

Seduced by the text: The desire to be deceived in story, memoir and drama

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ABSTRACT

This article grows out of a feeling that, over the past ten years or so, the concept of story has become distinctly too comfortable. Ideas that once seemed crisp and provocative (e.g. "The truth of a story lies in its meaning, not in its accuracy", "We are all storytelling animals", "Stories are repositories of knowledge" etc.) have assumed the standing of unquestioned truths, almost 'facts', in Latour's view. Moreover, I have come to view some of the current 'controversies', notably over performance versus text, as diversions from more problematic aspects of the use of stories in organizational research. The purpose here to reproblematicize the idea of narrative, to recover its recalcitrant and even dangerous qualities once more and point out some consequences of their seductive powers. In particular, I would like to argue that stories can be vehicles of contestation and opposition but also of oppression, easily slipping into hegemonic discourses; furthermore, that they can be vehicles to enlightenment and understanding but also to dissimulation and lying; and finally, that they do not obliterate or deny the existence of facts but allow facts to be re-interpreted and embellished – this makes stories particularly dangerous devices in the hands of image-makers, hoaxers and spin doctors. Stories have recently emerged as criticism-free zones, affording their authors an immunity from many requirements that apply to other narratives and texts. It is time, in my view, to withdraw this immunity. Neither stories, nor experiences are above academic criticism, challenge and contestation.

The study of stories and narratives has been one the most exciting developments in organizational theory over the past fifteen years or so. During this period, it has become clear that stories and narratives assume many distinct forms in organizations and that they can offer valuable insights to researchers into a wide range of organizational phenomena, including culture, politics and learning (Boje, 1995; Boje, 1991a, b, 1994, 2001; Boyce, 1996; Czarniawska, 1997, 1999; Gabriel, 1991a, b, 1995; Martin, 1982; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983; Wilkins, 1978). People use stories and narratives in many different ways: to make sense of their daily experiences, to promote their points of view and neutralize others, to entertain and divert themselves from the rigours of working life, to communicate important messages to the listeners and to deal with the pain and anxiety they experience.

One vital quality that makes stories and narratives both powerful discursive instruments and useful devices in social research is their rather tenuous relation with 'factual reality'. Storytellers have always enjoyed a licence to embroider and embellish their accounts, even at the cost of sacrificing historical accuracy. This is something that most of us acknowledge, both as storytellers and as audiences – why let the facts stand in the way of a 'telling' story? The realization that, far from being an obstacle to their use in social research, this poetic licence enhances their usefulness has been one of the major changes in researchers' attitudes. A story, even if inaccurate and maybe especially if inaccurate, opens windows into an organization's narrative universe, its clashes and contradictions, its fantasies and fictions – in short, into the meaning systems that people in organizations construct, sustain and inhabit.

This article grows out of a feeling that, since its early uses in organizational research, the concept of story has become distinctly too

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comfortable. Ideas that once seemed crisp and provocative (e.g. "The truth of a story lies in its meaning, not in its accuracy", "We are all storytelling animals", "Stories are repositories of knowledge" etc.) have assumed the standing of unquestioned truths, almost 'facts', in Latour's view. Moreover, I have come to view some of the current 'controversies', notably over performance versus text, as diversions from more problematic aspects of the use of stories in organizational research. The purpose here to reproblematicize the idea of narrative, to recover its recalcitrant and even dangerous qualities once more and point out some consequences of their seductive powers. In particular, I would like to temper some of the current enthusiasm with stories displayed by critical researchers, by pointing out that stories can be vehicles of contestation and opposition but also of oppression, easily slipping into hegemonic discourses; furthermore, that they can be vehicles to enlightenment and understanding but also to dissimulation and lying; and finally, that they do not obliterate or deny the existence of facts but allow facts to be re-interpreted and embellished – this makes stories particularly dangerous devices in the hands of image-makers, hoaxers and spin doctors. The article focuses on these seductive qualities of stories, but along the way examines the seductive qualities of certain other types of narrative, namely personal memoirs and drama. It seems to me that in all their impersonations, including their organizational ones, stories must be approached with a certain degree of critical suspicion by researcher.

Consider the following story:

It is said that an ancient Greek painter was challenged by a younger rival to a painting contest. The younger man produced a painting of grapes so realistic that it attracted the attention of nearby birds which mistook them for real. Confident of victory, he invited his rival to reveal his own painting, hiding under a veil. The older man asked him to lift the veil himself, whereupon

the young one realized that the veil was the painting. He, at once acknowledged the superiority of his rival.

