

Narrative: A Range of Sense for a Verbal Vision

Vivian Darroch

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
and School of Graduate Studies
University of Toronto

The following essay is an interesting experiment in autobiography, phenomenology and linguistic play /analysis in the style of Mary Daly. In many areas of Women's Studies, there is a perceptible movement towards transcending and/or subverting duality, either by exploring new forms of perception or by a refusal to accept dualistic categories (subject/object; experiential/abstract) as static paradigms of an either/or universe.

Darroch presents us with an exploration, a beginning glimpse of Self which, always mutable, creates its own stories, its own mythology, to explain itself. Against this narrative is counterpointed the Mind's analysis of the Self processes. Mind abstracts, demands pattern and order in the flux and flow of experience. Mind is part of Self, ordering Self. Self-knowledge arises from this dialectic, becomes the basis of all knowledge which is re-defined in terms of a dynamic process whereby the Knower is part of what is Known.

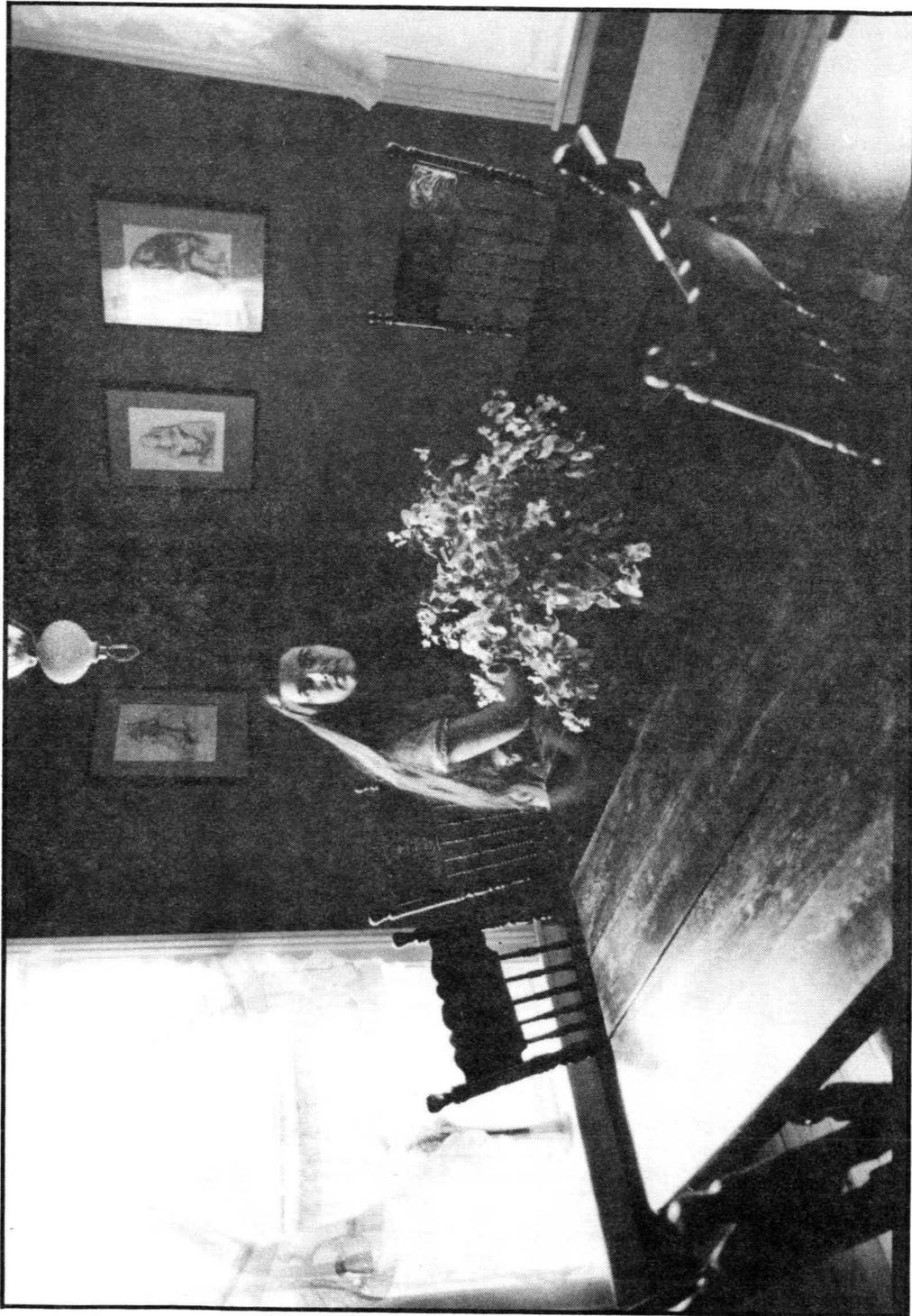
Summary

This essay came to be written when I was attempting a theoretical consideration of how we might bring our own biographies as narratives into our work. On one hand, this essay is a telling about a mother, a Baba, a father and a self. On an other hand, it is a telling of my life

