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Inventing (a) life: deconstruction and the praxis and poiesis of narrative

Abstract:

Deconstruction often sits awkwardly between the realm of literary studies and criticism, and philosophy proper. This paper explores the contribution that a deconstructive literacy might have for those engaged in writing narrative, as a practice and a product. Taking up Kristeva's reading of Arendt, and the Aristotelian categories of *praxis* and *poiesis*, it will be argued that the act of narrating life amounts to both the actual generation of the life it purports to describe, while also being a praxis in itself, one that need not produce anything, since the very act of engaging in/with it, leaves a traceless trace that itself is 'full of meaning'. Narrative, however, will not rest in either pole of Aristotle's binary structure. For Arendt, Kristeva will remind us, narrative is an activity that is very 'human', where we engender not just *zoe*, mere physiological life, but *bios*, a living that is not colonised by ends alone, and instead finding in itself a value, a fulfilment in its own process. Applied to the activity of story-making (autobiographical or otherwise), and also to pedagogical practice in the academy, this dual potential of narrative (at once to produce and to be an end unto itself) reframes the *Beruf* (calling) of creative writing. Deconstruction, in other words, assists us in appreciating the very ethical consequences of the labour of deciding where and when the story begins and ends, and who the protagonist is. Recalling us to the ontological implications of the thought of *différance*, this paper will attempt to demonstrate how the action of articulating the edges of story can be read as akin to that which turns the featureless flux of time into *bios*, or human life that, according to Arendt, is what goes missing under totalitarianism.

Biographical note:

Antonia Pont recently completed her doctoral studies at the University of Melbourne, with a thesis consisting of a poetic prose work of inaccurate autobiography, and a philosophical dissertation on Derrida and *How to Do Things with Sadness*. She is based mostly in Melbourne, though wonders at times about the appellation neo-nomad and whether it applies to her. She is not, however, very sophisticated in her attitudes to data-storage and doesn't own a smart device, so it probably doesn't. She writes poems that are more like enjambed narratives, and narratives that are a lot like unenjambed poems. She may need to see a therapist to unravel the complexities of this relation to hard returns.

Keywords:

Praxis—Narrative—Deconstruction

The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is of this life, *bios* as distinguished from *zoe*, that Aristotle said that it ‘somehow is a kind of praxis.’ (Quoted by J. Kristeva in *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative*, 8).

Introduction

This conference takes up the opportunity, among others, of welcoming fertile dialogue between the discipline of literary studies and creative writing. In this paper, I will enact to some degree, a thinking and a reframing of a central aspect of creative writing – that is, narrative – via the lens of deconstruction and a renowned pair of Aristotelian categories.

Let us quote Rainer Maria Rilke, from ‘The First Elegy’:

All of the living, though,
make the mistake of drawing too sharp distinctions.
Angels (it’s said) would be often unable to tell
whether they moved among the living or the dead.
The eternal torrent whirls all the ages through either realm
forever, and sounds above their voices in both.

The human, non-angelic realm, in other words, depends on the drawing of distinctions. This is perhaps clear to us in a common-sense way, but deconstruction, which sits mischievously between the fields of literary criticism and philosophy proper, has also trained us in our recognition of binary operations, and the way these constrain, but also engender our worlds. Deconstruction has also drawn our attention to our on-going struggle with the thinking and acknowledging of difference, so much so that this everyday word, at least in the academy, may often carry a distinctly deconstructive inflection.

In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida writes:

Origin of the experience of space and time, this writing of difference, this fabric of the trace, permits the difference between space and time to be articulated, to appear as such, in the unity of an appearance (of a “same” lived out of a “same” body proper [*corps propre*]). [...] It is from the primary possibility of this articulation that one must begin. Difference is articulation. (1997: 65-66)

In the realm of appearance or presentation, things appear to be consistent, as if their fabric were stable, and not the result of the topplings of *différance*. Time, too, emerges from a featureless continuity due to the operation of articulating, whereby the out-of-jointness proclaimed by Shakespeare’s Hamlet emerges as the very thing that makes human life possible at all. Time is, by definition, out of joint. In other words, were time in-joint, it mightn’t be time as we know it.

This deconstructive notion of time (and, as we shall see shortly, life) as an always-already broken-togetherness that functions thanks-to and not despite this quality, counters a more traditional metaphysical approach that would perpetuate the fantasy

of simple or pure presence. That with which Derrida counters (non-dialectically) the notion of presence will be the trace, as that ‘which does not let itself be summed up in the simplicity of a present’ (1997: 66). The trace slips away from an argument with presence. It does not compete. It offers nothing as a provocation to presence’s sovereignty, and yet it is such a provocation. Deconstructive practice introduces a quaver into the foundational categories upon which a traditional metaphysics would build its edifice. This edifice, of course, after deconstruction, remains. Its workings are revealed. It is not destroyed, but its force is altered in a way that can almost, I contend, only be pragmatically observed. Deconstruction, in other words, does. It is a praxis.

