

**Victoria University**

**Athina Bakirtzidis**

## **Honouring narrative truth**

### Abstract:

If someone says or writes something about themselves or someone, is it verifiable? The idea of truth when dealing with narratives is problematic, because the information could be the truth in the narrator's opinion. However, it may in fact not be true according to independently recorded or popularly held views. In this way, narrators can be considered unreliable. So, if a narrator can be unreliable, then what aspect of their narrative is of value? Personal narratives could still be used as historical evidence. Ricks (2015) argues narratives are about meaning, not truth, and that narrative is closely tied to identity and the actions which follow. He also asserts that narratives do not rely on truth for their success but rather on impact. The most successful narratives are the ones which are most influential. This paper explores the dichotomy between truth and meaning in personal narratives.

### Biographical note:

Athina is a PhD student at Victoria University Melbourne researching memoir, oral history and narrative.

### Key words:

Truth and meaning – memoir – narrative – identity

My relatives in Greece don't want to remember the dark years of the Civil War, but my parents and I do. Not particularly just the Civil War but all of our shared history. We don't have a 'no go' zone. Perhaps the distance of time and geography have made us reminisce about the past, in order to reconnect. Living in the diaspora means we have everything we need, except the family connections we crave. Being Greek in Australia is different to being Greek in Greece. It requires some effort to keep living up to the elusive ideal of Greekness, to bake the Easter and Christmas breads, to celebrate correctly by remembering traditions and fitting them into our Australian way of life. Yet when we return to Greece it becomes harder and harder to slip back into the old groove. People pass away, move away, the financial crisis has changed the way my relatives live, buildings crumble in disrepair. Each time we visit we must reinvent ourselves anew. And part of this process is remembering the past and reconnecting with our place in history. It is through narratives that 'human existence is rendered meaningful' (Polkinghorne 1988: 11).

Some people do not want to engage in remembering and some do. If assimilating more completely in the diaspora takes away the need for remembering, it could signify those who want to remember are not as fully assimilated, and by remembering they identify ethnically. McGratten, a lecturer in political and cultural studies, claims that 'received wisdoms about the past colour attitudes and beliefs in the present' and that 'violent pasts may adversely affect younger generations who did not experience conflict directly' (2012: 8). The need to pass on memories about our past, our history and ancestry is very important in the diaspora. However, transmission of memories through narrative also facilitate the transmission of intergenerational trauma.

This is illustrated by David Rieff, writer and policy analyst, author of *In Praise of Forgetting* (2016), who explains that forgetting does an injustice to the past and remembering does an injustice to the present. Remembering and narrating the past through personal ideologies and biases passes on old wounds. This could be seen as a kind of theft or appropriation of another's memories or experiences so that the next generation can make meaning of their lives. Rieff adds 'historical remembrance is generally considered valuable insofar as it is of service to society' (2016: 26). He questions the validity of holding onto some memories which may bring about conflict and disharmony again. Peace is often precarious and there are times in history, such as the current financial crisis in Greece, when some memories are best left in the past. Recently demonstrations by Greeks to commemorate the 1973 student uprising in Athens which led to bloodshed, again brought about unrest and conflict between the protesters and police. Stamatis Giannisis, Euronews reporter explains 'it has become something of a tradition to turn the commemoration of the 1973 student uprising into a protest against the policies of the government of the day' (2016). Again, this is a type of stealing, of past memories, or historical events to make a point today. This supports Rieff's argument that memory can be used as propaganda or to be of service to society. But what of individual memory? If collective memory can be reconstructed or deformed to serve the present, does individual memory undergo a similar transformation?

Truth and meaning in narratives is not necessarily the same. Truth can be manipulated to the service of meaning. Vivian Gornick, memoirist and critic postulates that writer's often use surrogate voices to deal with issues which are unpleasant, embarrassing, or anti-social. However, she clarifies that 'the persona in a non-fiction narrative is an unsurrogated one. Here the writer must identify openly with those very same defences and embarrassments that

the novelist or poet is once removed from' (2001: 7). If memoir includes the idiosyncrasies, weaknesses and fallability of the subject, not just their strengths and successes, then it becomes very powerful and engaging writing. Gornick goes further to state initially, 'instead of analysing my subject, I merged with my subject' (2001:12). Merging with the subject removes objectivity and clear decision making. Gornick later muses that detachment is a thing to be prized, 'without detachment there can be no story' (2001:12). Detachment allows the writer the space to tell the story instead of being confused by the emotions in the narrative. Identifying too closely with the narrative can bias the writer to create a work that tries to convince the reader to the ideology they are supporting, instead of allowing the truth to speak for itself. To avoid this, I found that I had to place myself in the memoir including my experiences in writing it, to allow the other narratives to speak for themselves. Often the writer has something to say, and using the narratives of others as examples to illustrate some point is tempting but dishonest. If the writer has something to say, then they need to say it themselves through the preface, or a separate part of the memoir.