through which I came to understand that the power of such telling is in the immediacy by which, through the response of speech to a vision, our "usual" introspection is made particular-to-life. A vision allows a truth of life to recur amplified, rather than diminished, by historical facticity. But it is the affective itinerary of language which is crucial to understanding the movements inherent in reaching a conclusion about a vision and which allows the semantic closure of any telling to be a moment for meaning rather than an epoch for conviction.¹

Background

The telling of our lives is something about which I began to write three years ago. At that time I attempted a first telling about a particular vision. Since then I have come to the conclusion that parts of my life are this vision because this vision is a metaphor living in my body. And parts of my life are this vision seeking another expression, an elucidation which would allow the vision to leave the house of my body and to achieve the status of a reality-creating force. Parts of my life are a narration of this vision's movement, a telling about its seeking, and even a telling about the



Photograph of Valerie Fisher by Cheryl Lean, 1978.

telling itself. So these pages are a narration of this vision's movement, a telling about the telling.

The writing on these pages is never direct. Never does it provide an explanation of a life. Never does it show something true about others' lives. But the writing shows how, as I wrote and listened to what I said, a vision from which I began to write became visible to me and then moved through its telling from life as seen, to become life as it is.

So telling of my life as I have written it is personal. In that, it is uneffaceable. But the significance of my subjective presence on these pages is not in what the pages conceal or show about me or my family. Nor does the significance of my presence lie in any possibility for generalizing from my narrative to others' lives, to others' psychological development, history or personal evolution. My presence on these pages is to show that it is only through allowing our presence to be fully present with our story that we may move beyond what we may usually call introspection to a reflective² analysis of an external expression of our mental life. So here I live and now live differently in the knowledge shown in these pages. And the yellow wheat, the silence, the image of my father against the sky, to which the pages refer, now live differently in me.

The Vision

My father died in a field of wheat. That day I had been playing in that field but that day there was no wind. No birds sang. No small animals watched me. In that terror, in that silence I ran back to the house. My father laughed joyously. He swung me in the air. Come, he said, we will make a party for Mihalina. Mihalina is my mother's name, although she is not called that. My mother carried the silver tray with her hands that were

cracked and swollen from work. She carried the silver tray with the tea and sugar and milk to the wheat field. She put it on a blue cloth in a special place she made for it in the yellow wheat. Still, no birds sang. No small animals watched us. My father stood strong smiling against the sky. In that silence we did not hear him fall to the ground.

The Telling

Story-telling is a name for something all people do. And in telling my story I must begin with this, what I have just told. It is a vision I have known for years, my whole life. It did not happen. But it is the vision with which I started my narrative. And so it is an unnamed reality for me from which I cannot escape.

We cannot escape from the story, the narrative of our life. The telling of it can no more be taken away from us than can our faces. It is so because although that did not happen to my father, yet that is a vision which has revealed what my daily life is and so created myself. For as I told my life, beginning with what I have told here, an immanence of meaning of its nature was glimpsed. In the continued telling of it this vision was decreased. Made. Decreased and made again. As I wrote, the concealed totality of this vision, this metaphor, which was and is my life became visible. It is true that the shape of this totality was bound by subjectivity, by connections with images which remained hidden to me. This totality was bound even by its own weight. So my first telling finished then, so long ago, with an absence of present meaning. But even then my writing about the vision began to show me what was and is at issue in my life.

Another,³ in speaking retrospectively about her diary, talks of how she believes it is in such telling about herself she first experienced her identity as a possibility. That is, while her diary

was concrete, her analysis therein was abstract, and so in the writing what came to be at issue was the self that was authoring the diary.