Creative Writing: praxis or poiesis

In her reading of *The Human Condition* (1958), Julia Kristeva summarises Arendt’s framing of the Aristotelian binary of *praxis* and *poiesis*:

[Arendt’s] reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics* leads her to distinguish... *poiesis*, an activity of *production*, from *praxis*, an activity of *action*. Arendt alerts us to the internal limitations in the production of works: labour and ‘works’ or ‘products’ ‘reify’ the fluidity of human experience within ‘objects’ which we ‘use’ as ‘means’ with a view to a given ‘end’; the seeds of the reification and utilitarianism to which the human condition succumbs are already within *poiesis* understood this way. (2001: 14)

Poiesis, then, would be marked by having a teleology, an end in view that may be a thing of substance, or at least quantifiable. Wood-working, for example, leads to a produced table, and what matters is the usefulness, the utilitarian value of the table.

Kristeva then goes on to explain *praxis*:

Conceptualized with the notion of *energeia* (actuality) by Aristotle, *praxis* includes activities that are not orientated towards a specific goal (*ateleis*) and leave behind no created work (*par’ autas erga*), but instead ‘are exhausted within an action that is itself full of meaning.’ (2001: 14)

Praxis would actualise itself, as itself, and not necessarily as a means to something else. Its only trace, dare we state it this way, is a relational – rather than a substantial – one. This would be the art of the artist (perhaps Woolf’s writer with a room of her own). It would be the process of placing paint on the canvas, or moving the body around the dance studio, but not in order to produce a work that could sell, nor a video documentation of the choreography. For Arendt, praxis will relate to the life of the polis and to something which she defines as specific to the human: narrative. When, for example, we are not worrying about the publication or otherwise of our papers from this conference, our activities here together over these days, might be considered praxis.

There is a way in which writing (or the making/making of texts) can, as one possible mode for narrative, be analysed using the lens of these two terms. What, in the first instance, would the features or attitude be of a writing that conformed to the notion of poiesis?

It might – hypothetically – involve a writing that was specifically oriented in its production goal, and directed towards an outcome that could be known in advance. For a writing conforming to poiesis, the action (verb) of the writer would mean little aside from its needing to generate the outcome such as the published artefact, fame or royalties, for example, or even (as was the case in U.S. creative writing courses in the 1920s and 30s (Brook 2010)) an improvement in literacy levels.

On the other hand, praxis might be at play in various and unidentified ways in the daily activity of many types of writers. This reminds us of Rilke’s confidence to his young poet that one probably should only write if one absolutely has to (see the first letter of 1954). Such writers, who are compelled to engage in the writing process, are possibly less motivated by the tangible outcome and therefore more aligned with the praxis side of the Arendtian/Aristotelian binary.

It is obvious, however, that there is no pure example of either praxis or poiesis, but that these modes would hold varying degrees of sway in the process of writing, which is both a kind of object-making and an experience in and of itself, as Brenda Walker confided to us in her keynote address at this conference. The lens, however, offered by Aristotle, taken up by Arendt and Kristeva, and reframed by deconstruction, does do a particular work for thinking. This binary-tool can allow an analysis of motivations and subtle differences in approach to be identified and somehow rigorously described.

An overly dominant poiesis approach might, as Arendt seems to suggest, tacitly lead in the direction of totalitarianism, where “men” themselves become tools for outcomes alone, and that no-one’s life, including that of the ‘totalitarian man’, holds any meaning or worth at all. (Kristeva 2001: 4) This is the possible unfolding at the extreme end of poiesis’ spectrum. Writing programs, too, that over-emphasise the aspect of poiesis may become compromised and somehow artistically eviscerated.

Similarly, there would be a point where the emphasis on praxis (on action or the activity itself) becomes unhelpfully hyperbolic, in the academy and beyond. Take the disdainful artist who, fearful of the threat of poiesis contaminating the purity of her process, cannot deign to allow anything to come to fruition in a substantial or saleable form. This, among other factors, may lead to starving artists, the ivory-tower syndrome, or ghettoisation.

Without sliding towards a fundamentalism, a praxis-inflected approach can take the pressure off obsessing about where everything’s going and what is going to come, and focus instead on the fecundity of process, the pleasure (or not) of the activity, the discipline of craft, and perhaps afford a certain “integrity” to the final work itself, which arguably may store traces of this approach in the tangibility of its form.

What is helpful, I would suggest, is that Aristotle’s distinction highlights a grammatical aspect relating to work, making or the creative in general, which is that poiesis operates nominally – that is, in relation to resulting substance, or thingness. Praxis, in contrast, is an approach that forces the verb into view. Rather than solely noticing *what* comes, the emphasis is shifted to the *how* of activity.

