intelligence is best judged not by wisdom but by technological know-how.

Bits and bytes, tweets and visuals, can at best provide information to be manipulated, data to be possessed and consumed. But to manipulate things is to give up living in them (as Virilio says). By contrast, as Hans Georg Gadamer put it: “Language is not one of man’s possessions in the world but on it depends the fact that man has a world at all... Language has no independent life apart from the world that comes to language within it. Not only is the world ‘world’ only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it.” In this sense, human beings are linguistic beings existing in a finite universe. Language grounds us and keeps us human. We are limited in our knowledge of self and the world, finite and mortal, unable to grasp “the ultimate secret,” but, as mortal beings, we have a journey to make, a responsibility to know the truth as linguistic beings can know it. Literary language remains the best pathway to that kind of mortal truth, to the kind of understanding that promises the possibility of knowing ourselves and the world that surrounds us.

One of the underlying assumptions of this essay is that a life more attentive to language than visual images, books rather than screens, narrative knowledge rather than bits and bytes of fragmented

information, is a way of establishing a crucial counter-culture, a culture serving as a contrary to the dominant mainstream culture. It is a way of keeping dialogical relationships fresh and in motion.

Reading literary narrative today is necessary to bring us back to the complexity of our own identity and to a recognition of the worth of other linguistic beings, mortal beings who desire to share in the enduring quest to expand and discover what it means to be human—"to know thyself" (as Socrates insisted).

The journey to gain human knowledge is the fundamental journey of life, a complex and troubling journey, filled with fear and fascination, an ongoing and embattled quest to know the meaning of our mortal human self and our place in the world that surrounds us. All great writers address this journey as do all human beings who innately desire to know the secrets of mortal human existence. Language and story lead the way to an understanding of the ambiguities and contradictions of our mortal existence.

ii.

When we talk about stories, we always appear to contradict ourselves. We make ourselves known to ourselves and to others through stories, for example, but, at the same time, stories distance us from ourselves and others. There is always "a gap" between our everyday unstoried experience (the contingent and chaotic events of our everyday experiences), what we sometimes call "real life," and the stories we tell about those "real life" experiences. Sometimes we even insist, because "the gap" is so noticeable, that the story we have told is "fiction." In this book, though, I want to suggest that all stories are "fiction," to one degree or another, and that this is our good fortune. "The gap" that opens up between our "real life" and our stories – between the contingent events of our everyday lives and the narratives that shape those chaotic events -- rouses us, excites desire, invites us to further recreate ourselves in pursuit of knowing ourselves. Telling stories to ourselves and to others sets us on the most important journey of our lives.

We always exist in the present moment, our sensuous body interacting with the world surrounding it. But it is language, circulating in the world and emerging from our bodies, that seems to offer to us the best opportunity to understand ourselves in relation to that world. Through language, we try to create coherence for our "real life" by shaping the past and making it a part of us and by projecting future possibilities for ourselves. In this sense, the metaphoric function of language, especially language shaped into narrative, is a gift that allows us to become conscious of who we are, where we have been, and where we are headed. Linguistic narrative is an especially rich way of making meaning for ourselves in the world and a way of making the world human.

Linguistic narrative offers an embodied sense of time and space through the sensuous and complex associations of language given the reader to experience. Extended narratives demand that we slow down, that we enter the rich storehouse of language itself, that we feel the systolic and diastolic rhythms of that language on our pulse, and that we reflect on that language, making it our own. That language, shaped into narrative, carries with it traces of the past and possibilities for the future. It evokes memory and desire, Literary narrative excites the imagination as well, through its auditory and visual power and through the movement readers experience when they are engaged with the rhythm and intensity of the unfolding and organic curve of the language. In this context, literary narrative has an affective, conceptual, and somatic quality. It invites us into the interior of ourselves, unlike the digital networks that flatten out the self, leaving us disembodied, without time or space for empathy or reflection. But we also need to emphasize that literary narrative always has a dual function, a doublings about it. When we engage with a story, the story engages us. We are in dialogue with it. If a story reinforces the mainstream culture, it also puts that culture into question. If we locate ourselves in a story, that story also urges us to question that location. If a story seems familiar, it also seems strange. As a result, stories offer temporary stability and coherence, but they simultaneously make us

feel unstable. When we live in a story, the story also lives in us. As we read it, it reads us. As we experience it, we question it. So we are always questing for our relationship to that story, which is another way of saying that we journey through stories to discover our singularity, our uniqueness, our strangeness, but also our connection to others, our home in the world. Stories offer us a way into our conflicted identity as both unique individuals and social beings.