This is a story recalled from memory and written down immediately following a jogging session. It is a story that I had heard or read in childhood and it had been stored in some recess of my mind since then. I found this an enjoyable, even a profound story. It seduced me before I had time to finish my jog. Seduction elevates any text and any object above criticism, above interrogation. But in addition to seducing me, the story intrigued me and perplexed me. It seemed to resurface in my consciousness, prompting a number of questions. One line of interrogation is forensic -- note how the story started with "It is said". Who said it? Did this incident actually happen or was it merely an invention? Does this matter at all?

Before we seek to settle these questions, let us interrogate the story psychologically. What were the motives of its chief characters? For the sake of the argument, let us call the older painter Parrhasios and the younger one Zeuxis. Zeuxis painted some grapes trying to make them look real and feeling that he had succeeded brilliantly by deceiving the birds. He did not intend to deceive the birds but the fact that he did offers a measure of his success. Parrhasios, on the other hand, painted a veil. What makes one choose a veil as the subject of a painting? Of course, we can never enter the mind Parrhasios, but we can be sure that the painter of veils, unlike the painter of grapes, never has deception far from his mind. What if he chose to paint the veil with the expressed intention to deceive, indeed to lie. What if the very point of the painting was to deceive?

But has our fascination with the veil already led us to forget the grapes? The grapes in the story, so realistically painted, deceived the birds, but have they deceived us too? Has anyone ever seen birds go for a set of painted grapes or even a perfect photograph of them? Do birds ever attack the numerous mouth-watering images of fruit on advertisers' roadside posters or on the sides of super-market trucks?

Is it plausible then that they went of Zeuxis's painting? Did the author of the story then deceive us with a story whose plausibility is thin? Or did we suspend our disbelief as a condition for understanding and appreciating the story?

And what about me? Am I too in the process of deceiving you, the reader? Did I recall the story from memory as I was jogging, or did I find it by putting a few well chosen words in the search facility of Google (try 'painter, grapes, birds' and you will find a remarkably similar story surface on your computer screen)? And even granting that I recalled the story, did I recall the names of the painters and the other details of the story?

Such questions begin to undermine our confidence in the story being itself a representation of some truth. What if the story itself is deceiving us? Are we perhaps even dumber than those birds which mistook the painted grapes for real by mistaking the story for reality? Furthermore, if the story deceived us so easily, in what ways have we colluded with the deception – just like audiences of a 'magic show' may collude with the wiles of the magician? What makes us so susceptible to such deceptions? Surely the birds had no reason to wish to be deceived by the grapes – but could it be that, when listening to stories, watch a play or observe a work of art, we actively desire to be deceived? Could it be that stories dull our critical intelligence as researchers, even as self-declared critical researchers, creating critique-free zones in today's over-contested narratives spaces? (For a more comprehensive discussion of this story, see Gabriel (2004).)

THE DESIRE TO BE SEDUCED IN DRAMA

The old story of the two painters alerts us to the twin possibilities of seduction and deception, the willing conversion of appearances into realities, the joyful surrender to the veil of the surface. The desire to be seduced and its corollary, the

desire to be deceived, provide the elan vital for Thomas Mann's last and unfinished novel Confessions of Felix Krull Confidence Man. Mann himself was fascinated by the deeper disease concealed by the surface, the disease that afflicts the body and the soul, without which deception would be unnecessary. The veil of deception is never far from his imagery, as Zouzou, his delightfully parvenu character proclaims to the novel's hero:

"Because it is the skin [**surface**] that all of you have in mind when you say love, the bare skin of the body. ...

However fair and smooth the skin
Stench and corruption lie within.'

'That's a nasty little verse, Zouzou,' I [Felix Krull, the novel's central character] interrupted with a sad, disapproving shake of the head'. ... 'Because this villainous little verse is designed to destroy belief in beauty and form, image and dream, belief in every phenomenon that, because it exists in words, is necessarily appearance and dream. But would become of life and what would become of joy -- without which there can be no life -- if **appearance and the surface world of the senses no longer counted for anything?**' (Mann, 1955, p. 356)

Felix Krull is the ideal-type confidence man, the man for whom art (and life in general) is indeed deception and deception is an art which he raises to undreamt levels of virtuosity, for the sheer hell of it. It is not accidental then that the stage provides the seminal formative experience for Felix Krull, when, as a fourteen year-old, he is taken by his father to see an operetta in Vienna. The show is set in Paris, very much in the style of the Phantom at the Opera, and its leading part "a fascinating rogue and lady-killer, played by that star of the theatre, the well-loved singer Müller-Rosé." (Mann, 1955, p. 24) "What I saw that evening made the strongest impression on me and gave me endless food for thought" (Mann, 1955, p. 23) confesses Felix Krull. What did he see? What he saw was in the first place one of those transcendental theatrical performances that change our lives. Müller-Rosé, in a state of

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grace, performs miracles on stage, dazzling and seducing the audience with his every gesture, his every muscular nuance, his every utterance.

