

The experience narrative

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An experiment starts to seem distant and uncertain. Its echoes can still be heard, but only faintly. What will remain of it? Visible or audible traces, captured in words or images; and the innumerable narratives of those who were involved in it. How are we to make visible—make blossom into a flower of knowledge¹—something that everyone experienced in such a personal way? All experimentation ushers in an unlimited possibility of commentary and narration, of description and analysis, which are continuously stimulated by distance and loss. For it is absence that motivates the desire to speak. At the same time as the original “text” of an experiment becomes blurred, other texts take it up again and extend, restore, and reinvent it. Each narrative bears witness to the situation that was experienced communally but that each person assesses in her own way, according to her particular mode of experience and reflection. It was in the pleasant company of Jean-Paul Thibeau and in the context of his laboratory for artistic and social experiments (“...au bord des protocoles méta”) that we put into practice and reflected upon the “experience narrative.” The first time was during a session in Roubaix and then again in a new seminar in Aix-en-Provence. Other initiatives followed, on different terrains and in different places: at the Palais de Tokyo in the context of a “laboratory of languages,” and on the occasion of a stroll around the La Viste / Belvédère de Séon quarter in Marseille.²

1. *Facilitating access*

How do we make manifest a reality we can no longer access? How can we make an experiment speak when it begins to evade us and conceal itself in our memory? The narrator often tries desperately to fill in the gaps and blank spaces, to bridge over the obstacles he encounters as he tells his story. He keeps adding new descriptions that complete (or not) the description already given; there is no end to his interpretations of what has already passed. We have all been in situations where the narrator revises a conclusion as soon as he has reached it (“to conclude, and I will really stop here, I would say...”). We all know that the gaps will not be filled or the omitted elements recovered, and yet none of us is impervious to the temptation to try to compensate at any price for lacking interpretations and sorely deficient descriptions. So the narrator goes running after his own story and tries to outdo himself in his pursuit of details, thereby setting himself a trap. He piles on descriptions and explanations but none of them live up to the task. The narrator “devours his phrases one after the other. No utterance can prevail in the face of the voracity of enunciation.”³ By chance it sometimes happens that the narrator lets go and admits that his account, no matter how carefully told, will never live up to the actual experience. This admission permits the experience narrative to be more about giving glimpses than providing evidence, to make itself heard but only from a distance. Now it is possible to sketch visions of the future without trying to fix them, to *facilitate access* to the experiment so that everyone can move around it freely. This change in attitude and shift in posture are crucial. To narrate an experiment is in the first place to become conscious of loss or impossibility, and it is around loss and impossibility that the narrator and her listeners will be able to meet. They share the impossibility; it is common to both and is the best reason for them to engage each other. The narrator and her listeners come together around the same necessity, the

1 Cf. **Michel de Certeau**, *Le lieu de l'autre*, Gallimard / Seuil, 2005, p. 21-22.

2 Roubaix (September 15-17, 2005), session organized by the Bureau d'art et de recherche (**Corinne Melin** and **Véronique Barbezat**); Aix-en-Provence (November 25-27, 2005), session coordinated by **Hélène Dattler**; Palais de Tokyo (March 25th, 2006); Marseille / Le Belvédère de Séon (May 21st, 2006), on the invitation of **Christophe Péron** under the auspices of the fourth Art des Lieux Festival. The activities of the laboratory “... au bord des protocoles méta” can be seen at <http://www.protocolesmeta.com/>

3 **Michel de Certeau**, *La faiblesse de croire*, éd. du Seuil, Coll. Points, 1987, p. 274.

necessity of conceiving a new “present” for an experiment that makes itself heard, but from afar. As long as the narrator remains fixated on the way she experienced things and obsessed with the precision and authenticity of her account, no discussion can take place. A fetishization of what was experienced discourages dialogue about it. In order to make understanding possible, the narrator has to come halfway by taking responsibility for this impossibility herself. The experiment in question cannot become accessible until it has become externalized and disassociated from itself. How can it ever be discussed if it remains closed onto itself, if it “encloses the truth in itself”⁴? How can it be communicated if it is primarily concerned with reasserting what it was and what it will always be, if it confines itself to whatever constituted its unique significance and the way it was lived?

