

Storytelling as a Strategy of Care: Writing and Education

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Quaderno per romanzi

The construction and narration of stories is an ancient art that includes many different models and techniques of writing and acting: oral interpretation, poetic writing, theatrical performance, internal monologue, artistic production in its many expressions, and writing about oneself as a memorial and as care. Since the last decades of the last century, Storytelling has been updated in many social, educational and clinical sectors, underlining its therapeutic and pedagogical power linked to different fields of application. A fine example is Rita Charon's studies on "Narrative Medicine", but also in the ethnographic, sociological, gender, psychological fields etc.... the narrative process has highlighted the evocative power of the story. Umberto Eco indicates many reasons for including Storytelling in academic writing: to improve discourse, to illustrate theses and to anchor scientific research to human experiences (Eco, 1997/2000). Myth is narration: it has always been identified as a "sacred story" or a "specific story of cultures and traditions" and can be evoked through art, painting, poetry, sculpture, music and all those aesthetic operations that imply free creation of the human intellect. We move, therefore, in a sophisticated world with relatively fluid borders because Storytelling seems to be a truly transversal communication and knowledge strategy and, thus, inclusive of many types of knowledge and a galaxy of meticulous cultural declinations. A great intellectual of the twentieth century, Jean-Paul Sartre, was the creator of this instrument, and he used autobiographical narration to reconstruct the traits of his own youth, in a game of references masterfully conducted through the strategy of Storytelling: narrating to remember, to take care of his emotions and feelings related to childhood and youthful sentiments. A past that returns to be in the present.

Jean-Paul Sartre in his beautiful volume entitled "Le parole" argues that writing is the only critical mirror of man that constantly reflects his true image: or mirrors a great building in ruins or the narration of a story, of an endless fantastic fable (Sartre, 2002). Through the "words" and the text, the author traces his past in a clearer way: finally freeing his conscience from a heavy intrigue of spurious events and acquiring self-awareness within a relationship that develops and is enriched in the encounter with others (and, above all, with himself, with little Poulou). At the age of 59, the French philosopher feels the need to recompose, relive and redefine in an authentic way the forms and contents of his own childhood and through memory and writing he discovers that "neurose caractérielle", which as he himself confesses on these pages, had imprisoned him all his life. Writing, therefore, is transformed into a Strategy and a method for "knowing" (especially the person that inhabits us) and literature and historiography have given words a new value: "I would have listened to them. [...] I would have known everything. They let me wander among the books and I assaulted human knowledge. It was this that formed me" (ivi, p. 37). Reading and writing (the title of the two chapters that make up Sartre's autobiographical volume) represent for the French author the most important tests that come from his own experience as a child and as an adult: first because they introduced him to a different vision of the world (more critical and problematic, broader and more articulated), and also because through novels or fables (read and written) the young Paul re-elaborates and modifies the conception of himself in relation to humanity and the nature of things. From an early age, engaging in writing tests - manipulating and reproducing the plots of fables, novels, short stories and fantastic stories, the French author realised how those words, those phrases composed by him, were nothing more than the physical and concrete production of his own inner world: "it was the realisation of the imaginary", as he himself stated (ivi., pp. 100-101). And Sartre continues: "I thought I had anchored my dreams to the world by means of the scratching of a metal

tip" and it is in this form of mixed memory and imagination that the private experience and existential project of the young Poulou and of the man Jean-Paul is fulfilled and enriched. A fantastic experience, yes, but no other reality was ever so true and meaningful because through the writing and composition of narrative texts (for these exercises Sartre had a notebook with a purple cover given to him by his mother which he titled "notebook for novels") the ten-year-old child gives an absolute value to the things and the many experiences that make up his life, both in its historical development and in that more highly imaginative (and, therefore, more authentically formative) dimension. The plots of the stories he invented become more and more intricate and complex, sometimes the meaning is elusive, but as he himself affirms in the pages of his autobiographical confession and in his memories as an adult, writing represented for the philosopher-child no absolute omnipotence: through pen and words he was able to dominate, manage, use, shape, orient, and organise the whole world, and in that textual production Jean-Paul could find and meet Jean Paul again. An encounter that takes place through words and that through words takes concrete form in an authentic social action, indispensable for the life of each individual, in order to be able to share with others the content of one's feelings, perceptions and sensations. "I wrote with a beating heart [...] and I was amazed, with my pen in mid-air: I had produced in the absolute a small event that compromised me delightfully" (ivi., p. 105)