How else can we say what linguistic narrative does, how it behaves when we engage it? Language, especially in its literary form, gives us “the ground, the soil in which to strike root and stand,” as Heidegger put it. But it also puts us into “exile,” as Maurice Blanchot insists. Language allows us to glimpse a potential “home,” a place to root ourselves in and to stand in the midst of the confusion and chaos of the world, but that “home” is always envisioned at a distance, a place that we do not yet fully know, and so it also reminds us of the strangeness of “the real world” that we presently live in. It makes us anxious. Language reminds us that we lack the fullness of our being, that we are ambiguous and ambivalent human beings, incomplete mortal selves. We are wounded beings on a quest for wholeness.

Linguistic narrative is the best way for us to experience story, in part because it always seems ready to reveal and conceal, open and hide what we are seeking. When we engage with linguistic narrative, it excites our desire and imagination to want to know more, to seek our beginnings and to pursue our ends, to discover “the secret” that we cannot grasp. As Michael Burke says: “I believe that the imagery produced while reading literature is so powerful, in part, because it is fundamental to who we are as individuals and where we come from. The meaning that participants and indeed locations and activities carry in the mental imagery of literary readers appears to be bound to those three fundamental questions: Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going? “Literary narrative transports us back toward the depths of our beginning and projects us forward towards our end. But it can never fully make explicit that beginning or that end.

Language, especially as it is shaped into literary narrative, then, does not recover for us our beginning, nor does it name our end, but it can give us continuity through time (our past, present and future) and temporary identity and location in space. Like the speaking body, it is the embattled way to affective and cognitive knowledge of the individual self and the social self. We might imagine the importance of literary narrative in the following way:

- A.) The raw experience of human life is a series of mostly contingent events, primarily chaotic and infused with anxiety and intimations of death. As mortal beings we are often thrown about by these troubling events, leaving us with little sense of our origins or our end.
- B.) That moment by moment experience of contingent events can be made into a life story, envisioned both as a linear narrative from birth to death and as a series of concentric circles (or expanding loops) taking us deeper and deeper into our interior self and out into the depths of the external world. That journey transports us through an emotional and conceptual arc of human meaning and purpose.
- C.) This journey, a person’s life story, always intermingles with the stories of others and with fictional stories, thus helping human beings to create a sense of identity through time and also helping them to create meaning and location for their lives.
- D.) Language, especially when shaped into story, is likely the most crucial development in giving the body human purpose and direction on this life journey. Through story, human beings appreciate the deep and enigmatic complexity of the human experience and become self-reflective.
- E.) Story evokes story, further deepening the reading experience and the human quest for further knowledge of the self. Reading and discussing stories, then, also enhances the

significance and interactivity of human community. Such a process inspires a rejuvenated and ongoing sense of the individual self and offers a glimpse of genuine democracy.

In this context, we might agree that human experience is only possible within a world which is already linguistically articulated. As Kristen Dietrich Balisi says:

“Human speech does not create or bring elements of life forms into being; it does not establish a physical order within the cosmos. Rather it creates linguistic ‘beings’ and a grammatically ordered realm within which the terms relate to each other; a secondary humanly constituted vision of reality layered upon the physical and cosmological order.”

This is the world as we know it: the way the world becomes human and meaningful as we experience it through language and story.

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Seeking to create a life story, we live in dialogical relation with ourselves and with others, with our stories and with the stories of others. As Alasdair MacIntyre says: “I can only answer the question: ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question: ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part’”? We need story to contextualize our contingent experiences, and we need that imagined context to create and interpret the ongoing story of our “real lives.”

Some people today have no story; they have no context and seem to have nothing to say. They cannot rely on themselves, so they cannot be relied on. They live without perspective, so they have trouble being self-reflective. They live in an endless present, without apparent goals or direction. They appear to have no future, no promise to fulfill. They have become zombies, the walking dead.