"Müller-Rosé dispensed the joy of life – if that phrase can be used to describe the precious and painful feeling, compounded of envy, yearning, hope, and love, that the sight of beauty and lighthearted perfection kindles in the souls of people. The audience in the orchestra was made up of middle-class citizens and their wives, clerks, one-year servicemen, and girls in blouses; and despite the rapture of my own sensations I had the presence of mind and curiosity enough to look about me and interpret their feelings. The expression on their faces was both silly and blissful. They were wrapped in self-forgetful absorption, a smile played about their lips, sweeter and more lively in the little shopgirls, more brooding and thoughtful in the grown-up women, while the faces of men expressed the benevolent admiration which plain fathers feel in the presence of sons who have exceeded them and realized the dreams of their youth." (Mann, 1955, p. 26)

Later, young Felix Krull realizes the significance of these expressions, when he visits his idol, the great Müller-Rosé, in his dressing room. "I shall never forget the disgusting sight that met my boyish eyes," (Mann, 1955, p. 28) he exclaims. The sight was that of the great and dazzling Müller-Rosé, stripped of his clothes, his wig, and his artistic props, an aging, smelling, sweating man, whose body was covered in suppurating, red-rimmed pustules, with an uncontrollable nervous twitch in the very eye that had glinted so magically only a few minutes earlier.

"This, then -- such was the tenor of my thoughts -- this grease smeared and pimply individual [Müller-Rosé] is the charmer at whom the twilight crowd was just now gazing so soulfully! This repulsive worm is the reality of the glorious butterfly in whom those deluded spectators believed they were beholding the realization of their own

secret dreams of beauty, grace, and perfection! ... But the grown-up people in the audience, who on the whole must know about life, and who yet were so frightfully eager to be deceived, must then not have been aware of the **deception**? Or privately not considered it one? ...

What unanimity in agreeing to let oneself be deceived! Restrain your disgust and consider that, in full knowledge and realization of his frightful pustules, he was yet able -- with the help of greasepaint, lighting, music, and distance -- to move before his audience with such assurance as to make them see in him their hearts' ideal and thereby to enliven them and edify them infinitely." (Mann, 1955, p. 29-30)

The audience's desire to be deceived, to be transported into magical realms of gleaming surfaces, to imagine itself loved and cared for by their idol, is matched by the artist's desire to transfigure himself into a 'glorious butterfly'. Far from art imitating life, it is life that imitates art, argued Oscar Wilde, another meticulous observer of veils. In a little-known but delightful essay called "The decay of lying", he maintains that:

"Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a **veil**, rather than a mirror. She has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses. She makes and unmakes many worlds, and can draw the moon from heaven with a scarlet thread. Hers are the 'forms more real than living man' and hers the great archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished **copies**." (Wilde, 1889/1905, p. 9)

For Wilde, lying and deceiving are the essence of creative art, "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art", he argues (Wilde, 1889/1905, p. 17). It is through lying that the painter, the dramatist, the poet, the story-teller make us see the world with new eyes, enable us to observe things that had not existed earlier, so that not only life but nature too imitate art rather than the other way

round. Ever since the impressionists started to paint brown fogs, people started to observe the brown fogs over London, and even more audaciously, ever since Sophocles created Oedipus, relations between young boys and their mothers lost something of their innocence. For Oscar Wilde, the veil deceives not because, like the one painted by Parrhasios, it is very life-like, but quite the opposite, because it is pure artifice, pure invention. If the veil entrances us, if it paralyses our critical faculties, it is because of its ability to speak to our desire.

Oscar Wilde, a true modern, however, is alarmed that art is losing its ability to lie; even more, it is losing the desire, the will to deceive, and people are losing their desire to be deceived by the artist. Why? Because of the arrival of modernity's bludgeoning champion and declared enemy of art, artifice and deception, the killer of romance, desire and magic. Enter the fact. Under the "monstrous worship of facts" (p. 3), he argues, artists have lost the ability to lie and hence to create art and we have lost interest in stories, surfaces and deceptions. Instead we look for unshakeable scientific certainties, puncturing any artist's attempt to depart from facts with the killer question "It can't be true. It never happened."

