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The Power of Narratives

Andrea Smorti. *Telling to Understand: the Impact of Narrative on Autobiographical Memory*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. 2020.

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Since the 1980s, Memory Studies has been enriched by a wide range of perspectives that contributed to the multidisciplinary of the field. Disciplines such as neurology, psychology, sociology, literary and cultural studies have provided empirical, theoretical, and critical concepts and insights. However, little attention has been paid to the heterogeneity of approaches that the field can accommodate. In the past few years, there have been calls to bring the different approaches into a productive exchange and a cooperative dialogue. *Telling to Understand: the Impact of Narrative on Autobiographical Memory* engages in this debate by bringing together psychological and narratological approaches to the study of autobiographical memory. This latter is a significant aspect of the book given that Memory Studies have tended to focus more on social and collective memory than individual memory. The author Andrea Smorti's main target in this book is autobiographical narratives and the cognitive processes of remembering.

The major problem that the author is faced with is that narratives are indispensable to achieve temporal continuity and coherence, but, at the same time, can be unreliable given their constructedness, which renders them liable to errors and, therefore, create fallacies and illusions. Smorti, however, puts aside this ambivalent nature of narratives and relocates the matter to his field of expertise—psychology—to investigate the implications of narratives in the psychological well-being of individuals. The book adopts narrative theory as an approach to deal with one's life memories and experiences and to make sense of them. In other words, Smorti makes use of narratives in his psychological experimentations to see how the narrative structuring of memories leads to understanding one's self and others, hence his argument that “humans must constantly build stories and tell them to understand both their own and others' events” (13). In the two parts, Smorti elaborates on how this twofold narrative understanding develops and takes place.

The first part of the book, Narrative Understanding of the Self, is dedicated to the first facet of narrative understanding. It starts with the supposition that narrative understanding of oneself comes from two sources: memory (to speak of autobiographical narrative in its historical sense) and play (from which narratives that have playful, literary, or aesthetic dimensions originate). Smorti's arguments are premised on the inadequacy of the archival thesis dominating the study of autobiographical memory; thus, he turns to and focuses on the variable of language, which serves as a medium between memory and narrative. This is a major breakthrough in the book and a pivotal point of the argument. The fact that language transforms memories into narratives makes the excavation of memory a more complex process rather than a simple, intact restoring operation.

What seems to be the “mysterious jump” from memory to narrative is made transparent by tracing its trajectory: a memory or thought has to pass through the medium of voice, be subject to the physical (phonetics) and cultural (semantic) constraints of language, and be

organized following a narrative structure within which the autobiographical genre presents a model of organization. Therefore, telling a memory is not a simple remembering process, but follows a number of transformations imposed by the prerequisites of diachronicity and cultural rules. Autobiographical narrative, then, makes the individual develop self-understanding thanks to the influence of the social conventions of storytelling.

“From play to Narrative” is another aspect of narrative understanding that Smorti introduces in the book. Here, the author connects play to narrative via the cognitive functions of constancy and variability that the child develops while playing. These two primary functions are responsible for the accumulation of knowledge that, with the acquisition of language, play can develop into stories endowed and supplemented with imagination. The dialectics of constancy and variability, which can function in adult life, basically sets forth norms and deviations, which in turn provide the material for the construction of narratives, given that the typical structure of narratives centers on narrative tensions, problems, and deviations which disturb norms and equilibrium. The playful narrative can take different shapes and be used for various purposes—literary, autobiographical, or legal—all concerned with reordering, repairing, or explaining certain anomalies and inconsistencies.

In this part, Smorti demonstrates how the exchange between cognitive processes and narrative can cooperate in order to help the individual understand events that are, for example, traumatic by structuring them in the form of a story. Moreover, the cognitive skills responsible for building constancies and creating variability also help the individual with any anomaly through creative story structuring and telling. The arguments presented in this part are supported with empirical evidence from neuroscience as well as from Smorti’s own psychological experiments with patients.

The second part of the book, which deals with the narrative understanding of the other, builds on the coordination between systems of reasoning and on models of interpretation to achieve that purpose. Smorti begins this part by investigating the history of writing, or rather the transition from orality to literacy. This transition means an evolution from episodic memory, to mimetic memory, and finally to narrative memory. With the written text, however, many details, pertaining to the context and authorial intention, are lost; hence the need to recollect what is lost. This recollection becomes subject to systems of reasoning which can be either logical/paradigmatic or plausible/syntagmatic.

Despite the rigid boundaries between the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic, Smorti argues that the narrative understanding of stories (autobiographical or fictional) is the result of both logics—the narrative logic. For instance, the fact that a story belongs to a genre is a paradigmatic aspect of it because it disposes the reader’s mind in a certain category/direction while narrative time/diachronicity belongs to the syntagmatic, plausible logic. In addition to this, the narrative understanding of a text makes use of the interpretative act to

decipher its possible meaning(s). In this regard, three ways of interpretation are possible: (a) author-oriented/biographical, (b) text-based/the text itself, and (c) reader-response. It is in the coordination of all the three ways that narrative understanding of the other occurs. The basic assumption here is that the interpretation is a second version of the text, a continuum between the text and interpretation, which extends to the addresser and the addressee.

In the last chapter, Smorti concludes by reflecting on the impacts of the Digital Age and of cyberculture on narrative understanding. A major impact is the gradual disappearance of the text and the dominance of the paratext, the implications of which include the “literal” death of the author (compared to Barthes’ metaphorical Death of the Author) and the spread of indirect interpretations and superficial readings. Therefore, in the Digital Age, the text increasingly loses its value and becomes insignificant. Consequently, when the text loses its value, so does the Self as the autobiographical self is a text itself; moreover, with the rise of social media, individuals develop syndromes, such as “the fear of missing out” (FoMO) and/or the “pathology of recognition” whereby the individual occupies, not the center, but the periphery of Internet networks.

This book is another contribution of Andrea Smorti’s committed research on studies of memory, autobiography, and psychology. A major strength of the book lies in its taking into consideration the impacts of language and narrativization, with both their constraints and benefits, in order to illustrate the dynamic circulation and metamorphosis of memories and thoughts within the cognitive system, therefore giving new insights that are shortcomings of the approach that considers memory as an archive. Equally importantly, the inquisition into the world of play brings to the fore useful concepts that can explain the source of some narrative devices and literary styles. On the other hand, because the book sets the objective of clarifying how narrative understanding occurs, its methodology takes a determinate course of action in order to arrive at the conclusion, and is blind, for example, to the endless meanings and interpretations that narratives can assume. For this reason, readers might find the author’s interpretations to be biased.

All in all, the book successfully delivers the idea that storytelling is an effective way to achieve narrative understanding. Smorti brings memory and narratives to a rich dialogue that contributes a great deal to Memory Studies. The structure of the book makes it easy to follow the arguments, and the author combines theory and practice and draws from prominent figures like Vygostky, Piaget, Jerome Bruner, Jonathan Culler, Roman Jakobson, to name but a few. Thanks to this, the book takes the reader to discover the dynamicity of autobiographical memory as the author makes eloquent references to dynamic aspects, namely language, play, and cyberculture. The book can be of general interest to students of Memory Studies and Psychology as the research provided leans towards cognitive and narrative psychology, but it can serve as resourceful reference for students of literature as well.