

CHAPTER ONE

TELOS AND TORTURE

I

Many recent thinkers have held that human lives are lived largely in or through narratives. Advocates of this view maintain, in one form or another, that our self-understandings and our understandings of others are articulated as stories. And they tend to connect this alleged fact with the alleged human drive for meaning, a drive that pulls us back from the abyss where death by suicide beckons.

Narrative has become a sort of philosophical panacea, performing all sorts of tasks that philosophers and other intellectuals seem to think need performing. Narrative has been used, for example, to explain the human experience of time. It has been used in the personal existential project of constructing a coherent life out of the chaos of experience; here, it sorts for relevance and yields explanations. It has been used to describe or explain the forms human sociality, to develop a taxonomy of roles or archetypes. It has been used as a central ethical category, or as a ground for ethical theory.

All these functions have something in common. In each case, narrative is a principle of or a strategy for organization. Narrative gives form, or displays form, or imposes form. This should hardly be surprising. In its use with regard to drama, the epic, and the novel—the use from which it has been expanded—narrative is the most general term to express the sheer fact that the work is organized. When we say that narrative is what makes possible the human experience of time, for example, we may well mean that it organizes time, which may in turn mean that it brings order out of a chaotic temporal flow, or that it makes an experience of time for the first time possible, that in

some sense it makes time. And likewise narrative is supposed to be a principle or a category for displaying or constructing forms of organization in lives, social systems, or axiomatics.

The other central distinguishing feature of narrative in all its uses is that it lends meaning to what is organized under its auspices. The notion of narrative was developed with regard to literary artifacts. The primary notion of meaning is what emerges within the interpretation of such objects. What is paradigmatically “meaningful” is the linguistic structure or work; its meaning can perhaps be given in an interpretation which correlates its units with other linguistic units, or with experiences, or with objects in the world. If it turned out that human life were narrative, or that time and the world in time were experienced fundamentally as narrative, human life would be an appropriate object for this sort of interpretation. Human life would have “meaning” in as straightforward a sense as anything can have meaning.

I will be attempting something of a genealogy and a therapy for such views. I will try to sketch the limits of narrative as a category, and some of its political sources and implications. I’m going to run serially through several philosophers on these matters, probing for a way out of their narratives, out of my narratives, out of all narratives. I will question whether and to what extent human experience and human life are organized narratively, and I will question whether human experience and human life are meaningful, what that might mean, and why we seem to think they should be, or that we would commit suicide if they were not.

This is not to say that narrative doesn’t have liberatory possibilities, and it not to say that I or you could or should live without it. But I will share with you that I believe that every counter-narrative brings with it a new capacity of oppression, and that this capacity is proportional to the coherence and meaningfulness of the narrative. So the more narrativized the narrative, the more thoroughly organized and chock-full of significance it is, the more problematic. I am interested, then, not only in departures from narrative, or in letting go of narrative, but also in the ways narratives are compromised as narratives in narratives, the ways they break down, evade paraphrase, incorporate and are incorporated by the random, provide us with lines of flight from themselves and from ourselves.

A particularly clear version of the uses of narrative I will be rejecting has been put forward by Alasdair MacIntyre. At the outset, however, I want to emphasize that not all narrativism can be tarred with the brush with which I paint MacIntyre, as we shall see. Nevertheless, MacIntyre’s position is useful as an initial stalking horse. He writes:

I am what I may justifiably be taken by others to be in the course of living out a story that runs from my birth to my death; I am the subject of a history that is my own and no one else's, that has its own peculiar meaning. When someone complains—as do some of those who attempt or commit suicide—that his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often and perhaps characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any point, any movement toward a climax or telos. Hence the point of doing any one thing rather than another at crucial junctures in their lives seems to such a person to have been lost.¹

Here we have a version of narrative as existential project, which MacIntyre connects quite correctly to forms of social organization and comprehension.

MacIntyre places stringent criteria of unity on what could count as a narrative; for his purposes, life as narrative first off requires a telos toward which that life is driving, and secondly organizes the events of that life fairly strictly with regard to that telos.

In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. . . . The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned, or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest. (218–19)

For MacIntyre, then, narrative is bound up with the teleology of human life, a teleology that lends life intelligibility or makes it meaningful. Life is something at which we can succeed or fail, and the standards of success or failure are given with reference to a goal; progress toward or regress away from that goal yields standards for evaluation of lives. “The meaning of life” is then the goal toward which your life or even all human life tends; the “story” of your life is the story of progress toward or regress away from that goal.

This teleological emphasis emerges directly from Aristotle, although the view that teleology and narrative are identical cannot be attributed to him. But recall the opening of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Every craft and every investigation, and likewise every action and decision, seems to aim at some good; hence the good has been well described as that at which everything aims. . . . Suppose, then, that

1. *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2nd edition 1984), p. 217.