But, as human beings, we have an ethical responsibility to acknowledge others, to listen to their stories and to offer stories to them. The exchange of stories is an ethical response to a most natural human demand. That demand, never fully satisfied, nevertheless obligates us. Through the telling of stories and the listening to stories, human beings begin to acknowledge each other’s desire. Within that linguistic environment, they create and enter into what Emanuel Levinas calls, “a curvature of inter subjective space.” Within that space, they make themselves vulnerable to each other, and, at the same time, protect themselves from the direct glare of their own mortality. They sense their connectivity to others by creating a shared space and a common horizon, and yet they acknowledge their difference, their singularity. In this way, the exchange of stories becomes an act of human love, a way to bring compassion into the world, It allows us to glimpse our imperfections, our shared mortal wounds.

Through the experience of language shaped into story, we feel empathy and compassion for the other, but we also acknowledge the strangeness of the other. That is why stories are said to “infect” us (Tolstoy), “shake us up” (Kafka), but also give us “a habitation and a name” (Shakespeare). Such stories drive us forward into the future as a promise would; they signify that a promise has been kept, a covenant secured. Stories give us hope, which allows us to return to the series of contingent events in our daily lives with fresh perceptions and renewed possibilities, but they also remind us that we are necessarily mortal and vulnerable beings, limited and incomplete, strangers in the world. Stories give us a sense of familiarity, but also remind us of our strangeness.

To put it another way, we can say stories allow us to temporarily leave behind our confusions, the chaos of our everyday existence, even the distractions that pull us away from ourselves. By moving us to acknowledge our strangeness in that everyday world of distraction, stories can inspire us to strike out in a new direction, to find a new beginning. As Stanley Cavell puts it: “The first step in attending to our education is to observe the strangeness of our lives, our estrangement from ourselves, the lack of

necessity in what we profess to be necessary.” The strangeness of the story opens a “gap” for us to enter, invites us to sense our mortality and our vulnerability, what we lack. But, then, with our desire aroused, it also offers us compassion, the human desire to connect, the promise to continue on with others in our quest to discover ourselves in the midst of the chaos.

IV.

Encountering literature is always risky business. It reminds us of what we have and what we do not have, what we are and what we are not, what is familiar to us and what is strange to us. But it also makes an ethical demand on us. As Arnold Weinstein says: “Literature endows us and teaches us to endow other living human beings who cross our path, not only in books, but in the world that we live in, with consciousness. This is an ethical injunction; for it moves from self to world.” Literature teaches us to recover our own story and also teaches us that others have (at least potentially) a story to tell. As Weinstein indicates, language is the best means we have “for chronicling and choreographing that huge realm of feeling and fantasy that is one’s ultimate real estate.”

That “real estate” (to use Weinstein’s term) is “our home,” the capacious scaffolding of the complexity and depth of our human identity, the embattled and troubled mortal being articulated as a linguistic self. It is our home, but also an enigma, a riddle, a knot that cannot be fully untied until its story ends and we become a corpse.

Like mortal life, language has its limits, hinting at that which we desire but cannot fully grasp. Language takes us to the threshold of this boundary, to the edge of this ultimate strangeness, but no further. In the human world, language makes the strange somewhat familiar, and the familiar somewhat strange, giving us stability, at times, and shaking us up, at other times. But it cannot carry us over the threshold into the direct experience of death (or the direct experience of God). Language can perhaps give us a glimpse of this mysterious experience. But, as linguistic beings, we cannot fully articulate that experience anymore than we can experience our own death and then name it.

In “real life,” we seem to move through contingent events, what we usually consider chaotic experience and chance occurrence. As story tellers, though, we move back through those chance events, giving them shape and meaning, a sense of necessity. We are like the detective working backwards from effects to causes, from the clues of the crime to its detection; like the doctor working from symptoms to the primary cause; or like Heidegger working from the fact of death to life, from nonbeing to being, from end to beginning. As human beings, we quest for the knowledge of “real life” experience, revealed and concealed through linguistic narrative. We seek for the answer to the riddle of “real life,” “the secret” embodied only in the story itself.