FACTS, FICTIONS AND STORIES

Oscar Wilde, like many other moderns, saw the future as belonging to information, facts, scientific theories, cold and clinical precision, amounting to a real disenchantment of the world. Yet, as we now know, this was not what happened. Far from facts swamping art, drama and poetry, a truce was declared. It would be fair to view what we call today 'a story' as the product of this truce, but also the condition upon which the truce was founded. This is the story that is explicitly not 'just fiction' or 'just invention' – it is not like a Grimm brothers fairy tale nor indeed like the numerous jokes we tell and hear today, Instead it is a story that preserves the memory of a factual occurrence, something that happened or at

least is believed to have happened. Such stories have assumed considerable importance in our culture — they fill the pages of newspapers, are indispensable in most television broadcasts, and are constantly swapped by individuals in their daily lives. They are also the main ingredient of literary biographies and literary memoirs. Such stories, in and out of organizations, are privileged among other discursive devices by a unique combination of two qualities, which single them -- those of having a plot at the same time as claiming to represent reality. Stories purport to relate to facts that happened, but also discover in these facts a plot or a meaning, by claiming that facts do not merely happen but that they happen in accordance with the requirements of a plot. In short, stories represent poetic elaborations of narrative material, aiming to communicate facts as experience, not facts as information (Benjamin, 1968). This accords the storyteller a unique narrative privilege, poetic licence, that enables him/her to maintain an allegiance to the effectiveness of the story, even as he/she claims to be representing the truth.

NARRATIVE CONTRACTS

Poetic licence is a vital feature of the storyteller's unique voice; it forms part of a psychological contract between the storyteller and his/her audience, that allows a storyteller to twist the material for effect, to exaggerate, to omit, to draw connections where none are apparent, to silence events that interfere with the storyline, to embellish, to elaborate, to display emotion, to comment, to interpret, even as s/he claims to be representing reality. All of these poetic interventions are justified in the name of experience. I shall refer to this psychological contract as a narrative contract. Different types of narrative, such as historical accounts, chronicles, jokes, myths, film, novel and opera, involve different types of narrative contracts between authors and their audiences or readers. In this presentation, I shall focus mostly on the narrative contract between storyteller and listener, and, later, between memoir-writer and reader.

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Poetic licence enables the storyteller to buy the audience's suspension of critical judgement in exchange for pulling off a story which is at once meaningful and verisimilar. The story is a poetic elaboration on events, one that accords with the needs of the teller and the audience, and one that requires considerable ingenuity on the part of the narrator. Storytellers must walk a tricky tightrope across two potentially undermining questions – the "So what?" question and the "Did it really?" question. The "So what?" question indicates that the plot is failing to carry meaning, while the "Did it really?" indicates that the plot fails to carry verisimilitude. Treading this tightrope between two questions which threaten the narrative contract is one feature that sets the storyteller apart from narrators of other narratives, such chronicles, reports, myths, and films.

Such moulding of events allows the storyteller considerable latitude in constructing plots and deploying poetic tropes in creating a narrative (Gabriel, 2000). Does this amount to deception or indeed lying? Undoubtedly, if the criterion of truth is accuracy of reporting. If, however, the criterion of truth, is something different, then it may be that distortions, omissions and exaggerations serve a deeper purpose. What may such a deeper truth be? One answer often given to this question is that poetic licence and all the falsifications that it justifies aim at generating a deeper truth, one which gives us greater insight into a situation than the literal truth. One of the 'characters' who arrive uninvited on the stage of Pirandello's Six characters in search of an author, a character in the sense that he is not a person, not even an actor pretending to be a person, but an actor pretending to be a character without a play, claims to be "more alive than those people who breathe and wear clothes: beings less real perhaps, but truer!" (Pirandello, 2001, p. 12) The same character expresses very vividly the idea that the real may be the enemy of the true:

"Excuse me, but why would you want to ruin, in the name of a commonplace sense of truth, this miracle of reality that is born, evoked, attracted and formed by the stage itself and which has more right to live here than all of you, because it is much truer than all of you. (Pirandello, 2001, p. 39)

We rediscover here the argument put first put forward by Aristotle in his opposition to Plato, who as is well known dismissed most of drama, poetry and art on the grounds that it represented a pale imitation of a pale imitation of the true world of ideas, and yet capable of stirring up irrational passions and uncontrollable emotions. The counter-argument offered by Aristotle (1963), claims that reality as represented by the work of art can more true and more profound than that represented by the historian or the chronicler -- instead of imitating mere superficial appearance, it represents the essence, the general. A literal untruth, according to this view, may be closer to the true nature of things than a literal truth which remains at the superficial and the mundane. Where literal representation accurately imitates the veil, art and poetry (including storytelling) reaches out towards what is hidden from sight, the enduring. It thus reveals a deeper truth, a truth that pertains to the general rather than the specific. Seen in this light, Zeuxis by actually reproducing the image of grapes may have failed to convey a deeper truth about them.