(a) there is some end of the things we pursue in our actions which we wish for because of itself and because of which we wish for the other things; and (b) we do not choose everything because of something else, since (c) if we do, it will go on without limit, making desire empty and futile; then clearly (d) this end will be the good, i.e., the best good.²

Part of my point in what follows is that far from representing a series of trivial truths or tautologies, this view is, at the time Aristotle proposes it, an innovation, and that, at any time, it is optional: it describes a particular form of life, and one that is not even very thoroughly pursued in the cultures in which it has currency. For now, however, note that we have an arrangement or distribution of projects, and that this distribution is determined by an overarching telos (I will call this distribution in what follows the *teleological order*). This arrangement of projects subsumes, for Aristotle, all the crafts and arts, all investigations, all actions, all decisions, and finally, all things. Thus, it is the teleological order that first articulates the arena of all human active and even mental life, and it is also this order which in some sense connects human life to the cosmos, which is itself organized teleologically. Consider, for example, the fundamental notion of ‘final cause’ in Aristotle: the basic mode of explanation even of nonhuman nature is teleological. “[T]he science which knows to what end each thing must be done is the most authoritative of the sciences, and more authoritative than any ancillary science; and this end is the good in each class, and in general the supreme good in the whole of nature.”³ So there is an order of nested teleologies in which human lives must find a place; to find the place of human life in that order is to compose an “ethics.” And notice too that the initially quoted passage betrays the anxiety that a life lived in local ends, life without an overarching project that subsumes the others, would be “empty and futile.”

Then the immediate role of ethics is to provide an account of practical reasoning: that is, a strategy or technique by which we can display the ordering of human action for ends. First, such account will (supposedly) be descriptive: it will show how we actually (supposedly) go about ordering our actions by ends. And then it will also be normative: it will show which ends are worthy of pursuit. So it will simultaneously provide us with self-understanding within the teleological order and make us better or more excellent agents within that

2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), pp. 1, 2.

3. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b, trans. W. D. Ross in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 1554.

order. It will describe the “meaning” of life in the narrativist sense and help us to realize that meaning. It will, thus, by sketching a limit, show us how lives (significantly, womanish or slavish lives) can fail in this order or be located outside it. And it will connect meaningful and excellent lives to a cosmic order that itself is driving toward ends in which our projects themselves participate.

It is problematic to assert that there are any criteria for the success and failure of whole lives, much less to assume blandly that we need such criteria or have access to them. It would be worth asking: why do we want to evaluate whole lives for success or failure? What does that practice indicate about the sorts of people that get constructed in particular situations? I think that such a genealogy, of which I will give a sketch in later sections, would have to proceed through an understanding of political or economic contexts that would make such evaluations possible and important. It is significant, that is, just who Aristotle excludes from this order. If life has a goal, then we can evaluate lives for their success or failure, but think for a moment of how problematic such evaluations are. “Her life was a failure.” What would that mean? That she didn’t have children, or that she didn’t rise to the top of her profession, or that she was unhappy, or that she made other people unhappy, or that she didn’t achieve salvation? Think first of all of how problematic any particular evaluation to that effect is. And think very carefully about what social practices would demand or make use of such evaluations, and about whether there could be social practices that did not. I am not certain that life has a goal. I could live with that, and am living with it anyhow, since if my life has a goal, I have no idea what it is. Now, on the other hand, I am not so certain I could live with having a life-goal, and eventually I will try to explain why.

It would seem that a life could be narrated from an indefinite number of points of view internal and external to the person whose life is being narrated. These are going to be related because, as we will see, MacIntyre thinks that narratives are constructed socially, so that insofar as the various narrative agencies are embedded in the same sociality, their sense of relevance and articulation of goals will likely be similar (at a minimum, they will present lives with the same taxonomy of meanings and purposes). From an external point of view, a life that is dissipated in distractions from its quest is perfectly narratable; it is narrated as a failure. But consider for a moment what such a life is like from the inside, if it is self-conscious and narratively constructed. To be dissipated into distractions is to lose track of one’s goals, to flounder around among goals, or without clear goals. By MacIntyre’s account, that would be an experience of the breakdown of narrative, though one would still be “living in a narrative” to the extent that there is a socially articulated telos from which one is distracted.

The lapse into unintelligibility from the internal point of view of which MacIntyre speaks—the dissipation into distraction, and so forth—must by MacIntyre’s own lights be a breakdown in the ability to find a narrative for oneself, to connect with the ongoing stories provided by one’s culture. For MacIntyre, life as a quest story is life as a project. The project might fail of completion, or one might be distracted from one’s quest, and so forth. But the experience of the loss of project itself must be an abandonment of the narrative from the internal point of view.

We live out our lives, both individually and in our relationships with each other, in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future. . . . There is no present which is not informed by some image of some future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a telos—or of a variety of ends or goals—toward which we are either moving or failing to move in the present. (215–16)

Here, MacIntyre strikes the theme of narrative as the experience of temporality. But he gives this a particularly emphatic spin; for MacIntyre, the human experience of time involves the organization of current energies with regard to a determinate imagined future. This is in turn related to the Aristotelian conception of practical rationality, so that we derive an account of temporality from an ethical “insight”: we are located in time insofar as we organize the past and perform acts of will in the present in the service of or with regard to a determinate telos or a determinate plurality of purposes. The human form of temporality is the quest narrative or the project; lives can then be evaluated from the point of view of their goals; temporality is rationality is narrative; we are smeared over time by the use of ourselves or our bodies as our own instruments or as the instruments of others. The possibility of a breakdown of intelligibility would hence, for MacIntyre, be a breakdown in goals, a moment, for example, in which the present ceases to be informed by an image of the future, or in which the present ceases to be dedicated instrumentally to the service of the future, in which the past ceases to be “read” as a story of the application of a series of past presents to past, present, and future futures. To lapse into such a moment (if it is possible, according to MacIntyre, to do so) would be to lapse not into an unintelligible narrative; rather, it would be to lapse into the realm of the unnarrated. Or more precisely, that is how it would appear from the point of view of the “distracted” person.