The story we tell, though, is always somewhat of a deception, a covering that hints at, but also protects us from full exposure to the ultimate mystery, the “secret” of our singularity, our uniqueness. Yet, that “fiction” also invites us to reconnect with our lived past experience and create imagined meaning for the future. Story projects us backwards and forward in this way; it gives us imagined coherence and keeps us alive. It is “the truth” of our mortal lives, whether it actually happened or not. By contrast, once the mystery is unveiled, the secret fully revealed, we collapse. As Foucault says: “That which hides and envelops, the curtain of night over truth, is paradoxically, life; and death, on the contrary, opens up to the light of day the black coffer of the body.”

Without story, we have neither meaningful life nor meaningful death, at least in terms of human identity. As unstoried beings, we are conflicted bodies without conscious knowledge or understanding of the rich contradictions of mortal life. Without story, we are, at best, endlessly distracted, often by what is insignificant, by indifference, by carelessness, by the contingencies of existence. We refuse to

embrace our uncertainty or the necessity of our mortality. We exist in endless illusion. Michael Roemer puts it well: "If we can accept our uncertainty, even though we cannot trust it as we once trusted God, story may regain its credibility, and, by affirming rather than distracting us from necessity, recover its ancient, persuasive and telling role. For what we call 'fiction' embodies a reality we cannot afford to face in life, and what we call 'reality' is, in fact, a fiction that allows us a measure of consciousness without casting us into despair. It may well be the reality and contradictions we can face only in fiction that gives our lives meaning and shape." There is a sense, then, that story is sturdier than we might expect. It makes us aware of how narrow the boundary between life and death, being and non-being, our uniqueness and our commonalities, fiction and experience, is: how strong and how vulnerable we all are.

We might say that literature in particular creates a bounding line for us, and so helps us to keep the shifting sense of difference between contingency and necessity in place (as blurry and unclear as that place might be). Literature reminds us, as Gregory Jusdaris says, "of the boundary we draw between what we experience and what we imagine." In that context, it is a social practice, and more than any other social practice, it "accentuates the threshold between itself and other spaces." As Jusdaris indicates, literature watches over these boundaries, but in order to do that, it must also "retain its own distance from reality." It helps us recognize the boundary between contingent experience and "fiction," in other words, through its linguistic inventions. As a result: "It brings light to the gap between fiction and reality because it needs this gap to live." Literature guards a crucial border which accentuates a sense of difference, that fortunate "gap" that allows us to continue on, to create an imagined meaning and purpose for our everyday experiences (commonly called "real life").

Unlike the abstract language of scientism (the ironic attempt to use distinct and efficient language as a means to an instrumental and practical end), the imaginative language of story offers us sensuous experience, an embodied language shaped into narrative (or poetic forms), expressing personal knowledge open to reflection. Literary language binds us to that experience, but also inspires us to movement and agency. It grants us both sensuous experience to immerse ourselves in and the perspective to distance ourselves from that experience so that we can make sense of the experience and begin to create our own story. It allows us to acknowledge that we are bodies and that we have bodies. In this way, we recognize how the story we are reading is similar to our own story and so we are able to recognize how we are connected to other mortal human beings. Another's story is our story as well. But we also recognize our difference from this story, our difference from others. Another's story is not quite our story after all. In this way, we know what we are and what we are not. We acknowledge the self and the other, our life and our death.

Since we cannot experience our own singular death and then name it, we can never say all that we are anymore than we can know what the mute body would say. But linguistic narrative can remind us that we are more than the mute body. We are both similar and different from others. Through the deep tissue of language, we connect to others, giving us a sense of community, and, at the same time, we sense our mortality, our fragility, even our death. Story embodies the enigma of our mortal human identity.

In the digital age, we still celebrate story, but we often forget that the depth of human identity, the interiority of the human self, is best accessed through an awareness of the full complexity of our mortality. Just as we need to appreciate both life and death, being and non-being, our similarities and differences, we need also to recognize the boundary between story and "real life," and how each seeps into the other. The metaphorical function of literary language provides us with the richest acknowledgment of this doublings. It is bounding, in this regard, always giving us a place to temporarily reside and the possibility of something more (and something less). When we dare to enter the depths of a story, it sends us into ourselves and then back out into the world of everyday contingency.