I had always been aware that in the telling of my life I had been writing in a private moment of anxiety. I had always been aware that what I was writing was my knowledge as it is contained within the thought of the world of my daily life, and so this knowledge was opaque and often denied itself. This was so. It is so. But in its being so came to lie the significance of the words which were appearing on the pages before me. I wanted to respond to my experience of my life; but although I attempted it, I could not begin to record happenings and to turn to logocentric writing. I needed to think in my usual thinking and to write in my usual language. And so, although I tried to uncover conceptually the meanings of the metaphor of my vision, the writing on the pages confounded me, pushed my pencil to the edges of my sheets of paper. But as I moved from the vision with which I began, as I continued to write, as I remembered through my narrative commitment, as I inserted the past and inserted the future into the instant of the present, I began to constitute my existence. For it is the revelation of story which provides that which we were and that which we shall be. As our narratives are separated from and returned to our lives, so are our lives separated from and returned to our narratives. Our lives are pulled from our history in the telling of them. And so re-created. And so returned to our history and our future differently. But for such a revelation of story the very movement of the beginning vision arrests the development of the life chosen as self. And the very expression of narrative elucidation through offering a vision, through pulling away from language and through being most operant in inaccuracies, requires tactics of initiation and threshold⁴ to substantiate the experienced range of imaged world.

Through a range of impacted imagery that expressed an existence which is truly known by me, my vision showed me the inevitability of a hyper-truth. I had written

It is true the shape of this totality was bound by subjectivity, by connections with images which remained hidden to me.

But as I attempted to recall and to describe my image I became disengaged from the shape, the ambience of this totality. For, yes, my speech displaced me from the processes of my vision, but the processes of vision were covert challenges to what I preferred in speech. So the binding logic of telling made subjectivity both an agent and an object of a telling which excluded me, the "author" of my story, from it. That is, the unnamed force of the reality of my vision required my telling to be aligned with anxiety, rather than with my self, because not only my telling but my vision chastised me for what I saw. What I saw was an awareness of happening at the wheat-field. But that is not what I told.

Initially, what I told was the range of the knowing of the vision, masked in my telling by the need for articulation according to a worthy paradigm through which I could explain what I would come to understand through such telling. So although I had written "it is true the shape of this totality was bound by subjectivity, by connections with images which remained hidden to me," what I had really told was

. . . it is the true shape of this subjectivity
. . . that the images of totality remained
by keeping their connections hidden from
me . . .

Eventually, however, the range of knowing of the image was elucidated only because the *not* truly known recoiled from my efforts to be

accurate and articulate in what I represented in my story. But this did not occur before my telling had led me to a beautiful lie in which the crisis of experience (the vision), which initiated the ethical intent for a new existence, was masked again by the need for articulation according to a worthy paradigm.

And as my vision developed and exclaimed so does a narrative develop. It also exclaims, it also reveals. And the narrative explication of a vision demands that words we use to describe must also be those we see as combinatorial units for speaking. A narrative's developing is the fixing of a range of affirmation and negation in words and phrases along a flux of imaging. Thus, my vision tells of the circumstances which led to my father's death. It also reveals he did not die.

The Beautiful Lie

In our narrative we must avoid beautiful lies. My father did not die in a wheat field. He is still alive. But my grandfather died in a wheat field. No. He did not die there. But he emigrated from the Ukraine and did not work. And I only remember we and Baba and my parents would go once or twice from the town to the farm where nothing grew. The only wheat was wild and dry. And we could after all hear the cold creek running. And I didn't really know then, because the language was different, how hard my Baba fought for his, my grandfather's, survival. Her hands were more swollen than my mother's. But I remember the roughness of the hands of them both. And although my own father worked too many hours each day, it is the continuous physical labour of Baba and my mother that I remember. They worked in different places. But they did not work for different things. They worked for the existence of all the rest of us. I know how hard my mother is working now. My hands are not swollen from physical labour. But I know how hard I fought for the survival of my husband.

The Linguaging of Narrative

But I do not really know all this because all our languages were different. Baba spoke Ukrainian. My mother that and English and I only this. My grandfather was dead before I was born. My father still lives and works. The man who was my husband is strong. And although the languages of my father and my husband are English I remember them most for their postures of silence. And yet that party in the wheat field has been a vision in my mind my whole life. And as my father has been there in that field, so have been my grandfather, my husband.

Until this year. Until this year my mother's language was that way and mine this way. A number of years ago I changed my biography and this year my mother's language is this way and mine that way.

My connections with Baba were scents: of dill, of dahlias, of old quilts, of fresh cream, of the roughness of the skin on her hands when she held me. And although Baba is dead I am confident in reconstructing her narrative for it has always been available to me through my senses. I had no movements of connections with my mother because the language of my mother is different from mine. Until this year.

But my narrative is drifting. When a narrative drifts our sense of our acts is also absent.

Of language I am speaking.