That is why I say that MacIntyre imposes rather draconian constraints of coherence on narratives. A life or a life-slice constitutes for MacIntyre a narrative just insofar as that life or segment is organized instrumentally with regard

to purposes, so that any material that resists such organization, that cannot be smoothly taken up into the temporality constructed in instrumental rationality, compromises the coherence of the narrative, which is to say that it compromises the narrative character of the life in question. Of course, it is amazing what can be incorporated into a narrative; what seems to evade or compromise the narrative gets incorporated as a barrier or a distraction or a lapse, and hence appears precisely within the narrative. The capacity of narrative as MacIntyre understands it to organize a life is very great indeed. On the other hand, as I will suggest, one could work this the other way round; one might assert that even the most coherent narrative is already compromised, has already broken down, is already in excess to instrumentality.

To repeat, one might, particularly from the external point of view, easily enough sweep up moments that evade or obstruct coherence into a narrative: “Then for a moment, lost in the throes of orgasm, he ceased to order his life by goals.” On the other hand, we have arrived at what seems to be a standoff, for one might also start sweeping whole lives into unintelligibility; one might regard the prodigious effort to order one’s life into a series of projects, which are in turn ordered into a single project, as the desperate imposition of a comprehensible surface on a massive incomprehensible randomness. (It is perhaps this view—the view that there is prenarrative experience or a random world which precedes narrative organization—that MacIntyre most firmly rejects; he diagnoses it as a symptom of modernity or as existential romanticism. And all the textualists I mentioned earlier—Rorty, say, or Goodman—likewise oppose this view as strongly as they oppose anything; they point out that we cannot hold up the prelinguistic world for comparison with the linguistic articulation of the world; the world comes to be in its articulations into language, or really just is a system of symbols, and so on.) Every lapse or distraction can be narrated from some point of view, but on the other hand every narrative is also lapsing or distracted. The lapse of goal can appear within the narrative, but it appears precisely as a lapse, as an interstice in the narrative structure. One might indicate the relation of a particular event as a lapse to the order of teleology. But one might also ostend or celebrate the moments in the narrative in which the narrative is coming apart, is in danger of lapsing into incoherence or meaninglessness, in which goals shift or dissolve, or in which one ceases at a certain moment to order one’s life in terms of a projected future.

I’ve tried to live my own life with an extreme degree of coherence; I’ve tried to understand my own life as a *techne*, to dedicate it to the realization of well-defined goals. I’ve tried to rationalize my life: both to live it rationally and to convince myself that I have lived or am living it rationally. I reached a point

at which I came to experience the need to do that as a torture. I came to experience the recalcitrance of myself to my will, came to experience the immensity of my own horrible and lovely irrationality. I came also to experience or to admit the recalcitrance of the world to my will. The latter recalcitrance I could initially narrate as a series of “barriers” to my life-plan. But I reached the point at which I wanted to learn to let the world be instead of trying to transform it into an instrument of my will. So, as I say, we are in a standoff here, a standoff between the future and the present, between rationality and ecstasy, between meaning and affirmation.

MacIntyre takes this standoff and actually uses it as an argument for his position. He quotes one of Samuel Johnson’s travel diaries which appears to report, in the quaint current phrase, that life is “just one damned thing after another.” (You might have noticed this: your life, most days, *is* just one damned thing after another, and you’re too tired, at day’s end, to work up any of it, much less, ludicrously, all of it in relation to your quest.): “There we waited on the ladies—Morville’s.—Spain. Country towns all beggars. At Dijon he could not find the way to Orleans.—Cross roads of France very bad.—Five soldiers.—Women.—Soldiers escaped . . . etc. etc.” Johnson’s stuff looks like just a fragmentary set of specific observations with no attempt to impose a connective flow, much less a narrative coherence. Oddly, MacIntyre twists this into an argument for his own position. He remarks that “the characterization of actions allegedly prior to any narrative form being imposed upon them will always turn out to be the presentation of what are plainly the disjointed parts of some possible narrative” (215). No doubt we could suck all of Johnson’s observations into a narrative if there were any profit in so doing. On the other hand, and as I will discuss presently, we could also try to show how narratives themselves fail of coherence, how every characterization of actions allegedly ordered into the structures of plot will always turn out to be radically in excess of any possible narrative. Every narrative is just as plainly slapped together from bits of a possible randomness. “Unintelligible actions are failed candidates for the status of intelligible actions” (209), MacIntyre writes. But intelligible actions are, by the same token, not exhausted by their intelligibility, and are radically amputated by the desperation with which intelligibility is imposed on them. What might be true to say is that narrative coherence and chaos are mutually and simultaneously caused and that the experience of each is impossible without the experience of the other. So I yearn for the prenarrative or what exceeds narrative precisely as an expression of the thoroughness with which my life is narrated; I engage in a romantic yen for the “primitive” or the ateleological. But then the dialectic runs just as firmly the other way: there is a desperation in the thoroughness with which narrative is made in experience.

