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What are narratives good for?

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ABSTRACT

Narratives may be easy to come by, but not everything is worth narrating. What *merits* a narrative? Here, I follow the lead of narratologists and literary theorists, and focus on one particular proposal concerning the elements of a story that make it narrative-worthy. These elements correspond to features of the natural world addressed by the historical sciences, where narratives figure so prominently. What matters is contingency. Narratives are especially good for representing contingency and accounting for contingent outcomes. This will be squared with a common view that narratives leave no room for chance. On the contrary, I will argue, tracing one path through a maze of alternative possibilities, and alluding to those possibilities along the way, is what a narrative does particularly well.

> Natural historians have too often been apologetic – but most emphatically should not be – in supporting a plurality of legitimately scientific modes, including a narrative or historical style.
>
> Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (2002, p. 1333)

> The king died and then the queen died.
>
> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* ([1927] 1954, p. 130)

> So what?
>
> William Labov, *Language in the Inner City* (1972, p. 366)

1. Introduction

Stephen Gould argued that there are important areas of science—he called them "historical"—that do not entirely fit the conventional, nomological mold. These include parts of evolutionary biology, ecology, paleontology, and more. No cause for concern though, he argued. There are, after all, other means of representing and explaining the world. Like narratives.

Gould's proposal has not been received with great enthusiasm (an understatement). Part of the reason may be the vague worry that narratives are too easy to come by. The criteria for what counts as a narrative are so permissive. For example, narratologist Gerald Prince characterizes his subject matter as just "the logically consistent representation of at least two asynchronous events that do not presuppose or imply each other" (2008, p. 19). For some, even this would be overly restrictive, and Prince himself acknowledges that his definition is "both flexible and limiting." Wolf Schmid and Peter Hühn offer an equally minimal, though differently oriented characterization of narratives, namely, as representations of "at least one change of state" (Hühn, 2010, pp. 1–2; Schmid, 2003, p. 19). To which one might object, "Why exclude narratives of the *status quo*?" ("General Franco is still on his deathbed," or as parodied by *Saturday Night Live*, "General Franco is still dead.") Schmid and Hühn nonetheless feel the need to draw a line somewhere. Though their definition, like Prince's, still accommodates Forster's famously unsatisfying story about the king and queen.

There are concerns about the abundant availability of narratives within the narratology literature itself, where the proposed solution has not been to make the criteria more exclusive, but rather to pose and pursue an interestingly different question. That is, rather

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than (just) ask, "What is a narrative?," we should also ponder, "What is a narrative good for?" Narratives *per se* may be easy to come by. But perhaps not everything is "worth narrating" (e.g., Prince, 1988, p. 5; Prince, 2008, p. 23). What *merits* a narrative?

Here, I follow the lead of narratologists and literary theorists in considering this issue. And I focus on one particular proposal concerning the elements of a story that make it narrative-worthy. These correspond to features of the natural world addressed by the historical sciences. In both cases, what matters is contingency, as was so often stressed by Gould.[1] Narratives are especially good for representing contingency and accounting for contingent outcomes.

Of course, as much depends on the meaning of "contingency" as on the meaning of "narrative." As for the former, it has something to do with chanciness. And this will need to be squared with a common view that narratives leave no room for chance. On the contrary, I will argue, tracing one path through a maze of alternative possibilities, and alluding to those possibilities along the way, is what a narrative does particularly well.