It is evident that in the construction of stories there are archetypes of form and content that are remarkable for the educational and formative scope of writing: the profound link between the story and the emotional world of the characters, the reader and the writer; the introspective journey; individual growth and building bonds and relationships with the outside world and with others. All fundamental elements to activate practices and places of inclusion. Taking care of this existential/narrative journey means taking care of the practices of Inclusion, that is, deleting the actions of the Barbarian and the Nietzschean Marauder from one's existence to allow the Gardener to act in a projective and propulsive manner.

But there's more, for Sartre writing is an irreplaceable source of life: "I cannot go one day without writing; it is part of me and lives with me as a moment of liberation and resigned acceptance of the present" (ivi, p. 106). Through the re-elaboration of an inner language (and, which performs a dual activity: both narratological and formative), a mental and psychical language, the author builds a strong and empathic bond between the world inside himself and reality outside himself, a bond that does not always develop in a linear and complete way, but which is, nevertheless, necessary for the promotion of social relations that remain inseparable from any activity of the subject-man. Even unfinished acts remain fundamental for the growth and development of the individuality of the subject and equally important are the interrupted plots, the characters just mentioned, the events left pending because they require further effort on the part of the autobiographer in order to give them the right meaning and the right collocation (and, therefore, a "value" within the complex existential journey), "In the autobiographical history, which episodically and intentionally memory tells, the narratable self is, therefore, always deified. By becoming in history what it has already been, the self is, thus, also able to recover the constitutive mundane and relational identity from which history itself arose. In other words, the identity of the self, crystallised in history, is totally constituted by the relations of its appearance to others and in the world "since only in a relationship dimension can the self fulfil itself and manifest itself (Cavarero, 2001, p. 51). Therefore, the thought that is narrated and written continually makes an effort to relocate the general human condition within a circumscribed and singular situation, but, which on closer inspection, performs a paradigmatic function for that conscience-man that is observed, rediscovers itself and relocates its experience in time and space. A difficult path, never linear, full of problematic situations, nevertheless, which can aid the subject who narrates and writes to acquire clarity concerning his social and historical role, so as to foster new experiences and new relationships that are increasingly imbued with affectivity (Bruner, 2002).

Writing and self-knowledge

There is no trace of the stories Sartre wrote as a child. The many heroes, with whom he had magically fought and with whom he had identified himself, have disappeared along with the "notebook novels/quaderni romanzi". I have lost them, and sometimes I tell myself it is a pity: if it had occurred to me to put them away under lock and key, they would now give me back my entire childhood (Sartre, 2002, p. 108). This is another extremely important aspect of writing about oneself: the past returns to make itself present and in that past we can reread all the hopes, passions, childhood emotions, fears, anxieties and the anguish of youth, a youth that, together with the complexity that distinguishes it and designs it, represents the antechamber of our maturity (and also the antechamber of the man Jean-Paul). In memory lies the discovery of a destiny, the future of a great writer, but this memory has a dual function: that of recomposing and recompensating for lost time (Proust), but above all, that of giving back to the subject who writes a holistic vision of his own historical experience (essentially, composed of relationships, encounters, misunderstandings and other stories). Writing is an exercise of thought, it is a sort of self-therapy, self-reflection (there is not always a recipient outside of me); writing is a methodological training ground where, through syntactic construction and linguistic experimentation, the past returns to the present and memory and words become fundamental tools to be reborn and take care of this new birth again, both for the realisation of a more critical spirit and, first and foremost, for the reconstruction of a freer self. New birth as new life and this, principally, by attributing great significance to every existential project, which for the man-person is mainly a search for meaning, a search that can be executed in the field of philosophical and scientific reflection, as well as in an act of profound faith or in the realisation of an individual artistic and literary path, but still in the fullness of a communicative and relational act that is sincerely shared (Boffo, 2005). Writing is a difficult act to accomplish which often requires more than one attempt and that sometimes withstands certain meanings that might originally have appeared clearer. Often, it is necessary to reread past experiences, to rethink them (shedding new light on the event), to rewrite them (with a different, richer, more lucid, even metaphorical and perhaps liberating language) "to experience them again, redelivering to the autobiographer all the cognitive and emotional fullness of the actions, gestures and thoughts that have accompanied him over time. Writing is a sort of examination of conscience, which for the author consists in the search for an authentic meaning that acts as the glue between the simplest (daily) experiences and the unpredictability of human occurrence (Castelli, 1959). Writing is not completeness (it cannot be), but the use of time in which it occurs gives it a form that is not a limit but a value, since it narrates and paints images linked to a man-context here and now. The form and the images constantly change within the narration and writing and this is perhaps one of the elements that has greater pedagogical-formative value because it is the testimony of a suffered and lived transformation of a subject who becomes a man and finally (perhaps) a person. (Cambi, 2002; Colangelo, 1998, 2003). The time of a story is the guideline that compels us to tell (or better interpret) ourselves once again and it is the mirror that reflects the author's ever new and different image of himself. It becomes easier to once again cite the testimonials of great authors, writers and philosophers, who have made of their own *histoire de vie* that extraordinary, useful and indispensable tool to continuously give and search for a profound meaning for their own "experience" in the world:

Given that rather preceding age than waiting for it, I began to decipher my moral entity to myself many years ago; and I had done it with a pen as well, not with thought. And I still keep a kind of diary which for some months I had had the constancy to write, including not only my usual nonsense from day to day, but also the thoughts, the intimate causes, which made me operate or speak: all in order to see, if I looked at myself in a misty mirror, I would see an improvement.

I had begun the diary in French; I continued it in Italian; it was not well-written in either language; it was rather originally felt and thought" (Alfieri, 1992, pp. 163-164. Italics mine). Admirable intuition that feeling and thinking that expand the narrative perspective to the point of making it become a certain form of phenomenology of self-knowledge, or rather of an *anthropos* (as Sartre

would once again state) all outstretched and committed to the realisation of his own absolute freedom. In this project "the autobiographical analysis requires the subject to rethink himself through a work of connection between the present (what one is) and the past (what one has become and how), of the projection of repressed needs and expectations not realised, of interpretative labour and of the construction of meaning, at the end of which it is precisely the identity crisis that is objectivity and, therefore, experienced, possessed and even more controlled "(Cambi, 2002, p. 116). It is necessary to continue to cultivate all those moments dedicated to critical reflection, and strongly self-criticism on the part of the subject, which, through a sophisticated methodological elaboration (in order not to fall into narcissism and expressive superficiality), become the heart and engine of autobiographical writing as self-care. Self-care is understood as an interminable analysis (for a lifetime) of the subject's cognitive, historical and emotional experiences, and acts as an interpretative meta-paradigm of the complex educational and formative device that distinguishes every context-man.

Bildung and self-care

Writing, and in particular writing about oneself, has acquired over time a value and an increasingly central role in and for the Bildung (formation of man): firstly because writing "urges" the writer (the autobiographer) to recover all those forgotten or removed, but rather significant pieces of one's existential adventure (Cambi, 2002; Demetrio, 1995; Lejeune, 1986); and it is also increasingly central because through the use of memory and writing, emotions, affective sensations, cognitive and relational elements, passionate or spiritual experiences can re-emerge (sometimes, even in a violent and disruptive way), that, however, belong to the private and collective life of each individual. The submerged re-emerges, the implicit becomes explicit and everyday gestures lose their apparent mediocrity and banality to become conscious and significant acts of a "first actor" who really wants to be able to interpret (and, therefore, take charge of) his own "being-in-the-world" (again from Sartre's memory). Writing is a secret and solitary art in which the author takes possession of his own thought without having to show it to others. [...] Writing is a kind of conversation with oneself from which many others are exempted. It allows us to discover in the depths of ourselves an ignored friend who gives us an incessant revelation, both familiar and miraculous and which continually elevates and allows us to grow: we are afraid of letting it go as if with it we were losing the best part of who we are" (Lavelle, 2004, pp. 113-114). The activity of writing is a sort of materialisation of reality, which on the one hand, can appear incomplete, but on the other hand, can be a precious tool to take care of oneself and increase control over one's own incompleteness, on the fragments of one's existence, on the darkest issues (issues still far from being understood and accepted) related to the history of each person and human frailty and precariousness. (Fadda, 1997). The subject who tells himself, says Battistini (Battistini, 1990) is the one who, "looking at himself in the mirror", wishes to retrace and re-experience his own history and in this we can identify both a strong desire for permanence and an exceedingly strong spirit of survival, even if, the autobiographical pages often suffer from a literary style that crystallises lived time in non-dynamic and non-mobile expressions. But, this is an exclusively instrumental limit in that the writing of oneself is (and today more than ever, if we shift our interest towards issues related to the question of the subject and the interpretation of a complex society and postmodernism) necessary to the subject "in its curative peculiarities, of self-affirmation and growth (perhaps, it is the only tool currently capable of touching and examining the deepest and most intimate needs and necessities of the contemporary, disoriented and restless man), (Certini, 2000). The art of writing, therefore, presents itself as a possible, but effective, pedagogical and formative tool as it is able to restructure the experience of the subject in the light of a more critical and profound interpretation of social and cultural events. Writing, therefore, can induce change and in this we find inscribed the cornerstones of the training process and of the "subject-as-training" (Cambi, 2002), training linked, above all, to the search for oneself. "At the base of this