Narrative as ‘human’ activity – the *praxis* of inventing the life described

Kristeva will identify in Arendt the idea that the capacity for, and engagement with, story-making is what renders the so-called human, specifically human (2001, 7). There will seem to be, for Arendt, a difference between ‘mere’ *zoe*, and *bios*. The making of the events of (a) life into story, into a biographical entity – through a process of identifying where life (the story) begins and ends – is what will be particular to the category called ‘human’. Kristeva writes:

... the possibility of narrating – grounds human life in what is specific to it, in what is non-animal about it, non-physiological. While implicitly evoking Nietzsche, who sees ‘the will to power’ as a normal desire in life, and also invoking implicitly Heidegger, who steers Nietzsche’s biologism towards the ‘serenity’ of poetic expression, Arendt rehabilitates the *praxis* of the narrative. (2001: 8)

It is uninteresting, for the thrust of the overall argument here, to submit uncritically to Arendt’s apparently ‘natural’ distinction between *bios* and *zoe*. Like the *praxis/poiesis* pair, the positing of such a clear demarcation may serve mostly as a lens. That is to say, with it we recruit a purely theoretical opposition as a frame of reference, but one that nevertheless cannot stand in any static way.

One of the difficult contributions from the deconstructive advent in philosophy might pertain to this issue of how to approach classical binary distinctions, that when placed under pressure fall asunder. Derrida has been clear (see 1997: 13 & 14) that it can’t be a matter of abandoning this legacy, but rather that the task for thinking is to inhabit it carefully, and with an understanding of its ‘hydraulics’ (my term) – that is, an ability to appreciate the practicality of such framings in particular instances, yet also to understand their mechanism at various levels of abstraction. It could be summed up, perhaps, as a kind of playful caution: one that includes and complicates.

So, it is the process of the activity of narration that interests Arendt, it seems. While also speaking of what makes a good story, and so forth, at this juncture in her writing, what is at stake is something that humans do, which for her is ‘non-physiological’, that is, it has no obvious utilitarian or survival-related purpose, apart from the fact that the activity of making-narrative valorises life, in a way that may offset a totalitarian trajectory.

Narrative activity, then, would contribute little (superficially) to the bare ticking over of breathing beings, but it nevertheless allows the beings that engage in it, a particular kind of quality, and one that might be politically desirable. If story matters politically, I would suggest, then one should not dismiss so readily its relevance for the ‘mere *zoe*’ of survival.

Making-Story, in other words, has a force in relation to the between of humans, but not explicitly in terms of their crudest tangible economies, or the human as mere-life. Kristeva points out that between-two is the root for the word interest: *inter-esse*. (2001: 14) If that which, according to Arendt, makes the human specifically-human is this facilitating of a between (in narrative practice) or an *inter-esse*, narrative would seem to intimate itself as something also relevant to the so-called ontological. At this point deconstruction comes to our aid.

Although the term, ‘narrative’ would seem to imply that it is the result of something being narrated, there is a paradox inherent in Kristeva’s reading. In our praxis of telling, we in fact *call into being the very thing purportedly narrated*. When we narrate life, in other words, we invent the life narrated.

Beginnings, endings and characters, or articulated decisions

Kristeva will say that, crucial to narrative practice and human-ness, is the ability to identify when a story begins and ends. Kristeva informs us that Arendt does not make central the cohesion or plot of narrative, so much as:

...firstly to recognize the ‘moment of ending or closure,’ and secondly to ‘identify the agent’ of the story. The art of narrative resides in the ability to condense the action into an exemplary moment, to extract it from the continuous flow of time... (2001: 17)

In the dovetailing of the threads of our discussion up until now, we find something curious emerging. Arendt will place emphasis on the *inter-esse*, on narrative-as-activity, and on the decision of where a ‘story’ begins or ends. Additionally, Derrida, as I read him, implies that *différance* can be understood as a non-originary-originary ‘operation’ that precedes the nominal.

I would like to argue that the basic, structural operation that permits what we identify as story to emerge, has something in common with the very workings of the *différance* of deconstruction. This structural operation – of designating beginnings, endings or protagonists (that is, point-of-view, to some degree) involves the movement of the trace, the marking – if you like – of the edges that permit appearance to appear.

I will only have a love story, for example, if I mark out within the multiplicity of minutiae of days and months, conversations, and the rubrics of bodies and landscapes the kind of ‘cut’ which brings forth that emphasis. The ‘same’ minutiae of detail could let arise a tale of economics, of domesticity, of friendship, and even allow a different protagonist to “appear”.

