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# Books and the Human Need for Narrative:

## *Reflections on the Writings of Paul Ricoeur*

by David Lee Stegall

"It is not by chance or by mistake that we commonly think of stories that happen to us or of stories in which we are caught up, or simply the story of a life."<sup>1</sup>

— Paul Ricoeur

### I. Portrait of the Bibliophile

When one thinks of books and of the voracious reader, in short, the world of the bibliophile, the lover of books, a whole constellation of images comes to mind. Readers who survey the shelves of their homes characterize the volumes stacked around them in a dozen differing yet reverential ways. "These books are my friends, to whom I can turn for wisdom and humor and stories of adventure. These books are my reminders to myself, of what I have learned and of what I want to be." The shelves are like the layers an archaeologist would dig through, each layer an interest once had or an author whose every novel and story one gathered and savored. Sitting and surveying a lifetime of books, a favorite thought experiment of the bibliophile is to try to decide what would be the five books one would want to have if marooned on a desert island. [For myself, the answer is Hugh Lofting's *The Voyages of Doctor Doolittle*, *The World as I Found It* by Bruce Duffy, *The Plague* by Albert Camus, Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, and *Shantiboat* by Harlan Hubbard]. This question is, of course, a version of asking, "what are the most precious books to me," the books one recommends or gives to friends. As the reader reflects upon the joys of reading, the authors that have befriended through their stories, the stories that seemed written just for one's own predicament, the enriching of life by books — from all this one easily slides into thinking the com-

mon claim that books are a special or magical invention, and thus by extension, book collectors and book lovers are on a sort of quest for the Holy Grail, in search of, and in communion with, magical things.

And yet clearly the voracious reader, the book lover, are also felt to be comical figures. Consider the parallel with the history of philosophy, where as any textbook teaches, the first Western philosopher was Thales. And any story of the origins of philosophy always includes the tale of Thales being so deep in thought that while walking through the countryside, he fell down a well and was thus laughed at by passersby. Thales embodies the "daydreamer" and the impractical thinker, and these same connotations cling to any discussion of the life of the bibliophile. The love of books appears whimsical, akin to a withdrawal from "real life." From Thales onward, philosophy has had an aura of the

comic, as being a daydreamer's life. The same comic aura clings to the life of the bibliophile. The reader seems to be a daydreamer and sleepwalker, oblivious like Thales.

### II. A Human Need for Narrative

Given the above, books seem to be a luxury, in both meanings of the term luxury — an escape from the world and something quite nonessential. Indeed, when one thinks of something like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, books do appear to be a luxury. For Maslow, there are physical needs, then safety needs, then social needs, then esteem needs and finally self-actualization needs. We are tempted, by the glory of the term 'self-actualization,' to say that this is where the experience of books and story lies. But such a temptation would be false, as the philosopher and theorist Paul Ricoeur has argued in his recent article, "Life in Quest of Narrative," in

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which Ricoeur presents his account of the nature of narrative. As Ricoeur states, "Fiction contributes to making life...into a human life."<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur argues that a human life is a narrative life, where a "narrative life" is a life that experiences stories told to it, and "stories to itself," as it describes its own life to itself. Thus, for Ricoeur, the need for narrative is infused into what it means for one to experience the world as a human being.

To make such a claim is no small feat, for as Ricoeur notes "Stories are recounted, life is lived. An unbridgeable gap seems to separate fiction and life."<sup>3</sup> Yet, Ricoeur continues "the sense or the significance of a narrative stems from the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader."<sup>4</sup> As David Carr puts it, in characterizing Ricoeur's overall theory, "Narration, far from being a distortion of, denial of or escape from 'reality,' is in fact an extension and enrichment, a confirmation, not a falsification of its primary features."<sup>5</sup>

But to say all of this is to leap ahead in 'the story.' First of all, what is meant by narrative? By narrative one means: Taking the world in terms of units of Beginning-Middle-End, of finding coherence within a unit of experiences, a carving out of a unit of meaning from the flow of experience. Humans experience the passage of time and the living of life, not as a stream of succession, of A, then B, then C..., but as episodes, 'experiences,' which have a coherence. As Ricoeur puts it, "In this sense, composing a story is, from the temporal point of view, drawing a configuration out of a succession."<sup>6</sup> or again, "the plot serves to make one story out of the multiple incidents or, if you prefer, transforms the many incidents into one story."<sup>7</sup> To be human is to hunger for units of meaning, echoing a basic need of humanity. And it is narrative which meets this hunger, a hunger for endings, for encapsulated events, for units of meaning in life. A beginning, middle, and end form a unit of coherence, of meaning, as they become a recognizable episode. We experience a capsule of Beginning-Middle-End by reading or hearing the tale told, but beneath any story, heard or read, there is the underlying message of breaking the flow of the world into units of meaning, and learning to tell one's own stories of one's experiences.

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understandable in units of meaning. From this it follows that stories do not just inform or entertain, if by this we mean being given facts or diversions from life. Rather, or more importantly, to have a self-understanding is to be able to tell the story of oneself. "Life is an activity and a passion in search of a narrative,"<sup>8</sup> as Ricoeur summarizes the point. We hear that we should tell our story, as if we had any other option. To be human is to be storying, and there is no other way of being human in the world. Just as a paleolithic hand ax reveals the shape of the human hand, stories reveal the shape of the human mind, the shape of "meaning." Storying, creating units of meaning and wanting units of meaning, is part of the structure of how humans think.