To anticipate, it is worth remarking that there are narratives that boil down to a series of apparently disconnected moments, that thematize precisely this disconnection as a way of collapsing writer and reader back into the unfolding present. Perhaps the greatest example of this is Bashō's *Okyu-no-hosomichi*, which is the tale of a pilgrimage, in other words an example of a primary narrative form, the there-and-back-again travelogue familiar in the west since the *Odyssey*. But here is a passage, in Cyd Corman's translation:

Spent night at Iizuka, bathed at hot-springs, found lodgings but only thin mats over bare earth, ramshackle sort of place. No lamp, bedded down by shadowy light of fireplace and tried to get some rest. All night, thunder, pouring buckets, roof leaking, fleas mosquitoes in droves: no sleep. . . . Hired horses, got to post town of Kōori. Future seemed further off than ever, and recurring illness nagged, but what a pilgrimage to far places calls for: willingness to let world go, its momentariness, to die on the road, human destiny, which lifted spirit a little, finding foot again here and there, crossing the Okido Barrier in Date.⁴

This passage raises many themes that we will explore as time goes on, including destiny. But for now, notice that momentariness, in contrast to the temporal smear of narrative, is the theme of this passage and is also instantiated in it; the book as a whole offers a series of lessons in reawakening to the present moment. The *Okyu-no-hosomichi* is a narrative that displays the fact that narratives, as also lives, are constructed out of a series of presences or presents, so that though we build moments into narrative, the narrative also disintegrates into moments. Of course Bashō's primary literary form is the haiku, which is always devoted to bringing the moment home, to crystallizing an instant:

Rainwater clings to
the quartz pebble, and to me.
Briefly, we glisten.

My only complaint about the haiku as a poetic form is that it is too long.

I am not sure whether MacIntyre believes that human life as quest or as project could be abandoned, for he believes that lives take place within social practices, and that social practices provide those lives with goals. But here are a few bald assertions. No human life has ever been ordered with the degree of coherence that MacIntyre ascribes to every human life. The quest is only one

4. Bashō, *Back Roads to Far Towns*, trans. Cyd Corman and Kamaike Susumu (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1996), p. 61.

particular form of narrative and itself reflects a certain very specific social positioning. One can be driven to suicide by the lapse into unintelligibility, but one can also be driven to suicide by the attempt to render the incredible welter and incoherent profusion of a life perfectly intelligible. And even the suicide by unintelligibility may respond to the socially articulated demand to make oneself intelligible.

A useful example here is the Book of Job. Job loses a sense of narrative coherence in his life as he loses the things and people he loves. Above all, he loses the teleological ordering of his life; one senses that he always assumed that faith and righteousness would be rewarded, thus that he deserved the things and the happiness and the children that he had, and that, furthermore, he would continue to have them or indeed to accumulate them. God allows Satan to try Job's faith by ripping Job's neat little story of his life to shreds, by taking away the teleological order, by stripping every project and every purpose from Job except the one remaining, highest purpose: to serve God and keep faith. Job's response is what I would call "ecstatic": the prose of the King James version loses structure, just pours:

My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope. O remember that my life is wind: mine eye shall no more see good. The eye of him that hath seen me shall see me no more: thine eyes are upon me, and I am not. As the cloud is consumed and vanisheth away: so he that goeth to the grave shall come up no more. . . . My soul chooseth strangling, and death rather than my life. I loathe it; I would not live alway. . . . How long wilt thou not depart from me, nor let me alone till I swallow down my own spittle. . . . And why dost thou not pardon my transgression, and take away mine iniquity? for now I shall sleep in the dust; and thou shalt seek me in the morning, but I shall not be. (Job 7)

Job here longs to be relieved not only of his trials and of his life, but of God. He yearns not for a glorious afterlife, but for absolute extinction ("as the cloud is consumed and vanisheth away"); that is why I call the passage ecstatic, for there are ecstasies of pain as well as of pleasure, and the seduction to ecstasy is always also a seduction to extinction.

Now this lamentation could be read, in fact is most naturally read, in a way that MacIntyre would find compatible with his ethics. Job has "lost the thread of the story he was telling"; he's lost the things and the purposes that give his life meaning. When he loses these things, he comes to yearn for extinction, and this yearning is itself narrated ("as the cloud is consumed and vanisheth away"): narrated precisely as the "lapse," the "barrier," the "distraction" from project. Job might as well be extinguished at this point if the pro-

ject cannot be resuscitated, if God will not finally reinstate the teleological order, will not again make sense of Job's faith. Job's despair could then be represented as a despair arising from the loss of narrative meaning. Indeed, this world and his own life no longer make sense to Job along the neat lines that they did previously: that God rewards righteousness with earthly happiness, and thus that the life of an exemplary man of faith will be a linear progress toward and in happiness.