If this be the case, then if the two structures – of Arendtian Making-Story and Derridean *différance* – are analogously laid alongside one another, and if we take up Arendt’s offering that narrative makes ‘life’ (*bios*) from ‘mere life’ (*zoe*), then to write of a life (which would include speaking, as something included in an expanded notion of writing) would amount simultaneously to making that life – to inventing life, so to speak. And not just one sole life, but many lives, always already – since a single, definitive life is never possible.

Even if English doesn’t distinguish between the fiction of this raw life, or continuous ‘flow of time’ which consequently is eventless, and the ‘life’ that we identify as living, making ‘us’ as subjects or humans appear to ourselves, we seem to be able to almost think this distinction, to know that there may be a qualitative difference between our life and things just rolling onwards. I read Arendt to be suggesting that such a “valuing” praxis of “perceiving-telling-inventing” is what makes the category “human” mean what we widely assume it to mean.

It would seem that humans – and this for Arendt implies the possibility of humanity itself – do something to life in general (*zoe*) but presumably also to their own lives, by embarking on the labour of telling [*le récit*]. Narrative has a certain consequence for this quality, and makes life, or lived experience of various kinds, something else, while also – at once – leaving it the same.

The Show-Don't-Tell truism of the creative writing classroom would seem to validate the fact that the transformative consequences for this mere life may be greater sometimes, the more closely narrative process accompanies the bare and unadorned detail of the former. Toni Morrison will speak of this 'accompanying' (my term) that is narrative practice, not in terms of fact, but in terms of an 'integrity' that leads to what she considers truth, which is the guiding preoccupation of the 'literary archeolog[ist]' (see generally Morrison 1995).

In the case of autobiography, the charge of indulgence is one with which the writer narrative, for example, must regularly contend. It can also be a charge levelled – like a double bind – at Creative Writing programs, in general, viewed as not producing enough commercially, but contrarily, producing too much, that is, not attending sufficiently to a purely intellectual praxis, in the ways generally validated by the academy.

Such accusations function both at the level of poiesis and of praxis.

In terms of the former, if writing is asked to function as a product, then it is asked to produce something, rather than being acknowledged as the a particular doing in and for itself. The narrative-as-product may function due to its entertainment value, its political impact, or its pedagogical capacity.

If we read, however, the labour of creative writing through the lens of praxis, framed as a more generalised form of practice-based work, and one that might be taken up by any story-maker, the action of narrating (as verb) can be framed as a kind of discipline, the products of which might or might not be interesting for a reading public, for historical purposes, or for a specific community, literary or otherwise.

Conclusion

To return to Arendt, the identification of character, framed as being crucial to good story, and the distillation of the 'exemplary moment' (Kristeva 2001: 17) extracted from the flow of time, as a human-acknowledged event, might be both relevant to actual living as well as to the vocational crafting of tales. To understand who we are, what kind of 'life' we are in, and who our loves, friends and enemies might be, demands that we have always-already embarked upon decisions also pertinent to the narrative practitioner. Derrida, in this regards, reminds us of what he calls the 'hyper-ethical sacrifice' in his later work *The Gift of Death*:

What binds me to singularities, to this one or that one, male or female, rather than that one or this one, remains finally unjustifiable (this is Abraham's hyper-ethical sacrifice), as unjustifiable as the infinite sacrifice I make at each moment. These singularities

represent others, a wholly other form of alterity: one other or some other persons, but also places, animals, languages. (1995: 71)

In having been bequeathed this plight of the obligation to sacrifice something for something else, always and into the future (as the very making of ‘future’), it could be said that we each practice the nuts-and-bolts of narrative, always already.

Narration is, for me, an encounter with the impossibility of any foundational totality. To narrate is always already to supplement a life that isn’t whole, to labour impossibly towards making it whole, to giving it conceptually digestible edges. And these efforts always fail, partially, but also succeed in their unendedness. The stories we tell to try to make something of the deferrals and dis-articulations of ‘our experience’ are by definition a kind of gracious failure. It is as if we would attempt to circumscribe our multiplicities, to strangle ourselves with the edges of the known and pre-empted, but that something within writing, within the praxis and mechanism of narrative itself, offers us the impossibility of this as a kind of secular blessing. The circle in Derrida is never closed, contamination is always already there. It might be akin the fermentation of food, the way that the very bacteria that render the food ‘impure’, are what permits it to be digested and to nourish the body at all. Pure food, in this analogy, is pointless food. Pure categories, as deconstruction demonstrates, are lifeless categories.

We narrate life in order to invent it, and to fail continually at inventing it once and for all. There will be no definitive definition of any experience, and this is both infuriating (when what we think we seek is closure and certainty), but it is also what would save us, and allow the future to remain open. It gives us options other than *the worst* (see 1994: 34). Derrida distils for us something about the enduring paradox of telling about the world, our worlds, when, referring to Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*, he quotes: “How goes the world? – It wears, sir, as it grows” (1994: 97).

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