completed/unfinished analysis of one's own lived experience, a pedagogical category must be placed, which on several occasions (think of Demetrius, Fadda, etc.), has been underlined as constitutively formative: that of care, or rather of "self-care" [...] "Self-care" is taking care of one's existence, one's moods, one's character and one's "destiny" on the part of the subject, imposing oneself as his own "vigilante" and his own guide, theoretical and practical, which calls for an internal duplication and a projected work of the conscience on itself: a complex, nuanced, aristocratic work, but that can also be conceived and made available to everyone (ivi., pp. 118-119). Self-care as a search for meaning, therefore, but also as listening to oneself because only through the recognition of the voices that inhabit us can we truly acquire full awareness of the many worlds we live in and that are part of our history. Self-care, continues Cambi, as a meta-pedagogical device and writing is to be considered a sort of therapeutic tool because it stimulates the author to transform and modify his own traits and features, both as a social actor, but above all, in light of a more authentically human commitment. Writing has a dual formative and curative function, because writing is basically a critique of experience and supporting and facilitating writing practices means offering another opportunity to those who have not been able to fully grasp the sense and the meaning of one's acting and thinking.

To educate in narration it is necessary to know how to tell one's own story: personal, professional, interior etc...because reflexivity is the central tool for knowing how to rethink and reorganise oneself according to the requests and needs that come from others. Being teachers, educators and parents means first of all knowing how to tell a story, knowing how to offer a physical gesture together with a reassuring look, establishing perfect harmony between the active subject "I" and the valuable subject "you". Inclusion is creating harmony through storytelling.

Writing is also a form of resistance, a barrier between the subject's conscience and the pervasiveness of a "single dominant thought" - for example that of mass media - which does not offer the possibility of confrontation and debate (an intelligent discussion), but the passive distribution of images and meanings that are the same for everyone, here and now. Writing can become self-care because it can help the subject to rediscover the many dimensions of the human, and to comfort him (ethically and spiritually) in the face of the nauseating and overwhelming presence of the real (Sartre, 2001). The anthropos, therefore, presents itself in all its potential: a free and critically free spirit, creator in the first instance of his own existential project (and, therefore, formative), able to independently manage (through the essential choice of social human values to be cultivated) his own time and his own history and capable of healing and restoring the unsolved issues that represent all the infirmities of the body and spirit, through qualitatively and technically original therapies and tools (or long forgotten), such as, for instance, writing. *Nulla dies sine linea* claimed Sartre, and beyond the profound literary and philosophical value that these few words expressed in Latin may have, they suggest a training path that has great pedagogical value since the expressive tool (didactic?) is pragmatically joined to theoretical-personal awareness, creating a place of understanding between educating and thinking about new strategies for training (self-training) of the postmodern subject, a subject in constant search for meaning within a never simple lived experience, never linear, punctuated by so many lights and so many shadows, but, which renders the experiential path of each individual unique and unrepeatable. "The true role of writing is to recognise the fleeting moments in which man feels transported above himself, in order to let him penetrate the substance and the light within the fabric of everyday life itself" (Lavelle, 2004, p. 116). *Nothing dies sine linea*.

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