But I want to suggest a different reading, one that is, oddly enough, compatible with what I am speculating MacIntyre's reading would be. We could represent the instrument of Job's torment alternately as his loss of narrative or as the narrative itself. What drives Job to despair is his loss of meaning, but what makes him sensible of that loss is precisely the meaningful ordering of his life. Job has achieved a perfect, effortless conciliation with the teleological order: that is the sense (here) in which he is the man of faith. He has expunged himself perfectly (or apparently so) into the order of signs, into God's word. ("There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil" [Job 1].) In that sense, the extinction he longs for is something that he already had; there was (apparently) nothing left of Job but the word of God: no excess, no disobedience, no tension. That is precisely why Satan wants to torment him. What drives Job to despair is the lapse, the failure of his narrative; his life has become incomprehensible in the teleological order ("as a cloud is consumed and vanishes away"). But that failure is, of course, only a failure by the standards of that order: ecstasy is only transgression where the symbolic order is installed. It is only a complete transgression where that order is installed perfectly, as it is in Job. The lack of meaning drives one toward extinction only insofar as meaning itself is experienced as an imperative. So it is as true to say that Job is driven to despair by faith as that he is driven to despair by a trial of faith, that he is as driven by the symbolic order as by its lapse. In fact, those are two ways of saying the same thing.

And I am interested in the prose here, for it is a disintegration of sense inscribed precisely within the word of God. The passage I quoted is the hub or pivot of the Book of Job; it is a longing for extinction expressed precisely in a process of the extinction of sense ("my life is wind . . . and I am not"). In that sense the passage is ecstatic—"my life is wind . . . and I am not"—that is what ecstasy is, what defies and extinguishes the narrative order. That is the moment at which Satan's trial comes to a certain kind of fruition: Job does not even doubt God's providence, but he wants to be annihilated from the order of that providence, if *this* is the form it takes. It is important that this desire for, or

indeed experience of, annihilation can be taken up into the order of signs (“my life is wind . . . and I am not”): that confirms MacIntyre’s vision of that order. But it is equally important that it *is* a desire for annihilation that is so taken up (“my life is wind . . . and I am not”): that disarticulates the order of signs within that very order. You could not have this narrative without the moment of its disarticulation, and you could not have the moment of disarticulation without the narrative. The excess must be *inscribed*, the order must be reinstated. But the *excess* must be inscribed; the order must be compromised. The narrative is an exercise in intelligibility, but for that very reason it feeds off unintelligibility, needs it as it expunges it.

God shatters Job’s practical rationality. Or better, he shatters the world in which practical rationality is possible or in which sense itself makes sense. God shows to Job a world in which actions have no predictable consequences, in which there is no moral order whatever as any of us might be given to understand it. That shattering, surrendered to, *is* Job’s liberation, his enlightenment, his “return.” And that universe is *our* universe, a universe which displays no moral order that we can understand. When, as in Aristotle and Hegel, human action is linked in the teleological order to the unfolding of the world, the world is made comically human—comically because even human beings aren’t arranged and don’t arrange things teleologically very often or very well. The basic insight is right: we are linked to the world’s order (and its chaos); we are the world’s order (and its chaos) in one of its manifestations. But we need to take the shattering inhumanity of that order and try to understand ourselves within it or surrender ourselves to it, rather than trying to take our imposition of order on ourselves and one another as a model for the universe.

When God speaks to Job from the whirlwind, he speaks as a whirlwind would speak if whirlwinds spoke; he speaks in an overwhelming advocacy of chaos. He says: do you think I made the world for *you*, little man; do you think I made the world even for human beings?

Is the wild ox willing to serve you? Will it spend the night in your crib? Can you tie it in the furrow with ropes, and will it harrow the valley after you? Will you depend on it because its strength is great, and will you hand over your labor to it? Do you have faith that it will return and bring grain to your threshing floor? (Job 39, New Revised Standard Version)

God displays for Job a creation that is not centered on the human, a world in which human teleology is dwarfed in a universe that pays it no heed whatever, that displays no order that corresponds to it.

Who hath divided a watercourse for the overflowing of waters, or a way for the lightning of thunder; to cause it to rain on the earth, where no man is; on the wilderness, wherein there is no man; to satisfy the desolate and waste ground; and to cause the bud of the tender herb to spring forth? Hath the rain a father? (Job 38)

As Stephen Mitchell points out, Job and the reader are not meant to *answer* that question; it sits there as a question, puncturing our pretensions to comprehension. Get used to bewilderment. Is there one single thing in this universe that you can grasp adequately or fully? The world is brute and brutal, incomprehensible by any ethics; animals are ripping themselves apart at God's behest.

Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion? or fill the appetite of the young lions, when they couch in their dens, and abide in the covert to lie in wait? Who provideth for the raven his food? when his young ones cry unto God, they wander for lack of meat. (Job 38)

This God is the God of ravens no less than of men of virtue, and men of virtue are carrion. The Book of Job gives the most radical answer imaginable in theology to the problem of evil: God is the God of evil; God is the God of predation and of the corpse left to rot as much as of the good man of Uz. God is the whirlwind that disarticulates your little moral structure. If God tests you it is to break your comfortable little rationality so that you can find some measure of contact with reality.

What nails this brutal and beautiful cosmology is the image in verses 40 and 41 of the behemoth and the leviathan. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* describes these as symbols of chaos.⁵ "Behold now behemoth, which I made with thee" (40). (NRSV: "which I made just as I made you.") Here, God connects the creation of man with the creation of chaos; he connects human life not to the order of the universe as in the wistful rationalisms of Aristotle and Hegel, but to its disorder, its brutality, its predation, its love of killing. Consider the passage about warhorses at 39, which is followed by this:

Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom, and stretch her wings toward the south? Doth the eagle mount up at thy command, and make her nest on high? She dwelleth and abideth on the rock, upon the crag of the rock, and the strong place. From thence she seeketh her prey, and her eyes behold afar off. Her young ones also suck up blood: and where the slain are, there is she.

5. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 670n and 671n.

The message of Job, finally, is that you cannot break or tame the world; you cannot understand it (and if you could it would drive you insane); God's creation is not compassed in your moral order. The behemoth and the leviathan are, finally, the universe, are, finally, Job himself and God himself.

Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook? or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down? Canst thou put an hook into his nose? or bore his jaw through with a thorn? Will he make supplications unto thee? will he speak soft words unto thee? Will he make a covenant with thee? wilt thou take him for a servant for ever? Wilt thou play with him as with a bird? or wilt thou bind him for thy maidens? (Job 41)

No deals; no answers. Let go.

The moment of letting go is the moment simultaneously of despair and of ecstasy. I think it is impossible to imagine ecstasy at all in human life as MacIntyre conceives human life. The moment of ecstasy is a moment of vertigo, a vertigo that responds to letting go of one's projects into an all-encompassing present moment. A life with a telos, if there were any such lives, would be a life in which moments of ecstasy are useless; they don't drive the quest anywhere; they suck you back from the grail to where you are now. But Job needs the ecstasy just as he needs the reinstatement of the theocentric order, disarticulated by Satan precisely at the behest of God. Every quest incorporates and seeks to expunge ecstasy: Gawaine was tempted to abandon the quest when he found an enchanted castle full of beautiful women; he faced the choice between ecstasy and project.

Of course, one might imagine the great pleasure of actually finding the grail, or of coming across another vision of or clue to its whereabouts; one might even call that ecstasy, I guess. On the other hand, MacIntyre, like Aristotle, holds that the quest is completed only at death, which might make you wonder if it is a quest for death, since that's its "end." We might say that Job's quest ceases to be a quest for happiness and becomes a quest precisely for death. But what I am going to suggest is that in some sense, by the internal logic of the quest, every quest is a quest for annihilation. The success of the quest only gets evaluated from the point of view external to the quester in question. Of course, if the quest is a quest for death, it's also a quest to end one's thinking of one's life as a quest, and if life were the sort of unity that MacIntyre supposes it is, death would be a very great relief. At least you can let go of your little project at that point; no one, not even yourself, expects you to accomplish something today if you croaked last night, and the list you made for yourself of things to do tomorrow appears in the clothing of irony to those who discover it next

to your corpse. Death is an “ecstasy” in that sense; the dead do not organize their lives around the future and what they’re going to accomplish there.

Obviously, MacIntyre and Aristotle do not conceive the telos of a human life to be death, though that’s its “end” in one sense. But the quest of which human life is supposed to consist is not like the grail quest, which could get accomplished within your life, thus confronting you with the question of what the hell to do next. MacIntyre’s quest must suffice for an entire life, or it will not provide criteria for evaluation of lives. There can be and will be subquests, local goals to be met, and so on. But recall that MacIntyre is interested in giving an account of the unity of entire human lives and expects narrative to provide that. He cannot, thus, remain satisfied with piecemeal projects, local instrumentalities, a decent degree of temporally localized rationality. On the contrary, narrative must provide the socially articulated rational principles on which whole lives can be displayed in their coherence. I suppose discharging one’s quest would under such circumstances be the worst possible fate; one would lapse into unintelligibility. One might as well commit suicide at *that* point. One suspects, of course, that there’s going to be a place beyond death where all this gets sorted out; God will call you to judgment and tell you how you did on your project, grade you and write you a letter of recommendation.

And now let me frame a dilemma. If we take seriously MacIntyre’s claim that the quest suffices for a life, and if we restrict our view to this life, then the quest can never be fulfilled, in which case human life (which just is, without remainder, quest), is perfectly futile. The alternative would be that the goal is to be reached or not reached in the next life, in which case human existence looks to me like an eternal torment, since I am tortured by project. Heaven in such a case looks exactly like hell.

MacIntyre is reticent about the next life, and of course Aristotle had a similar view without moving into the next life; essentially he believed that the goal was a life of action in accordance with virtue (action of the soul, embodied in study), and hence that by realizing the local goals one would eventually be accounted happy. So let’s back off again into this life as a quest. The form of one’s quest, the final narration of one’s life, must be put into the hands of others; they’ll use it in your eulogy. And they’ll use it to order or explain their own lives and the lives they make together within social practices. Your life will then be, as indeed it has already been, part of their projects.

Thus, the telos of a human life has to be given within social practices, and for MacIntyre this means that the telos of human life is given by the roles one performs within those practices.

I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession. I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be good for one who inhabits those roles. (220)

Indeed, the notion of role is central to MacIntyre's narrativization of human life. "There is no 'I' apart from these [roles]" (176), MacIntyre writes, and the roles, though they are determined by social practices, are conceived as dramatic performances. MacIntyre goes so far as to order social interactions such as conversations, as well as whole human lives, into literary genres. Now one could easily nudge this into absurdity. But for now I just want to appeal to your self-reflection: if we liquidate your life into a role in a farce or whatever, do you think we've gotten all of it? Would we want to perform this liquidation, to fend off unintelligibility this thoroughly? And why would we need to do that? Because unintelligibility is a constant threat? Hardly, if human life is a quest narrative. But by the same token, we are constantly threatened (or, in my case, comforted) by unintelligibility, as MacIntyre's philosophy makes as clear as anyone's.

