

Kearney - On  
Jones

Where do Stories Come From?

# One

If this be magic, let it be an art lawful as eating.

A Winter's Tale

Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. More so, in fact, for while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition human.

This was recognised from the very beginnings of Western civilisation. Hesiod tells us how the founding myths (*mythos* in Greek means 'story') were invented to explain how the world came to be and how we came to be in it. Myths were stories people told themselves in order to explain themselves to themselves and to others. But it was Aristotle who first developed this insight into a philosophical position when he argued, in his *Poetics*, that the art of storytelling – defined as the dramatic imitating and plotting of human action – is what gives us a *shareable* world.

It is, in short, only when haphazard happenings are transformed into story, and thus made memorable over time, that we become full agents of our history. This becoming historical involves a transition from the flux of events into a meaningful social or political community – what Aristotle and the Greeks called a *polis*. Without this transition from nature to narrative, from time suffered to time enacted and enunciated, it is debatable whether a merely biological life (*zoe*) could ever be considered a truly human one (*bios*). As the twentieth-century thinker Hannah Arendt argued: 'The chief characteristic of

the specifically human life . . . is that it is always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story. . . . It is of this life, bios, as distinguished from mere *zoe*, that Aristotle said that it "somehow is a kind of action (*praxis*)".<sup>1</sup>

What works at the level of communal history works also at the level of individual history. When someone asks you who you are, you tell your story. That is, you recount your present condition in the light of past memories and future anticipations. You interpret where you are now in terms of where you have come from and where you are going to. And so doing you give a sense of yourself as a narrative identity that perdures and coheres over a lifetime. This is what the German philosopher Dilthey called the coming-together-of-a-life (*Zusammenhang des Lebens*), meaning the act of coordinating an existence which would otherwise be scattered over time. In this way, storytelling may be said to humanise time by transforming it from an impersonal passing of fragmented moments into a pattern, a plot, a *mythos*.<sup>2</sup>

Every life is in search of a narrative. We all seek, willy-nilly, to introduce some kind of concord into the everyday discord and dispersal we find about us. We may, therefore, agree with the poet who described narrative as a stay against confusion. For the storytelling impulse is, and always has been, a desire for a certain 'unity of life'.<sup>3</sup> In our own postmodern era of fragmentation and fracture, I shall be arguing that narrative provides us with one of our most viable forms of identity – individual and communal.

If the need for stories has become acute in our contemporary culture, it has been recognised from the origin of time as an indispensable ingredient of any meaningful society. In fact, storytelling goes back over a million years, as scholars like

Kellogg and Scholes have shown. The narrative imperative has assumed many genres – myth, epic, sacred history, legend, saga, folk tale, romance, allegory, confession, chronicle, satire, novel. And within each genre there are multiple sub-genres: oral and written, poetic and prosaic, historical and fictional. But no matter how distinct in style, voice or plot, every story shares the common function of *someone telling something to someone about something*. In each case there is a teller, a tale, something told about and a recipient of the tale. And it is this crucially intersubjective model of discourse which, I'll be claiming, marks narrative as a quintessentially communicative act. Even in the case of postmodern monologues like Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* or *Happy Days*, where the actor is talking and listening to him/herself, there is always at least an implicit other out there to whom the tale is addressed – that 'other' often being 'us' the listeners. In short, where the author or audience appear absent they are usually 'implied'. That is why the continuing, and I believe inexhaustible, practice of storytelling belies the faddish maxim that 'in narrative no one speaks', or worse, that language speaks only to itself.<sup>4</sup>

To imagine the origins of storytelling we need to tell ourselves a story. Someone, somewhere, sometime, took it into his head to utter the words 'once upon a time'; and, so doing, lit bonfires in the imaginations of his listeners. A tale was spun from bits and pieces of experience, linking past happenings with present ones and casting both into a dream of possibilities. Once the listeners heard the beginning they wanted to find out the middle and then go on to the end. Stories seemed to make some sense of time, of history, of their lives. Stories were gifts from the gods enabling mortals to fashion the world in their own image. And once the story-