To the charge that the storyteller deceives and lies, we have counterposed two arguments. First, Thomas Mann's and Oscar Wilde's view that seduction, the promise of pleasure, actual or imagined, is what art is all about, that this is what the audience desire and what they actively collude in. "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" (Wilde, 1889/1905, p. 17). To this, Pirandello adds the Aristotelian argument that through distortion and poetic licence, the artist reaches for a deeper truth, one quite distinct from the ephemeral, superficial 'realities' we experience in our busy, partial, fragmented lives. The two arguments come together in the formula "the truth of the story lies not in its accuracy, but in its meaning",

whether the meaning reaches for a deeper insight or is one that gives us pleasure.

TRUTHS AND UNTRUTHS IN MEMOIR

I have long found this view that the truth of a story lies in its meaning rather than in its accuracy compelling. I have now developed serious doubts and have come to regard it as a comforting but inadequate rhetorical gesture where proper argument is called for. Could it be that a story deceives us precisely because its meaning rings true? Could it be that the more authentic a story seems, the more reason we have to approach it with caution? This would seem to be the case with two recent imbroglions involving memoirs, par excellence the literary genre that voices experience. Both achieved great success by combining the qualities of authenticity and verisimilitude that marked them as expressions of people who had experienced extraordinary events. In 1, Rigoberta Menchú (Menchú & Burgos-Debray, 1984), a Guatemalan Indian woman (later honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize) painted a torrid account of the brutality inflicted on her family and her village by wealthy land-owners and the government in trying to drive them off their land. Subsequently, David Stoll (Stoll, 1999), an American anthropologist, sympathetic to the plight of Guatemalan Indians, challenged substantial parts of Menchú's narrative. With the help of interviews with numerous villagers, Stoll offered convincing evidence (both narrative and factual) that some of the reported atrocities had not actually happened to Menchú's own family and that many of her claims were inaccurate (not least her claim to have been illiterate or that her father was a landless peasant). On the basis of this evidence, Stoll challenged Menchú's contention that the Mayan Indians had been enthusiastic recruits by the focista guerrillas. Instead he makes a very convincing argument that they were caught between two armies, both of which bullied and brutalized them. Even more devastating was the discovery that Fragments: Memories of a wartime childhood, an award-winning

Holocaust memoir written by Binjamin Wilkomirski (Wilkomirski, 1996), was a fake, its author being neither a Jew nor a Holocaust survivor (Maechler, 2001; Peskin, 2000; Suleiman, 2000). Both of these memoirs represent unspeakable suffering told by the presumed victims and generate powerful emotions in the reader – compassion for the victims as well as admiration for their courage, outrage against the oppressor. However, when we learn that the events could not have taken place as told, we feel that the authors have abused our trust, exceeding the limits of poetic licence to present fictions as facts.

Some have defended Menchú and Wilkomirski on similar grounds. Israel Gutman, for example, the director of the revered Yad Vashem and a Holocaust survivor, defended Wilkomirski on the grounds that "Wilkomirski has written a story which he has experienced deeply; that's for sure. ... He is not a fake. He is someone who lives this story very deeply in his soul. The pain is authentic" (Finkelstein, 2000). Others have argued that Menchú and Wilkomirski speak not just for themselves but with a collective voice, on behalf of a whole class of disempowered and silenced victims. "If you take each of the events (Wilkomirski) describes, they seem to be the sum of experience of all survivors" (Maechler, 2001). Some indeed have seen this as a perfectly legitimate defence, refusing to acknowledge any difference between factual truth and a presumed symbolic truth (Binford, 2001; Gledhill, 2001). The mere contestation of testimonies like Menchú's and Wilkomirski's, according to such defendants, amounts to a denial of every survivor's experience, a virtual blasphemy. "I was there, not you", exclaimed Wilkomirski to his detractors, implying that no historical research, not even by distinguished scholars like Raoul Hilberg and Yehuda Bauer, could cast any doubt on his testimony.