2. Two narratives

> When intelligence, therefore, was received, that the interposition of the tribunes in his favour had been utterly rejected, and that they themselves had fled from the city, he immediately sent forward some cohorts, but privately, to prevent any suspicion of his design; and, to keep up appearances, attended at a public spectacle, examined the model of a fencing-school which he proposed to build, and, as usual, sat down to table with a numerous party of his friends. But after sun-set, mules being put to his carriage from a neighbouring mill, he set forward on his journey with all possible privacy, and a small retinue. The lights going out, he lost his way, and wandered about a long time, until at length, by the help of a guide, whom he found towards day-break, he proceeded on foot through some narrow paths, and again reached the road. Coming up with his troops on the banks of the Rubicon, which was the boundary of his province, he halted for a while, and, revolving in his mind the importance of the step he was on the point of taking, he turned to those about him, and said: "We may still retreat; but if we pass this little bridge, nothing is left for us but to fight it out in arms."
>
> While he was thus hesitating, the following incident occurred. A person remarkable for his noble mien and graceful aspect, appeared close at hand, sitting and playing upon a pipe. When, not only the shepherds, but a number of soldiers also flocked from their posts to listen to him, and some trumpeters among them, he snatched a trumpet from one of them, ran to the river with it, and sounding the advance with a piercing blast, crossed to the other side. Upon this, Caesar exclaimed, "Let us go whither the omens of the Gods and the iniquity of our enemies call us. The die is now cast."
>
> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* ([121 AD] 1890, pp. 21–22)

This fairly familiar story does what a narrative does well. But before getting into the abstract analysis of how and why, let us consider another concrete example—not nearly so well-known, and otherwise very different, but also worthy of a narrative. This one is from Darwin's account of the evolution of orchids, in his follow-up to the *Origin*, published just two years later in 1861 (second edition 1877; discussed in greater detail in Beatty, 2004). There he argued that all of the amazingly different orchid flowers are not only variations on the same theme, but also solutions to the same adaptive problem, namely to enlist flying insects in their cross-pollination, and thus avoid inbreeding. Moreover, Darwin believed, all orchids had evolved under virtually the same environmental circumstances, that is, the same range of available pollinators—small flies, large flies, little bees, big bees, and so on. There are many different ways to modify the three petals, three sepals, and other orchid parts to achieve cross-pollination, even given this seemingly limited range of parts and pollinators. The outcome of evolution in any particular case, Darwin argued, depends in large part on which variations happen to arise, and in what order, in that lineage. And famously, according to Darwin, which variations arise in any particular lineage at any point in time is a matter of chance.

An example of orchid evolution that particularly struck him involved the position of the so-called "labellum," which in most fully formed orchid flowers is the lowermost of the three petals. In that position, it often serves as a landing pad for pollinators. But what especially interested Darwin was how the labellum arrives at the bottom of the flower. In most all orchids, the labellum starts out on top and makes its way to the bottom through a 180-degree twisting of the flower's stalk. Darwin reckoned that the position of the labellum in the ancestral orchid had been uppermost, presumably on the grounds that this was also the original position in development, and assuming more generally that the order of development reflects the order of ancestry. He understood the now-typical, lowermost position of the labellum to depend on evolution by natural selection of the more twisted variations that had happened, by chance, to arise.

Darwin was even more intrigued by cases where the labellum had resumed its uppermost position, which in some cases had (supposedly) resulted from the selection of less-and-less twisted variations, leading to flowers that do not twist at all, and in other cases had resulted from the selection of more-and-more twisted variants. Flowers of the latter sort twist a full 360 degrees so that the labellum resumes its starting position (Fig. 1). As Darwin described the situation,

> in many Orchids the [flower stalk] becomes for a period twisted, causing the labellum to assume the position of a lower petal, so that insects can easily visit the flower; but … it might be advantageous to the plant that the labellum should resume its normal position on the upper side of the flower, as is actually the case with Malaxis paludosa, and some species of Catasetum, &c. This change, it is obvious, might be simply effected by the continued selection of varieties which had their [stalks] less and less twisted, but if the plant only afforded variations with the [stalk] more twisted, the same end could be attained by the selection of such variations, until the flower was turned completely on its axis. This seems to have actually occurred with Malaxis paludosa, for the labellum has acquired its present upward position by the [stalk] being twisted twice as much as is usual. (1877, pp. 284–285)

So it had apparently become advantageous for *Malaxis paludosa* and some species of Catasetum to have their labellae uppermost. But due to chance differences in the variations that happened to occur in the two lineages, evolution by natural selection had resulted in very different means of serving this end: a 360-degree twist in the first case, and no twist in the second.

[1] Literary historian and theorist Gary Morson expressly addresses Gould's views of contingency in connection with his own views of narrative worthiness (1994, pp. 3, 13, 245–254).