II

I suggested earlier that although seemingly unconnected, fragmentary, or bizarre events can be swept up into narratives, even those narratives which display the sort of extreme coherence that MacIntyre requires can be swept back into unintelligibility. I will consider here a figure whom MacIntyre makes central to modernity: Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is central to MacIntyre because, in *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard sets out a choice between the aesthetic and the ethical as essentially arbitrary. (That is according to MacIntyre, and this much is right: the choice is rationally arbitrary; no arguments will move one from the aesthetic to the ethical. But what moves one from the aesthetic to the ethical is also not merely a whimsical preference; it is despair.) Thus, for MacIntyre, Kierkegaard is symptomatic of the nightmare of modernity, in which rival visions of life confront one another with no hope of rational resolution, a nightmare that MacIntyre traces to the enlightenment conception of rationality as being value-neutral, and the post-enlightenment conception of values as being emotive preferences.

The aesthetic life is, for Kierkegaard, the life that seeks to make itself interesting, that goes out and tries to sample the smorgasbord of experiences. It is marked by a lack of seriousness. But the ethical, for Kierkegaard, orders life into project, and demands the highest seriousness. This seriousness is encapsulated according to *Either/Or* in the project of marriage as a lifetime commitment. MacIntyre writes:

When Kierkegaard contrasted the ethical and the aesthetic ways of life in *Enten/eller*, he argued that the aesthetic life is one in which a human life is dissolved into a series of separate present moments, in which the unity of a human life disappears from view. By contrast in the ethical life commitments and responsibilities to the future springing from past episodes in which obligations were conceived and debts assumed unite the present to past and future in such a way as to make of human life a unity. The unity to which Kierkegaard refers is [a] narrative unity. (241–42)

MacIntyre disagrees with Kierkegaard in the latter's account of the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical. He also disagrees with Kierkegaard's account of the ethical itself, which as MacIntyre points out is fundamentally Kantian. But where MacIntyre agrees with (his own reading of) *Either/Or* is in the characterization of the ethical life as unified by narrative teleology in a way that the aesthetic is not.

Two remarks: first, it is odd that Kierkegaard himself characterizes the aesthetic essentially through narrative; in setting out the aesthetic sphere, he calls to his aid tales about Don Juan as well as many other tales. It is hard to imagine a more perfectly unified, teleologically-driven narrative than the "Diary of a Seducer." Furthermore, when he comes to characterize the ethical with regard to the life-project of marriage, Kierkegaard runs precisely into problems with narrative. The narratives of love with which Judge William is familiar end with marriage; it is the exciting and "interesting" events bound up with securing the beloved over a series of obstacles that form the narratives of love in Western culture.

Over the centuries have not knights and adventurers experienced incredible toil and trouble in order to find quiet peace in a happy marriage; over the centuries have not writers and readers of novels labored through one volume after another in order to end with a happy marriage; and has not one generation after the other again and again faithfully endured four acts of troubles and entanglements if only there was the probability of a happy marriage in the fifth act? But through these efforts very little is accomplished for the glorification of marriage, and I doubt very much that any person by reading such books has felt himself made competent to fulfill the task he has set for himself or has felt himself oriented in life, for precisely this is the corruption, the unhealthiness in these books, that they end where they should begin.⁶

6. *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), vol. 2, p. 17.

The reason that there are not many narratives of long, happy marriages in which the parties involved find in marriage an ethical telos and devote their lives to its continuous realization is precisely that such a narrative would be insufficiently aesthetic. It would be boring, and Judge William's treatment of marriage is one of the most boring segments of Kierkegaard's entire oeuvre: it is pointedly boring, grindingly repetitive. The narrative of a happy marriage goes something like this: we committed ourselves to the project with utter seriousness, and then the next day we did the same, and the next day we did the same, and so on and on. Such a narrative is, in Aristotle's phrase, episodic. That is a funny thing about the ethical in relation to narrative: its successful realization consists fundamentally in episodes that embody that realization. In fact I don't think it is too much to say that by MacIntyre's standards there cannot be an ethical narrative on Kierkegaard's understanding of the ethical. For Kierkegaard, the ethical is that which has its telos in itself: the "purpose" of marriage is . . . itself. So a narrative of the ethical in Kierkegaard's sense isn't going anywhere; it is trying to find meaning and satisfaction in repetition. It is hard, however, to imagine a purely ethical narrative on any account of the ethical, though there can be narratives with an ethical upshot, which present barriers to the realization of the ethical, lapses away from it and recommitments to it. Thus, a decent narrative with ethical content is going to have to inscribe the failure of the ethical, its lapse, its rejection. Any decent narrative of the ethical is going to stand, that is, in excess to the ethical; it will show the ethical in a final victory, but it must also hold to the constant possibility of transgression. If the ethical is to be an achievement, then the transgression of the ethical is always going to be inscribed within it; *the ethical that is not threatened with collapse cannot be narrated.*

If we were in the mood to associate narrative and the ethical, we might also associate the foregoing insight with the insight that narratives themselves are always tenuous, that they take their character, among other things, from the character of what must be overcome in the achievement of the telos. And narrative is precisely the selection of material and its ordering into a whole that displays some degree of coherence and meaning; it is thus a safari into incoherence and meaninglessness, and part of the pleasure associated with narrative arises in building incoherences toward coherent closure.

