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NARRATIVE INTERPRETATION: PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE STORYTELLING

Steve McGuire

As a visiting artist I gather with students at the end of a workshop to talk about the art each person has made that day. Most often, students talk about their pieces by telling the story of an experience or experiences which originated their art works. During the workshop they identify experiences, places and objects that, for one reason or another, stand out and take up meaningful positions in their lives. They dwell within these experiences and make these, so to speak, true to life. In recent workshops they have done this through the medium of sculpture. But to their sculpture, I have noticed, they give a story. That is, when they talk about their sculpture they give narrative form to the experiences which originated their art works.

There is a unique dialectic between the students' sculpture and the stories they tell about the experiences which originated them. This dialectic can be viewed as one between self and world. Through their narrative students focus on their self in relation to others, supplying the view of the world by which their self identity can emerge. As one student said about his sculpture of a bridge he and his friends used as a diving plank, "If you know anything about me and if you have ever been to this bridge then you know why I made it." Schleiermacher wrote, "Everyone carries a tiny bit of everyone else within himself so that divination is stimulated by comparison with oneself." (Schleiermacher, 7p 146f) Stanley Hauerwas suggested that, from our "culture" and our particular "biographical situation", "we inherit the stories we use to organize our life plan." (Hauerwas, p. 75) Through reflecting upon how we stand in relation to others those questions which lead to self-understanding can be annunciated. Gadamer believed that, "the ultimate ground of all understanding must always be a divinatory act of corresponding genius, the possibility of which depends on a pre-existing possibility between all individualities." (Gadamer, p. 166) The students' narratives of the experiences which originated their art works, represent what Ricoeur suggested is a moment of "refiguration": when the students reconstruct the ordering of their experiences in a world which is manifested in their art works and infer, in the process, possibilities for their lives from it. (Ricoeur, p. 76)

Wendy had made a sculpture of a "night on stage", complete with tiered seats, spotlights ("they're so hot") and audience, including her parents. Pointing to herself in her sculpture, she said,"I'm the one on stage." She added: "It's not always a pleasant experience, but it's always a learning experience for me. I'm a performer at heart. I would like to major in theatre arts in college. Shows that I have done before have been both good and bad, but nevertheless I enjoy the stage. I'll never forget fifth grade. That was when I really got my start in theatre. I started in a community theatre production of **Hansel and Gretel.** I was hooked. Three months later I auditioned for a semi-professional production of **The Music Man.** I have many different memories of that show. Some good. Some bad. Since then I have appeared in shows like **Mame, Come Back Little**

Sheba, another production of **The Music Man**, and several others. The thing that makes all of these shows great is the 'high' you feel when you're on stage. Nothing, no drug, not anything, can compare to the feeling of portraying someone else. Someone who may not have all of the same feelings and experiences that you have. Yet all of these characters are also extensions of me. Like my art is an extension of me." Winquist noted: "Telling stories conjoins the actuality of the past with added possibilities for experience to carry us into a future." (Winquist, p. 5)

If we recognize ourselves in our artwork it is because we recognize a story of our life eminating from it. It seems visual art works can be thought of as possessing stories that demand to be told. When we recover these stories "a story that stands for a person" emerges. (Ibid, p. 75) The story we tell by way of the act of giving narrative form to experience - ordering the actions of our experiences according to their internal connections, what we or someone else did or did not do, their impact and motives - is a "universalizing making." (Ibid, p. 79) Because our narratives are a "universalizing making" other persons can enter into them. But also, students do, by giving narrative form to the experiences which originated their artworks, place themselves in the position of listeners to the story their art work comprises.

In configuring the experiences which originated their artworks, the students meet face to face with those experiences as they were grasped together in their art making. There is obviously a retelling involved in making art.

Through making visual art works we dwell within the world we are a part of. Many contemporary theologians and philsophers, notably Martin Heidegger, point to this "in-dwelling". About art works Heidegger wrote, "To be a work means to set up a world. . . Wherever those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there a world worlds. . . The work as a work sets up a world. (Heidegger, p. 44) And, as Heidegger went on to note, this can only happen through dwelling in the world. "For only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build." (Ibid, p. 160) This in-dwelling when making art is key to the relationship between art work and narrative. In-dwelling suggests that there are potential stories that need to be brought to language. The "building" Heidegger spoke of necessitates, in regards to the students' art works, their spoken narratives of the originating experiences of them.

As an educator I must try to provide for the happening of such "building", "refigurational moments." As Martin Buber expressed, giving students their possibilities in a world is the role of the educator. (Buber, p. 89-91) As an educator I have a responsibility to tell a story of my own and to be as Madeline Grumet suggests, "The reader as well as the writer of it": (Grumet, p. 8) The story of my educating students and my being educated by them. In order for me to be able to handover to students their possibilities in the world, I must give my experiences in narrative form.