2. A double encroachment of meaning

The narrator finds himself straddling the border between two worlds: that of the experiment, which he alone can access through his work of memory, and that of the dialogue, which he initiates by telling of his experience, and to which all participants have free access. The gap between the two—between the experiment and what can be said about it, between the experiment in the way it was experienced and the experiment in the way it is implicated by being recounted—defines his attitude. The challenge for the narrator is to make his account proportionate. One part of the narrative refers to the singularity of what he experienced, the other to the free interpretation of his listeners and to the surprises it has in store for him. The narrator’s situation is like that of a migrant worker who finds himself between two worlds, equally attentive to both.⁵ Ideally, the experience narrative will emerge in an incessant movement between deterritorialization (disengagement) and reterritorialization (implication), and in a double encroachment of meaning that leads us to accept that what makes sense to the other may only make partial sense to us. The moment always arrives when listeners become speakers, taking over words addressed to them in order to make use of them from different perspectives and in other contexts. They begin to debate and confront the narrator. They suggest an interpretation or attempt an explanation. They make comparisons with other situations. All of this is the experience narrative doing its work. A space for communication has been created, and the experience begins to exist as a communal one within this space, thanks to the multiple interpretations that are given of it and the many variations on its theme. It is revisited and retranslated. It becomes a shared thing by the slow superimposition of interpretive layers, thin and transparent,⁶ that continue to cover it with new meanings without thereby masking what others had to say about it beforehand. It becomes split into a large number of fragments that are recomposed according to a variety of diverse points of view. The original experience is, in a sense, spirited away and dispossessed for the sake of an experience that has become communal and that emerges at the intersection of the different statements about it. But this dispossession does not imply loss or abandonment. On the contrary, it clears the path for many new developments, keeping the experience active, productive, present, and influential. The narrative has fulfilled its role when the experience has become a multiplicity—a multiplicity of perceptions and interpretations, of comments and assessments. At this point, the narrator can choose to discretely leave the scene. He can become modest and concise, as described by

4 **Michel de Certeau**, *L'étranger ou l'union dans la différence*, éd. du Seuil, Coll. Points, 2005, p. 158

5 Cf. **Michel de Certeau**, *La prise de parole et autres écrits politiques*, éd. du Seuil, Coll. Points, 1994, p. 192.

6 **Walter Benjamin**, “The Storyteller (Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov).” Section IX. <http://grace.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/storyteller.pdf>

Walter Benjamin: “[T]he more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story’s claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later.”⁷

3. Learning from one’s own narrative

An experience narrative invites a response. It creates a collective space of encounter and exchange, intentionally conceived with the goal of encouraging questions and soliciting comment. The experience narrative is an invitation to dialogue. It is a dispositive initiated by the narrator, but it in turn obliges her, as Isabelle Stengers puts it, to see her own experience in a different light. It requires her to accept the many misunderstandings that are bound to occur when we make others privy to certain events we have experienced. It obliges her, in fact, to let her own narrative slip away, and accept seeing it branch off and falter in the presence of her listeners. The narrator no longer expresses herself only from her own point of view, but does so now in a communicative space that her narrative helped bring about, without however being able to predict how it would develop. This space places obligations on all the participants who are willing to implicate themselves and most of all on the author of the narrative herself.⁸ It “obliges” them because it confronts them with this fundamental question: do we accept the risk of being shaped by the intersecting statements incurred by our own stories and the discussions that arise from them? Will the narrator hold her own narrative at arm’s length for fear of being surprised by it and led onto uncertain ground? Or will she rise instead to the challenge posed by her narrative and welcome the many interpretations it will no doubt invite? The time will come when the narrator is no longer the initiator. Her account has established a communicative space that, naturally, begins functioning on its own. Will she mistrust this process and try to protect herself from it? Or will she approach her own experience in a new way in response to the many questions raised by others? What our own experience narrative “obliges” us to do is to listen to it and become capable of learning from it. The experience shaped us and the account of it does so all the more, thanks to the multiple statements jostling around it. The narrator becomes disoriented by the very process of telling; she becomes flustered by others listening to what after all belongs to her so intimately. She will learn from her own narrative as much as she willingly makes herself vulnerable to the many developments prompted by her own act of narration.

4. The play of differences

To give an account of an experience consists then in putting to work numerous variants and variations that will inevitably arise as a result of the narrative itself. The account diffracts the situation recounted into a wide variety of viewpoints, as numerous as the questions raised and the interpretations proposed. To conceive of and give an account is to demonstrate our capacity to allow for a play of differences, to invite them into the heart of our own story. A question crops up, for instance, that no one expected, or an interpretation opens up a horizon that was invisible until now. The narrative and its author thus become “an inscription surface, an echo chamber, a membrane upon which everyone’s multiple projections are thrown, frequently without [the narrator] knowing.”⁹ How are we to situate ourselves in this flux of images and words, of comments and

7 Idem, Section VIII.

8 Inasmuch as we are “obliged” by our own practices. Cf. **Isabelle Stengers**, *La vierge et le neutrino (Les scientifiques dans la tourmente)*, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2006.