My mother's language matures slowly, grows in battle, is open and linear. My language is a closed circle, is self-sufficient, repeats upon itself. Every utterance of my mother is a speaking of this and that. While we both came through epics and dramas and dreams, she best can recognize herself, even in her enforced isolation, within a collectivity. I

am more lyric, more personal, give monologues of experience. Comparing our languages, I begin to believe my mother languages a story which is a reality elucidated and described. I language a story which, like my vision, is a reality symbolized. My story is there in that afternoon, in that wheat field. It is there in that strange party. It is there in that death. Death that happened there, not here.

The information addressed by my mother's story is indicative, by mine interrogative. My mother's story attends to her concrete lived experience, the totality of her life. My narrative attends to the principle of my lived experience. In that, my mother's narrative and mine were unavailable to each other. Until this year. And now her language is mine and mine hers.

My mother's life has been harder than mine. She has had to save her self. That is one of the tasks of narrative, to save one's self. Narrative allows reception of life, informs how life is being used, is to be used. My mother when she tells her story looks to that very telling for the rest of her narrative so that she will know how to continue living it. And so this year my mother sends to me pages yellow from 1945 and says Vivian I have had this for many, many years, written shortly after the war, I went through a traumatic shock when Dad was missing in action in Normandy, and later found in a hospital in France badly hurt, then his return home, very ill, those memories are mine alone.

The following years of my mother's life were described on those pages before they happened.

While a narrative like my mother's will save our selves, the narrative I attempted intended to save the world, that is, name the world I lived in. My narrative told me how and where life is generated. And, although my narrative

powerfully was influencing my life, conscious attending to it was voluntary.

Then in some still-space in time I heard my narrative tell me no life was being generated where I was. It told me I was at that death in the wheat field, not here. In another place in time, by leaving my husband and so by leaving my life which was repeating the life of my mother, I interrupted my biography. And when I interrupted my biography both my mother's life and mine were pulled from our histories, our histories which were the histories of women and men as I, generationally, had collected them in that vision.

For my mother, in translating my story as it was suddenly revealed to her through my own broken biography, found her own narrative in jeopardy. And the narrative revelation of that for her, and it was an unconscious revelation, was to recognize that it is only in biographical jeopardy that one may gain the purpose of truth as given to the self by the self through vision and telling. So for the first time she begins consciously to attend to where life is generated for her. In so doing she may begin to name the world and she is so doing. And I, in that same instant recognizing that our biographical stories had been the same way, may now for the first time attend to the resting of my narrative, my story through which I wanted to name the world, which was a metaphor personal and uneffaceable. In so doing, I may go on to save myself.

Narrative Elucidation

*metaphor meta-for, the harsh
nurture of self-birth*

*saving naming as beyond
procreational prowess*

*personal uneffaceable a precariousness of
experience and identity
is expressed*

per / son / al / un / if / face "t" d
through / child / all / re- / if / faced
versed

exclaim ex-claim, the vision
testifies against itself
in order to maintain its
coherence and to
intensify the seer's
(teller's) experience of
outrage, outraged
because comprehending

Narrative elucidation then is as motion of light, as light showing and hiding.

An Aura of Intelligible Seeming

Now whether a narrative is like my mother's or like my own, it cannot be understood unless it is placed within the context of our daily living. Just as our words are, our daily living is ours and others'. Our daily living belongs to a people and is datable. On the other hand our daily living is an absolute beginning. As our narrative is the beginning of our daily lives, so are our daily lives the beginning of our narrative. So I begin this narrative after I have seen the vision again. And in my vision which starts my story, my father is the most present one. It is he who stands against the sky. It is my mother who carries. And I who run. And in my life-story here, my narrative here, my father is absent. And this is a curious thing, for anyone who knows the three of us, would say my life is as my father's, has been as my father's. And in any way, in all ways, in my daily life my father was very much present.

But I am writing now after I have interrupted my biography. I am writing this now after my narrative has told me to look at my vision again. Has told me to interrogate it. Has told me to hear what I answer to that interrogation. I write here, now, acknowledging that in all ways in my daily life my father was

very much present but that also I have passed close to Baba and my mother. Been pressed close by them. And my understanding is there, not in my father's presence.