Truth can be manipulated to the service of meaning, as the Greek demonstrations exemplify. In *the Ethics of Authenticity*, philosopher Charles Taylor explains the moral obligation of being true to oneself, or 'the moral ideal of authenticity' which takes precedence over popular opinion, or the beliefs of others (in Eakin, 2004: 64). Taylor further adds, following Rousseau's theories, 'I am free when I decide for myself what concerns me, rather than being shaped by external influences' (in Eakin, 2004: 64). Paul Eakin, autobiographer and scholar, writes 'I have a responsibility to and for myself ... not to yield utterly to demands from beyond myself to conform to some universal human template...but to realise my own particular way of being human' (in Eakin, 2004: 65).

However Eakin also argues there is a fine line between telling the truth and misrepresenting it in a biased narrative account. 'When life writers fail to tell the truth ... they do more than violate a literary convention governing non-fiction as a genre, they disobey a moral imperative' (2008:3).

My relatives are selective in what they chose to remember. The dark years are taboo, but remembering parents, grandparents and the deceased still occurred. Their voices would trail off once they realised they strayed a little too far into dangerous territory. They used remembering to illustrate a point of difference or explain why they did something a certain way. Just as a writer backs up his research by referencing other writers, my relatives added impact and authenticity to their arguments by using reminiscences from the past. Grandfather did this, grandmother did that, the Left wing committed this crime and the Right that. The past was woven into the present and the present depended on the past. The past again, was used to serve the present.

Rieff, suggests that communities should try to forget the past if it brings up pain of historical wounds and bitterness of historical grievances. He explains that 'societies all but venerate the imperative to remember' and that it has become one of humanity's 'highest moral obligations' (2016). He asks what if this is wrong, even some of the time?

What if collective historical memory, as it is actually employed by communities and nations, has led far too often to war rather than peace, to rancour and resentment rather than reconciliation, and the determination to exact revenge for injuries both real and imagined, rather than to commit to the hard work of forgiveness? (2016)

I agree that in his examples of the Balkan wars in the 1990s, perhaps his point is valid to a large degree due to one sided views and bias, remembering as victims, rather than more wholistically the cause and effect of the conflict. I disagree that is always useful to forget parts of history to protect against intergenerational trauma motivating newer generations into committing crimes against previous aggressors. Memories can also serve as reminders of what went wrong, and if they are forgotten, perhaps the same mistakes can recur. Knowing the story of Noah's Ark has not stopped industrialisation and environmental degradation. Perhaps some things cannot be prevented from recurring.

Selimovic, professor of peace studies and social anthropologist, describes the deep rift between the Serbs and Croats and their conflicting stories and memories of the conflict are 'fractured and contentious' (2015: 231). She describes the three main narratives as being the 'insitutional' narratives of brokered peace, the collective narratives of ethnonationalism formed by entrepreneurs in politics and media and the counter narratives of individuals who are 'less aligned' (2015: 232). She explains that singling out individual perpetrators is supposed to put an end to the demonising and victimisation of whole groups so society can move on and leave the past behind (p 233). Collective narratives try to acknowledge the unity of suffering of both sides, such as 'the tears for a Muslim and Serb child are the same' (p 237).

Phillips, journalist and public commentator, concludes that narratives are affected by other narratives, so the meaning is not static:

When there is some contextual effect, all narratives involved in this connection are warped by the presence of the others, leading to a lens-like phenomenon in which some elements are emphasized or deemphasized, or in the most severe instances may be completely hidden or may not really exist at all as they are no more than virtual images of no substance, established solely by the collective influence of the elements from other surrounding narratives (2013).

Therefore, some narratives which could be seen as the truth at one time, depending on the subsequent information available, may later be seen as untrue. However, the impact of the narrative, the meaning it had needs to be considered more important than how true it was, because it could mobilise action.

Remembering acknowledges the pain of loss and is a way of honouring the dead, those who were victimised or who fought against injustice and sacrificed their lives so there could be peace. By remembering and feeling this pain, it is not in fact encouraging future violence. The people who committed those crimes are long gone and the path to retribution closed. In regards to the Greek Civil War, for reconciliation to occur, both sides were given a voice. Initially this caused outrage to those with opposing views, but the dialogue was established and brought about peace. Scapegoating current populations who are related ethnically to the original aggressors is pointless and misplaced. By doing so you do not right the wrongs done historically, but commit further violence. Remembering and feeling loss and pain teach moral lessons to both the aggressors and the victims on both sides of political parties or nationalities. Of course it is not always possible to prevent other political parties from using historical events and traumatic memories to mobilise minorities to follow their ideologies or believe their narratives. The way these memories are narrated is more contentious than remembering past events. It is the narratives themselves not the memories which could be dangerous.