In spite of attempts to defend the authenticity of the voice of experience (with all its inexactitudes, artifices and partialities), it seems to me incontestable that incidents like the above (and numerous less well-publicised others) alert us to the possibility grave breaches

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of the psychological contract between author and reader. In each case, knowingly or unknowingly, the authors have exceeded the prerogatives of poetic licence and ventured into the field of misrepresentation. If we hesitate to refer to Menchú and Wilkomirski as hoaxers, it is because their deception is, by all accounts, a self-deception as much as a deception of others. Yet, their narrative acquires a different hue, once certain facts about them have come to light. For many, the fundamental credibility of such narratives has been broken. Verisimilitude has given way to dissimulation. The narrator is no longer a creditable one and having proven untrustworthy once, the narrator remains so for ever – his/her narrative damaged beyond repair. This in itself generates a new type of literary narrative, the literary expose, which has emerged as the antithesis of the memoir, establishing its own psychological contracts between authors and their audiences. Others may take a less extreme view – they may, for instance, seek to understand why a very strong identification with the experience of someone else may come to be felt as a self-experience.

THE STORYTELLER'S AUTHORITY

What is true of literary memoirs is also true of stories. We can no longer believe that the "truth of stories lies in their meaning, not in their accuracy", since the meaning of stories is radically different, depending on whether the facts reported were experienced at first hand or not. The trauma experienced by individuals like Wilkomirski may be real, but the meaning of the trauma is different, depending on whether they actually experienced the brutality at first hand or whether they sought to recreate it by imagining it. The argument here is identical to the issue that has long made psychoanalysis a target to criticism, namely that what matters is the experience of trauma, not whether the events causing the trauma actually happened or not (See (Crews, 1995; Forrester, 1997; Gabriel, 1999). While the experience of trauma may be very similar in the cases of individuals who were brutalized by their

parents and those who imagined themselves brutalized by their parents, I would contend that the meaning of the trauma is very different.

What we learn from the Wilkomirski and Menchú affairs is that once the facts have been successfully challenged the credibility of the storyteller has been corrupted and the narrative contract lies in tatters. To the two questions feared by every storyteller "So what?" and "Did it really happen?" we must now add a third one, "Who are you to speak with authority?" Once the authority of personal eye-witness experience has been supplanted, the story becomes absorbed in a new narrative, a narrative of deceit, delusion or manipulation. Poetic licence then must be seen as part of a very complex contract between storyteller and audience which entails the granting of the audience of attention, a temporary suspension of disbelief, a temporary curbing of criticism and inquiry, in exchange for delivering a narrative which makes sense (verisimilitude), yields pleasure or consolation (entertainment or catharsis), but sustains numerous hidden assumptions about legitimate and non-legitimate forms of representation. For a storyteller to say "I witnessed it with my own eyes" may be legitimate distortion for effect in some instances or entirely fraudulent in others. Poetic truth, therefore, becomes a product of this narrative contract, which continuously defines legitimate and non-legitimate deviations from the facts, legitimate and non-legitimate forms of representation. (Veyne 1988). Regimes of truth can then be seen as the products of the contract, which is subject to regular renegotiation.

STORIES, NARRATIVES AND THE RISE OF EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF AUTHORITATIVE KNOWLEDGE

Twenty years ago, it was not uncommon for researchers to complain that narratives and stories were not taken seriously in organizational or more generally in social research. One still hears such complaints though they are far less justified. The climate of opinion has changed. While some research on organizations has remained indifferent to them,

scholars have increasingly turned to narratives and stories for a wide range of organizational studies, including strategy, power and politics, emotion and rationality, ethics and morality, management learning and practice, aesthetics and identity as well as the more predictable ones such as sense-making, communication and culture. As was suggested earlier, much of this work has challenged the standard platform of organizational theory and has sought to reconceptualized organizations as narrative spaces, where discourse is, if not hegemonic and constituting, at least constitutive of what organizations stand for.

Numerous benefits have accrued. We have now become infinitely more alert to the role of language in shaping perceptions and understanding, in discursive forms of control which operate in a subtle and often invisible manner as well as discursive forms of opposition and contestation. We have been able to observe and study emotions and fantasies operating in organizations and note that far, from being extra add-ons, they are vital in many aspects of organizational life. We have realized that much knowledge and information in organizations is disseminated and transformed through narrative processes. Our understanding of leadership and management has turned increasingly on the discursive resources deployed, which are every bit as important as material and human resources. Numerous aspects of organizational functioning which were either invisible or opaque have gradually come into view. All this is to the good.