9 **Michel Anselme**, *Du bruit à la parole (La scène politique des cités)*, éd. de l’Aube, 2000, p. 108.

questions? How are we to tame this multiplicity inherent in any experience narrative—this untimely, disruptive, creative multiplicity? We could begin, perhaps, by weaning ourselves from the propensity to prove and explain, automatically associated with the act of narration. We aspire ourselves to such a position of authority, but it is also assigned to us by our listeners. Could you explain yourself? What solution do you suggest? What lessons did you learn from this experience? The injunction to demonstrate and explain closes the narrative down around itself, as if it were supposed to discover only in its own texture all of its reasons and motivations. But why demand something of the narrative that it will never be able to achieve—the ability to provide an answer, the ability to reach a conclusion—when it derives its strength, on the contrary, from its indecisiveness. The narrative has value because of the multiplicity of questions to which it gives rise and which it helps shape. It acts both as an inscription surface upon which many questions are projected and as fertile soil in which questions can take root and grow. Following François Deck, we could say that an experience narrative, in the first place, allows for a problem (or problems) to become legible, thanks to their transformation into questions. In this sense, narratives “intensify the mobilization of meaning, of intellectual technologies, of people and sharable resources.”¹⁰ They facilitate the formulation of questions more than they provide solutions or impose their own lessons. And it is by proceeding this way, by favoring uncommon and untimely readings, that “the prophets and the legislators, all those who speak for others and before others, are silenced.”¹¹

5. Revealing and engaging meaning

The narrator creates two kinds of freedom, first in his relationship to the experience, which is no longer held back or intimidated by a demand for authenticity, second in his relationship to his listeners, which is no longer hampered by an injunction to deliver results. Without having to provide proof or propose a solution, the narrative can follow its own course and unfold its own plot. At stake is not so much knowing what it is meant to re-cover (a reliable testimony or an authentic expression) but rather to dis-cover what it is capable of initiating, organizing, or creating. What does the narrative help us share? What questions does it pose? What does it make us think about? Finally and most importantly, what new experiments does it invite us to engage in? An experience narrative brings about a multiplicity of other experiences. It brings together many other experiential or creative situations, in encounters that can be quiet or loud, made up of long exchanges or brief moments, and take place in group discussions or in individual reflection. An experience narrative *discovers* experiments, in the double sense of the term: it reveals the experiments at the heart of our existence and progressively removes all the interferences that block our access to them. Thanks to the narrative, multiple experiments come to interpellate each other, seek each other out, or surprise each other. Thanks to the narrative, we can experience the “common.” The experience narrative is a dispositive that founds a community of sensitivity and questioning. It reveals and engages meaning. It builds bridges and suggests passageways. The experience narrative is itself an experiment, and a full-fledged one at that. It brings to the surface events that were deeply buried in themselves; it allows for self-discovery by means of the responses of others, as well as for a feeling of closeness and familiarity towards a situation that nevertheless is new to us. It is the quality of the narrative that is crucial, the relevance of its narrative composition: the way it unfolds, its rhythm, intensity, and plot. Paul Ricœur emphasizes the importance of such an “emplotment”

10 **François Deck**, *Performer la société*, Biennale de Paris, octobre 2006. The entire text can be found at www.iscra.fr

11 **Michel Foucault**, “Dits et écrits IV (1980-1988)”, éd. Gallimard, 1994, p. 87.

(*mise en intrigue*) and its mediating role. What the speaker went through is first constructed by and through the narrative. If an experience can speak to us while at the same time remaining inaccessible on a fundamental level, it is because the narrative given of it employs signs, concepts, sensible forms, and norms with which we are familiar.¹² The strength of the art of narrative resides in intelligent plotting, in the organization of facts, the articulation of signs, and the shaping of sensibilities. In this way, an experiment becomes intelligible and decipherable without at the same time becoming perfectly transparent or fully accessible.

12 **Paul Ricoeur**, *Temps et récit – 1. L'intrigue et le récit historique*, éd. du Seuil, Coll. Points-essais, 1983, p. 108 et sq.