Because the hunger for books, the hunger for reading, is a subset or subvariety of the human hunger for story, books fall into that list of ways and settings in which humans encounter narrative — the human activities which are embodiments of story or narrative. Such a list *in toto*, reads like the whole journey of humanity. First, there is the tribe gathering around a campfire at dusk to narrate the hunt or dance again the myth of how life came to the land. There is the narrative of parents telling wisdom tales to children in their laps, and gatherings throughout human history, with their public performances of myths and epics by bards or traveling entertainers. All this right on through to today's television and theatre and cinema and library storyhour. All reflect an unbroken chain of humanity's way of being in the world, a way of being in the world in terms of creating units of meaning called stories, units with beginning, middle, and end, that one can apply to one's own episodes of life. The story "of my childhood, of finding a companion, of making one's way in the world," are all stories of self-understanding whose making one was tutoring in, by hours of the stories of one's community. Narrative continues beyond the personal, for story is the coin of the realm for far more than personal discourse. A community tells its history, its story of itself, with all its accompanying myths, its wisdom tales, its exemplars of how good citizens live, on to its chapter within the story of humankind. Science narrates as well, with its story of evolu-

tion and of the big bang, the story of the rise of civilization, the story of life and death. Story pervades then at each level — the personal, the social and the general — as being the way humans conceptualize the world.

### III. Reading as Emancipation

But are books then banal, because they do only what the campfire tale and the Aesopian homily does, i.e., supply examples of how to see units of meaning in the ongoing flow of time? On the contrary, it is the power of narrative, the human as the animal who tells stories, that guarantees to books a place of richness and honor in the human story.

This power of stories is often characterized as a story's ability to 'free' the reader, not free them from their day-to-day worries, but free them in the sense of telling them that the world can be otherwise. For Ricoeur, to be freed, to be emancipated, is to be shown other possibilities for one's life. As philosopher David Wood puts it, "Ricoeur suggests we think of the examined life as a narrated life, characterized by a struggle between concordance and discordance, the aim of which is to discover, not to impose on oneself, a narrative identity."<sup>9</sup> In short, from story, one finds there are other possibilities, other ways to live. Beyond a need for coherence, the need for units of meaning, there is then reading as emancipation, and indeed this notion of the narrative as emancipating leads one to again think of narrative as being the last rung of Maslow's ladder. This freeing, of what does it consist? In stories we think that information is being conveyed — the information about other places — such as what it is like to live in a world of concrete and asphalt or what it feels like to be in love. But what any story conveys to the hungry reader or listener is other possibilities, other

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ways one could live one's life and other ways one could think of oneself. Consider the book *Reading Rooms*,<sup>10</sup> in which various authors write of what libraries meant to them. One motif that recurs in this anthology is of young people, often in isolated circumstances, finding in a story on a library shelf, possibilities for their lives that they and perhaps their whole community had never spoken of. In a story, a poor black youth can learn that not all blacks are poor, and from this fact can imagine other new exciting possibilities for his or her life. One can read of worlds where not all the rulers are male, or where there are positive portrayals of gay life, or where growing up doesn't mean going to work in the local mill or foundry. In these pages, there are tales of places where atheism is fine, or where parents don't hit children, or where imagination is rewarded and listened to, rather than dismissed. Stories become thought experiments by which one learns of all the interesting, differing units of meaning that humans have made for themselves. Thus from a story first felt as someone speaking to the reader, there comes then from the experience of the story a modeling of how one can speak to oneself about one-

self — the possible stories for oneself are enlarged.

#### IV. Conclusion

To have said this sounds simple, but what it says about what it is to be human is not so simple. Within life, there can be conflicting stories, distorting stories, addictive stories; there are no guarantees, and the stories one lives by can make false endings, assign meanings to meaningless moments, and become a fog that settles upon experience to blur the sharp edges of reality. Yet, stories do not merely distract us from painful or dull realities. Stories are the stuff of human reality — they are how one experiences reality. A story is not a magic potion, but is instead a necessary tonic for being human, and thus in a roundabout way perhaps magical after all.

To return to the beginning of the story: Thales, the philosopher fallen into the well, is comical, by being so deep in thought that he tumbles into a hole in the ground. But he is also doing something deeply revelatory about the human situation — he is in his thoughts, as he walks without seeing, asking the question, "What is the nature


of reality?" or "What is this strange thing that we call 'the world'?" Likewise, the bibliophile is at times comic, but is, as Ricoeur tells us, also a reflection of something fundamental to the human situation — the need for story, for narrative, as the stuff of human thought.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative." In *On Paul Ricoeur*, edited by David Wood. London: Routledge, 1991, 29.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>5</sup> David Carr, Charles Taylor, and Paul Ricoeur, "Discussion: Ricoeur on Narrative." In *On Paul Ricoeur*, edited by David Wood. London: Routledge, 1991, 162.
- <sup>6</sup> Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 22.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> David Wood, "Introduction: Interpreting Narrative." In *On Paul Ricoeur*, edited by David Wood. London: Routledge, 1991, 11.
- <sup>10</sup> Susan Toth and John Coughlan, eds. *Reading Rooms*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

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