A few years ago, during what could be referred to as the high-noon of post-modern scholarship if not of post-modernity, there was a tendency to celebrate the plasticity of facts and their ability to accommodate a virtual infinity of interpretations and symbolic constructions. Baudrillard's mischievous proclamation of the 1991 Gulf War as a virtual war, conducted on television monitors for the benefit of television viewers could be seen as a turning point in post-modern denial of the facticity of the material world. Following the events of 11

September 2001, I have encountered few social scientists willing to argue for the non-existence or irrelevance of facts or celebrating the infinity of interpretations and symbolic constructions. Instead, there is a re-awakening to the recalcitrance of facts. Thousands of people dying, whether in New York, Afghanistan or Africa, are no virtual deaths, irrespective of whether the dead are symbolically constructed as victims, martyrs, heroes or collateral damage. Facts are recalcitrant – they cannot be modified at will, although they may be contested, interpreted or explained. It is a fact that Wilkomirski was not a concentration camp inmate, just as it is a fact that Rigoberta did not witness the execution-by-burning of one of her brothers, even if both of these individuals insist that they 'experienced' these events with the total conviction.

If the facticity of facts cannot be denied, the ability of people to 'experience' them in many and diverse ways can also not be denied. It is to the standing of experience as a source of authoritative knowledge that we shall now turn.

WHO CAN SPEAK WITH AUTHORITY? WHO CAN SPEAK WITH AUTHORITY ON BEHALF OF ANOTHER PERSON OR A GROUP?

Over centuries of human development, various sources of authority were proffered. The authority of the prophet with his or her personal line to the divine, the authority of tradition which Burke sought to reclaim, the authority of the artist, the intellectual or the outsider who can speak his or her mind with parrhesia. Modernity undoubtedly elevated the authority of the expert, the specialist, the scientist above others, though in late modernity, with the rise of the mass media, the pundit, may be seen as the scientist's brother and popularizer. Yet, our earlier discussion suggests that in late modernity, the authority of specialist expertise, the core feature of Plato's political philosophy, is certainly facing a challenge from the authority of experience, the person who lived and witnessed events at first hand. It will not have escaped the reader's attention that this is especially so when the experience is one of suffering and

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oppression; articulating such an experience enables the subject to discover a voice, akin to the confessional, that allows him/her to turn shame and sorrow into defiance and pride -- the acknowledgement victimhood becomes a celebration of survival.

We owe to Foucault the assertive linkage of knowledge and power, knowledge not merely being a tool or an instrument of power but being enmeshed with it. What is defined as knowledge is inextricably linked to the operation of power relations in both an oppressive and an exploitative fashion. Foucault also alerted us to a type of discourse, the confessional discourse, whose power agenda is not merely the humiliation or purification of the subject, but the definition of a domain of experience as a domain of surveillance and control:

"The confessional is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual which unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile. ... A ritual which exonerates, redeems and purifies him." (Foucault, 1978) p. 61.

EXPERIENCE AS THE BASIS OF AUTHORITY

More recently, we have witnessed the emergence of a different type of confessional discourse, the discourse that seeks to inoculate experience from criticism, safeguarding it from the assault of objectivity, the fact and the scientist. "Thou shalt not deny my experience; thou shalt not silence my voice!" This approach asserts the primacy of experience over other ways of establishing truth, and in the view of Eagleton (1996, p. 67) is "one of the commonest forms of postmodernist dogma, ... the intuitive appeal to 'experience', which is absolute because it

cannot be gainsaid." A result of this has been an argument, implicit or explicit, that only he or she who has lived through a certain experience can speak authoritatively about it – thus, only black people can speak authoritatively about race, only women about gender minoritisation, only gay people about sexual marginalization, and only black women about the combined effects of racism and sexism. In this way, in a generally contested environment where most fragments of discourse are criticised, undermined and subverted, stories of personal experience offer a shelter from criticism, an oasis of trust, an island of tranquility, where a person can speak with uncontested authority and expect, if not being respected, at the very least being believed.