I must return again to the vision which is the starting point in my narrative. Come, he said, we will make a tea party for Mihalina. But while my mother is holding the silver tray with workworn hands my father falls to the ground. With my parents there never was a silver tray, there never was a wheat field. Although my mother's hands are workworn there never was such a tea party. My narrative has composed these. And although the composition is imaginal, it is not fantasy. In being imaginal it is an intensified representation of my experience of my life and so one to which I must extend authority. In being presented through the mediation of language it is an expression of my life. And in hearing what this expression says I hear I have been wrong in what I have seen in my vision. I have been wrong in my understanding of the vision. I will not write all the new understanding here, but I heard my father say, "Make a tea party for her." I heard myself say

party part-ing, the bestowal
of affective distance as
donum

wheat field we-field, the
generations of family
displaced in time

blue sky, the colour of faith

imaginal I-marginal, the
imagery of being
pushed to the edges by
rules of preferred
thought, family
conditions as preferred
but ultimately
displaced into the

*postures of be-trayal as
in*

*mother carries is betrayed, the giving-
to is changed into a
taking-from; and the
blue cloth is laid down
as the background of
faith on which the
sacrifice may rest*

*a woman feted gets the sky behind her as a cloth laid
down, a child must then "take place"*

He said, "Make a tea party for her." It was my father who wanted to save my mother. And although my life has repeated my mother's story, it has been my father's life which until this telling I have always recounted.

*serve save, impotence because
of the abjured centrality
in the telling of the
"already-possessed" in
conflict with "self-
birth"*

*save the uncoupling of the
unity of survival as
defense and the
declining of survival as
"serving"*

I understood more (not all). But what is relevant here is that in the end, for myself, and it can be the only ending, I learned I could not save the world. Nor did I serve a life.

Gift of Validation⁵

Thus, in the re-seeing of the narrative as it appeared to me through the tea party in the wheat field, a historical truth was allowed to filter and to absent itself. And we must know our place in history in order to outstrip it.

Here, in this narrative I know that I have seen my father standing smiling against the sky. And I know that there, I did not hear him fall to the ground. But I do not know what his life has been. Yet I weep at my imagined departure of them, of my father, of my husband. I weep at their death on that afternoon in the wheat field. But I do not weep because I imagine them to be gone from me. I weep because we are also other than what we imagine ourselves to be.⁶ In my vision I have murdered them. In my telling I have uncovered that saving self serves the evil in this vision because in my telling I was self-directed in volition as well as intent. I wrote

*dateable de-bate-able, where the
chronology of event in
life substantiates the
extent of covert
challenge issued by the
vision, where the truth
of actuality is accepted
as unacceptable*

*existence telling, not merely
validity in the sense of
possibility, but validity
in that it also has the
power to take away
existence⁷*

Since I have written these pages I have read that there is a writing which "confuses," "exposes," "shelters nothing." "This writing is a parricidal writing. It has refused not only to be blinded, but even to take shelter."⁸ I do not know if my writing above as I wrote it a while ago was this way. Certainly, I doubt that it was entirely so, for if it were so I would have uncovered holiness and savagery. I did not uncover these here. I only uncovered that my father stands. That he falls.

my father stands holiness

savagery *he falls*

no

savagery *he stands*

promise *he falls*

I have said I began writing in anxiety. I began writing from within the darkness of that vision literalized in my body. It is known that the purpose of darkness is to discover the light. In my darkness here, my words were my "light". They revealed to me the danger of my vision. They required me to leap with faith from each one of them to the next. And through this writing of light, time became for me an experience in which its changeableness was the only force connecting across the vacancy which lay between what I knew and what I came to know.

I heard what I said. I heard what I said fragment itself. Sometimes, I heard things which are not written on these pages. But I kept-rehearing the writing on the paper. It is one telling of a life. And it is in such a telling the range of sense of the verbal vision transforms the pleasure of the original visual image into a situation of crisis where the immediacy of existence in individuality is the paradigm for

seeing *being, the crisis of experience is unmasked through hearing the words which are spoken in response to the vision*

validity *it has the power to take away existence.*

these portraits I have often depended on phrasing she has suggested for the designating of particular relations between what is carried within the word and referents to which the word may refer.

2. The idea of reflection, as it is used here, refers to the recovery of the origins of our sources of understanding.
3. Heather Berkeley.
4. "Threshold" is taken from the Latin *limen*. Its use here is to point to what is dynamic and processual, to what moves and is ambiguous, between what is recognized and accepted in the vision and in the telling.
5. I have taken the phrase "gift of validation" from Esther Saltzman who has used it in an unpublished paper in which she addressed process of therapy.
6. The idea of that we are also other than what we imagine ourselves to be permeates the work of Simone Weil.
7. "If thought could give reality in the sense of actuality, and not merely validity in the sense of possibility, it would also have the power to take away existence, and so to take away from the existing individual the only reality to which he sustains a real relationship, namely, his own." In Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941.
8. Stefano, Agosti. "Coup upon Coup. An Introduction to Spurs." In *Spurs* by Jacques Derrida. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Barbara Ivan for her discussion with me about this paper. In the last parts of it I have included "portraits" of words in response to her advice. And in