Both Rieff and Ricks, military journalist and commentator, draw similarities in recent political parties using historical figures or events to further their own causes. Rieff suggests that remembering too vividly- as he terms it *hyperthamesia*- is a risk in times of war and conflict. Again, I argue that the risk is not in remembering too well, because if that were the case then aggressors and victims would recognise their own involvement in crises. Rather the risk lies in remembering only what the 'other' has done unto them. If both sides can concede their own actions and entanglements, instead of laying blame they would open the path to true reconciliation which is the aim of remembering all sides of events. By choosing to be selectively blind, narrators are choosing to be ignorant. There is no long term benefit to the narrator forgetting half the story. And by forgetting the whole story and creating new narratives, there is the risk of the previous mistake being repeated again in history. Ricks further explains:

Narrative is not just a mode of communication, messaging, explanation or description. It is operating at the most basic neurological level of perception, thought (both conscious and unconscious), and most fundamentally, identity (2015).

It is the way ideas are narrated which is more important than the ideas themselves, Ricks argues. I agree with this argument by further adding that memories in themselves do not hold the risks Rieff suggests, in bringing about further conflict, but the way they are narrated. In writing about my relative's past and involvement in the Greek Civil War, I took care in the way I described events, and chose to let the narrators' voices speak in the first person, rather than the third person. Describing events involves interpreting them, second or third hand and this takes away from the authenticity and original intent. Labelling events as 'atrocities', 'massacres', 'reign of terror' involves making 'value-based judgments and making such judgements in history is a controversial issue' (Kheng, 2000: 26). Narratives hold power, narratives can play with how truth is perceived and highlight some facts but hide others. Narratives can be dangerous propaganda or can bring about reconciliation. Even narratives which claim to be objective, may in fact not be so if 'no historian can detach himself completely from the age and society in which he lives (Kheng, 2000:26). Kheng further argues that it would be nigh impossible to expect such objectivity from the victims of war. They, more than anyone else, would not hesitate to hand down moral judgements' (ibid). I must agree with Kheng here, as I have noticed that relatives who lost siblings, uncles, parents to the Civil War often do not hesitate to use words which carry bias and judgement. This is why keeping narratives in first person more obviously reveals the biases of the narrator.

Indeed the pen is mightier than the sword. Ricks adds that even if a narrative does not rely on truth value it can still be successful as the narrative works without the need to qualify it (2015). This is why oral history writers and memoirists use material based on eye witness accounts and not hearsay. In doing so, they avoid creating or adding to narratives which may be used by others as a tool or propaganda. Hirsch, professor of English and comparative literature explains that 'postmemory' can be used to describe the narratives which dominate the lives of subsequent generations, and 'whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated' (1997: 22). The danger is that these postmemory narratives are accepted without question by the younger generation, and in doing so, they mobilise a minority into acts of retribution, without full understanding. If the children inherit the sins of the fathers, then the question is, how to break this cycle without doing away with memories of past

events altogether. A culture of questioning existing narratives and creating counter narratives may be the answer.

Ricks suggests the answer is to make a shared narrative which tries to find a peaceful solution (2015). Aciman, professor in the history of literary theory, argues that shifting the order or sequence of events in a narrative may make them easier to live with, but will not necessarily alter the truth. He also claims that writing memoir with the conventions of fiction instead of history is a way to 'take revenge against facts that won't go away' (2013). You can acknowledge something but avoid the details. In my own memoir, I find this has been a useful tool, when I did not want to include an event, such as retribution, to mention it briefly and once.

The narratives I have grown up with, living in the diaspora helped me construct part of my identity as a Greek Australian. The memories of my childhood in Greece were always seen through the rose tinted glasses of the past, even the unpleasant memories, because they were my 'bible', my genesis, my history. This explains why I and my parents do not have 'no go zones' which other relatives living in Greece do. The same narratives have been assimilated in a different way, depending on the political climate and culture in which we live. Their interest in the past is different to mine. While I wanted to write those narratives in a memoir, others chose to forget them. I can only say that for me, honouring those narratives means remembering them and writing them down, yet it may be equally valid for my relatives to honour them by forgetting them and choosing only life affirming positive memories.

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