Why is personal experience coming to be privileged as a source of knowledge? It would seem that, in late modernity, science is undergoing a decline in authority not unlike that experienced by religion and tradition as sources of knowledge in earlier times. Science has undoubtedly been guilty of long disregarding the voice of personal experience. In fields as diverse as medicine, architecture, history, engineering, to say nothing of the social and psychological sciences, the voice of experience was lost in the midst of the authoritative proclamations of the experts. This is changing now. It may be more broadly connected with what has been described as a therapeutic culture, or even the 'Oprahization' of culture, i.e. the increasing hegemony of an uncontested confessional discourse which enables the victim to become a survivor through the magic of finding a voice. When the knowledge of experts is routinely devalued (and often for excellent reasons), knowledge from introspection, divination or faith are virtually dismissed, and facts become infinitely accommodating of diverse interpretations and spin, we are left with knowledge and truth from authentic personal experience, and the different voices that it takes (art, story, memoir, reminiscence) which assumes pride of place. Far from storytelling then being overwhelmed by other scientific narratives and texts as some theorists of modernity imagined (Benedict, 1931; Benjamin, 1968), storytelling enables people to discover a

voice through which they can validate their experience, communicate it, debate it and share it with other people. It is as fellow-sufferers and fellow-survivors that people can now speak with authority on behalf of their fellow people, a substantial reversal from the lofty, if arrogant humanism and universalism of science. How can a man understand the experience of a woman, let alone speak, as Tolstoy, Ibsen or Freud presumed to do, on behalf of women?

The authority of experience as a source of knowledge should not be seen as a unique invention of late modernity. What is novel to the current elevation of experience as a source of knowledge is precisely the experience of suffering and victimization. It is in this regard that experience has gained over the knowledge of the detached and objective expert. People suffering from asthma, tinnitus or a whole reange of 'syndromes' are as likely to seek recourse to support groups of fellow sufferers than to the authority of the expert. Even when the authority of the expert is sought, his/her prescriptions, medications and interventions are likely to be put through the filter of experience.

Our discussion suggests that if science can no longer be trusted to speak on behalf of people and groups to whose voices it is deaf, neither can the voice of experience be elevated to unquestioned and unquestionable authority. As Moore and Muller (Moore & Muller, 1999) have argued

"The reduction of knowledge to the single plane of experience through the rejection of 'depth analysis' and its epistemology (that allows for and requires a separate and autonomous non-mundane language of theory) produces differences of identity alone, but differences that are, in essence, all the same. The postmodern proclamation that there is only 'surface' echoes the earlier phenomenological claim that science is simply another species of commonsense -- an everyday accomplishment of members of the science community or form

of life. ... The world is viewed [as] a patchwork of incommensurable and exclusive voices or standpoints. Through the process of subdivision, increasingly more particularized identity categories come into being, each claiming the unique specificity of its distinctive experience and the knowledge authorized by it" (p. 199).

CONCLUSION

Where does this leave us? Undoubtedly, experience as a source of authoritative knowledge is here to stay. There is much to learn from direct experience and science can no longer disregard it or take automatic precedence. Equally, however, knowledge from experience cannot be accepted without interrogation, verification and criticism. While Descartes' rationalism has lost much of its appeal in our time, we would do well to remember his warning about the "deceiver, supremely powerful, supremely intelligent who purposely always deceives me" (Meditation 2) and approach experience with a healthy dose of scepticism. Our experience can often deceive us, and, in our self-deception, may deploy it to deceive others. Desire, whose whims can lead us to passionate knowledge (Gherardi), can just as easily surface as wishful thinking and self-deceitful misknowledge.

Instead of accepting all voices of experience as equally valid and equally worthy of attention, I would argue that it is the job of researchers to interrogate experiences, seeking to examine not only their origins, but also those blind spots, illusions and self-deceptions that crucially and legitimately make them up. Far from being an unqualified source of knowledge, experience must be treated with the same scepticism and suspicion with which we approach all other sources of authoritative knowledge. Joining the postmodern choirs or ever smaller voices does little credit to academic research. Disentangling these voices, understanding them, comparing them, privileging those which deserve to be privileged and silencing those that deserve to be silenced, questioning them, testing them and qualifying them – these seem to me to essential judging qualities that mark research into

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storytelling and narratives as something different from the acts of storytelling and narration themselves. Deception, blind-spots, wishful thinking, the desire to please or to manipulate an audience, lapses of memory, confusion, and other factors may help mould a story or a narrative. It is the researcher's task not merely to celebrate the story or the narrative but to seek to use it as a vehicle for accessing deeper truths than the truths of undigested personal experience.

For us, as researchers of organizations, engaging with the an organizational story means engaging with ourselves, questioning ourselves as we experience the narrative, and acknowledging our desire to be tempted, to be seduced and even to be deceived. Engaging with the story also means engaging with the storyteller, his/her motives, fantasies and desires. Finally, it means not losing sight of certain facts, contestable, problematic, sometimes unknowable and often unknown, upon which the meaning of a story vitally depends. Stories, personal or otherwise, no less than other discursive devices must remain part of a contested and contestable environment and cannot be believed on account of the authority of experience.

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