Can an educator's story of his or her educating and being educated be an approach for understanding what a student needs to grow? And further, can such an approach - narrative interpretation - be considered a way of researching? These questions appeared to me in my teaching experiences. Obviously, they are intertwined. The goal of research is understanding. I believe the answer to both

is overwhelmingly affirmative. But simply being a way of researching is not grounds enough for using narrative interpretation. Our sense of what it is to be human must necessarily be accounted for in research approaches, both in what we seek to understand and how we go about understanding it.

In the story I tell of the workshop, of students making sense of their lives through their narratives of the experiences that originated their art, I stand as a historian. So when I use the term "narrative interpretation", I am speaking specifically of fictively narrating history.

In fictively narrated history, historical account and imagination combine to proclaim an essence of how persons make sense of their lives. History is selective and must accordingly have a sense of vision that originates with the fullness of experiences of persons in the world - the individual.[1]

That narrative reveals a truth of active individuals in a world is why history is bound to narrative. History cannot maintain its distinctive role in the human sciences without being bound to narrative understanding. (Ricoeur, p. 95) For without its bond to narrative understanding history would lose its power to reveal a truth.

To meet the characteristics of historical knowledge, it was granted that historical explanations were different than those of the natural sciences. This came about because interpretation was found to be a necessary moment of historical knowing and, in this way, had to be accounted for in the method. (Ibid, p. 113) While explanation gave the causual connections between events, the values and meanings of events required interpretation. (Ibid, p. 115) A narrative thesis of history arose out of the potential for intelligibility narrative offered. The narrativist thesis of history recognizes that historical explanation necessarily includes interpretation and judgment. (Ibid, p. 116) Any explanation I give which approaches the uniqueness of the relationship between one student's story and their art work or, say, the differences between one student and another in their narrative, involves my judgment. Simply, to give a sufficient explanation of the relationship between the students' narratives, art work, and other impactful events of the workshop, I must fill in the details. This, necessarily, involves my interpretation of what happened and, too, my judgment.

Explanation in history is a reconstruction: in my narrative of the workshop, the reconstruction of the events and, in this, the students' actions. In order to explain the relationship between the art work students made and their narratives I am required to reconstruct the situation a student was caught up with and acted within. To reconstruct the situation is to give the reasons why that student acted the way he or she did; to give a "rational explanation." (Ibid, p. 128) In turn, the rational explanation I give originates within the student and his or her reasons for doing what they did. In this way, when fictively narrating a workshop, my concern is not simply the motivations for actions, but rather if I am to construct the reality

[1] How this is so in theory is the discussions of Paul Ricoeur in his books **Time And Narrative Volumes I & II** and **The Reality of the Historical Past**, and Hayden White in, notably, **The Tropics of Discourse** and **Metahistory.**

of what happens I must also concern myself with the outcome of actions. I must look to the whole sphere of an action for its reasons for happening. To tell the story of a workshop is to understand the relation between actions, thoughts, and then the direction toward which they are heading. The element of "directedness" within the "followability" of my story emphasizes that its outcome must be proper to what has gone before it. Both story and history comprise putting together human thought and human action in such a way that the future they set in motion reveals itself. The reader or listener of my story is a critical element. For my story to explain itself, further questions must be asked of it. For further questions to be asked, my story must be intelligible. (Ibid, p. 155) Explanation of the relationship between students' art work and their narratives is implicit in my narrative of them by way of my narrative's intelligibility.

Yet while this is so, fictively narrating history is not simply a story. Ricoeur noted that even while history is a configurational activity, history uniquely requires that the historian judge explanations. Even while telling a story of the workshop is to both explain and understand the events, my narrative, because it, so to speak, justifies, makes explanation in my story an object. (Ibid, p. 156) It becomes apparent when I tell my story to an audience of art educators that I am not simply a narrator. I know that things can be explained in other ways. In "retrospection" many constructs are possible.

In trying to identify the relationships between the events of the workshop, I "question back" and, in so doing, reconstruct the reality of what happened. The relationship between art work and narrative will, as the story unfolds, be explained. "Ideally, a story would be self-explanatory." (Ibid, p. 151) But it is only my attention to singular events that allows me to reconstruct. For only through organizing my narrative according to the internal connections of events can my story be intelligible and, in turn, reveal a truth.

To educate ourselves with our students' needs, our understanding of those needs must originate in the fullness of our experiences as educators. Being a source for our teaching necessitates not only bringing about a continuity of our teaching experiences, it also means we must reflect upon the continuity we see in them. We must, as teachers, incorporate our lives into a story. As Madeline Grumet suggested: "for the educator, the telling of individual stories requires that a collective story be told as well." (Grumet, p. 13)

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