P. G. Wodehouse is for my money a great master of narrative. And the structure of any Blandings Castle or Bertie and Jeeves adventure is this. We start with a simple idyllic situation, a lark, vacation, or interstice in the rush of life. One by one disturbing complications are introduced that push the situation to the brink of all-out madness. Then some genius in the cast—Galahad Threeep-

wood or Jeeves—pulls a rabbit out of the hat and re-orders the chaos. All ends with perfect coherence and more or less for the best. The point in the plot that I want to emphasize is the moment of excruciating tension, when the complications have reached incredible intensity and resolution appears impossible. Without that moment, the Wodehousian narrative is inconceivable. And that moment is, of course, the moment of the highest comedy, the moment in which we are bewildered into laughter, the moment of ecstasy. The narrative is indeed an achievement of coherence, but the coherence would have no significance or value without the moment in which its possibility is submerged in the chaotic or rhizomatic intertwining of subplots. Each subplot is complicated exponentially and compromised in its coherence by its merging into the dense chaotic system whereby it is placed into relation with all the others. And of course Wodehouse's narratives, though they have an ethical undertow in their very innocence and lack of seriousness, are paradigmatically aesthetic. The usefulness of most characters to Wodehouse ends promptly at the moment of marriage, which is why Bertie and Galahad remain forever bachelors.

The value of narrative to life is made possible and given urgency by the chaotic moment, the moment of absurdity, incomprehension, intolerable complication. The form or organization is made possible and given its specific characteristics by a specific possibility or fact of a chaos. The Greek tragedy, for instance, arises as a possibility in the resolution of an ever-intensifying chaotic pain system into an inevitability. One shows that the incomprehensible or the bizarre could not have been otherwise, but to show that requires precisely a sojourn to the incomprehensible and bizarre. And this is a sojourn that we all take from time to time, though whether we will return to or arrive at the inevitable or the form of temporality is for us, as it is not for Bertie or Oedipus, an open question. And so we reach for narrative, strive for order as an achievement. This is paradoxical, for inevitability is precisely what cannot be achieved. That makes a problem of the relation of narrative to practical rationality, as we seek to impose upon ourselves a life that could not have been otherwise. A particular form of *amor fati*: fate as something we achieve. This paradox is revealed in the necessity attributed to practical rationality as the supposedly universal human condition; our will is supposed to be something we cannot escape. That is why there is supposed to be no temporality outside narrative; that is why narrative becomes a transcendental principle, a condition of possible experience. This should absolutely not be confused with a Nietzschean *amor fati*, which is precisely the realization that our fate cannot be achieved and that instrumental rationality is a hatred of life. Nietzsche's love of life is precisely a return into love as a chaotic system; better, it is itself a chaotic love.

The actual narrative resources available in the Western tradition for treating romantic love leave love at the moment that love is transformed from the aesthetic to the ethical. It is worth noting that although MacIntyre treats narrative as essential to ethics, most of our narratives rollick through the aesthetic in Kierkegaard's sense, for the aesthetic is entertaining and the ethical is boring. (That is an aesthetic criticism of the ethical and of course does no damage to the ethical considered on its own terms. It is Kierkegaard's point, in fact, that neither the ethical nor the aesthetic can address or assess the other in its own terms without begging the question. If my question is why I should bother living ethically, the only answer an advocate of the ethical can give me is an ethical answer: that is how you ought to live. If my question is how someone can possibly live pre-ethically or aesthetically, the answer is that it is more interesting to live that way.) But that suggests at a minimum that MacIntyre's ethical treatment of narrative is optional. In fact, many aspects of it are optional; narrative gets used for many different purposes in the contemporary discourse. For example, MacIntyre places great weight on the singleness and coherence in narratives that allow whole human lives to be made intelligible. But other thinkers, including Rorty, emphasize precisely the multiplicity of alternative narratives, as well as their ambiguity, in trying to show the centrality of narrative to human life. And if MacIntyre is caught up in ethical uses of narrative (uses which in our culture at any rate are not the primary uses of narrative), many others are more interested in the aesthetic uses, in the play of narrative, and in narrative, and with narrative. If narrative can be used to suggest that our fate can be achieved, it can also be used to show that our fate is a simplification of a chaos (Wodehouse) or that it is something in the face of which we learn resignation or affirmation (Sophocles, Job, Nietzsche).

But what sets Kierkegaard most fundamentally in opposition to MacIntyre is not any of the points that MacIntyre selects for criticism, nor even his misreading of those points with which he takes himself to be in sympathy. MacIntyre omits Kierkegaard's treatment of the religious sphere in its entirety. Let us remind ourselves of some of the fundamental tenets of Kierkegaard's account of the religious. First of all, it goes through and then beyond the ethical: it presupposes the ethical, but is "higher." Second, the religious is a movement made by each individual one by one, not by committee. To perform one's social role perfectly is what the ethical demands; the religious involves something that is socially incomprehensible. To live ethically is to reconcile oneself to the universal or to seek to erase or expunge everything in oneself that is not perfectly describable as universal. MacIntyre does not actually believe in "the universal" in this sense, but we could put the point, in keeping with MacIntyre's concep-