1 INTRODUCTION

In the fields of early Christian literature and history and theological studies the concept 'narrative' has become exceptionally prominent during the last two decades or so. What is noteworthy is that this concern with narrative has mostly taken its cue from literary theory. However, a strong tradition of critical reflection on narrativity exists within the study of rhetoric. Given the prominence of 'narrative' in theological and exegetical studies nowadays it should be worth our while to investigate how rhetorical criticism deals with the phenomenon of the narrative from.

Stories that help people discover a capacity to become what they are not, have important consequences for moral reflection. Such stories can expand our moral responsibility by showing us that we are more free and more capable than previously imagined and by inviting us to decide how we will exercise our freedom. To appreciate the role of narrative in moral argument rhetorical critics must understand how storytellers can acquaint people with unfamiliar possibilities of conduct.

In this study I am concerned with the moral aspects of the narrative form, more specifically with how unexpected and innovative moral reflection (meaning moral development and awareness) can come from storytelling and the investigation of stories. For instance, how can moral reflection escape from cultural bondage? Thus, I do not want to discuss how narrative can move linguistic and other human creative faculties to the borders of mystery or such matters, important as they are. Furthermore, not all moral aspects of narrativity are at stake here, but simply the problem of presenting original, unprecedented insights—moral pos-
sibilities that, for example, can truly criticise prevailing norms and expectations—where narratives are involved.

2 SETTING THE SCENE: THE NARRATIVE EXPERIENCE OF REALITY

‘Narrative’ is definitely a prominent term in academic reflection nowadays.

Some writers assert the general thesis that the concept of story, or narrative, is a form of understanding *sui generis* that is fundamental to all historical thought and knowledge. Thus, to understand any historical event or form of thought (including ethical theories), one must comprehend it in the context of the narrative or narratives of which it is a part. Certain moral philosophers regard story as foundational, not only to the understanding of a moral tradition, but to the moral views of individuals. There are moral theologians [for whom]...it is the Christian story that provides the paradigms, metaphors, and concepts that determine adherents’ vision and thus shape Christian character. Some students of scripture make the more limited and particular proposal that narrative be revived as a way of construing the Old and New Tesaments for theological purposes (Nelson 1987:1).

What sets the scene for this study is the simple observation that narrative is ingredient to the historical understanding of ourselves and our communities. The meaning of moral practices and the use of moral concepts can be elucidated in terms of their place within narratives.

Narratives spring from a human need to bring the past and future into cohesion with the present—even if it is an illusory coherence. Humans, ‘like poets, rush “into the middest,” in *medias res*, when they are born; they also die in *medii rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems’ (Kermode 1967:7, cf :3-4). By telling, listening or reading, narrative offers to the imagination thought experiments in which we (learn to) link together the ethical aspects of human conduct and happiness and misfortune. It is due to the familiarity we have with the types of plot received from our culture that we learn to configure the various relationships between virtue, conduct, misfortune and happiness or unhappiness.

The moralities into which we are socialized are not so much sets of rules or principles as they are collections of stories about human possibilities and paradigms for action. These stories...disclose who we are, where we have been, and where we are going, thereby allowing us to locate our position in the larger scheme of things (Nelson 1987:9).

Alasdair MacIntyre (1981:190), reacting to the tendency of modernity to think about human life and action atomised and segmentised—to regard the self as being detached from society, history and even one’s own past—argues extensively
for an adequate conception of selfhood rooted in narrative. Although he wants to develop a pre-modern concept of virtue, his point that the unity of selfhood 'resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end' is important (1981:191, 199, 202, 209). Thus, to understand one's self it is necessary to discover the story or stories of which one is a part. Human actions cannot be seen as isolated bits of behaviour independent of one's intentions, beliefs, and settings. Rather, they ought to be understood as components of a narrative history, an 'enacted dramatic narrative in which the characters are also the authors' (:200). We may be assigned certain roles and inserted into a story that has existed before our appearance. We are, or at least are capable of being, 'co-authors' of our narratives. Despite the fact that we are acted upon and pressed into roles in the dramas of others, we are, nevertheless, able to enact our intentions and thereby to participate in the creation of stories that are uniquely our own. The narrative concept of the self implies that

the narratives which we live out have both an unpredictable and a partially teleological character. If the narrative of our individual and social lives is to continue intelligibly—and either type of narrative may lapse into unintelligibility—it is always both the case that there are constraints on how the story can continue and that within those constraints there are indefinitely many ways that it can continue (:201).

From this a central thesis emerges. According to MacIntyre, the concepts of narrative, intelligibility, accountability, and personal identity stand in a relationship of mutual presupposition. None is more fundamental than another, and all are necessary if we are to make sense of ourselves. Humans are in their actions and practice, as well as in their fictions, essentially story-telling animals. We are not essentially, but become through our history, tellers of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for humans is not about their own authorship; one can only answer the question, 'What am I to do?' if one can answer the prior question, 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' (cf MacIntyre 1981:201; Stroup 1975:136).

The essence of this whole perspective can, in a sense, be summarised with the title of Crites's 'landmark statement' (so called by Hartt 1984:117): the narrative quality of experience. In the present the past and the future 'exist' as modalities inseparably joined: only the narrative form can unify temporal experience.

The three modalities are correlative to one another...[T]he inner form of any possible experience is determined by the union of these three distinct modalities [present/past/future] in every moment of experience...[T]he tensed unity of these modalities requires narrative forms both for its expression (mundane stories) and for its own sense of the meaning of its internal coherence (sacred stories). For this tensed unity has already an incipient narrative form (Crites 1971:301-302).
But, acknowledging the narrative quality of experience a troublesome implication should not be overlooked, namely the disclosing of creative possibilities of thought and action: to what extent would that be possible given the dominance of a society’s or a culture’s stories?

For instance, Crites (1971:295-296) discusses what he calls ‘sacred stories’, that is, stories that people use to orient their individual and corporate existence and their sense of style to the great powers that establish the reality of their world. These stories are culturally given, hence they form, even create ‘the very consciousness that projects a total world horizon, and therefore informs the intentions by which actions are projected into that world’ (:296).

3 THE PROBLEM: MORAL POSSIBILTY
How do people assess ‘good reasons’ for moral action? Fisher (1987:64) writes:

Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings—their inherent awareness of narrative probability, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing narrative fidelity, whether or not the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives...

What Fisher is articulating here is that the strongest moral arguments are those which conform to people’s pre-existing beliefs about life. Narrative probability is the product of ‘structural’, ‘material’ and ‘characterological’ consistency (1987:47-49) and how people judge these will be determined by their concepts of causation and human nature. Similarly, fidelity exists when the values displayed in a story are ‘confirmed or validated in one’s personal experience, in the lives or statements of others whom one admires and respects, and in a conception of the best audience that one can conceive’ (:109).

Clearly Fisher has identified an important facet of how stories contribute to and determine the human condition. However, irrespective of whether one takes Fisher’s point in a strong or weak sense, what is troubling is the implication that ‘good stories’ cannot and should not exceed people’s values and beliefs.

Though the perspective thrown on the telling of Biblical stories and/or the Christian story is self-evident, some illustration may be in order. A well-known problem in the history of South African Biblical scholarship is the adaptation of exegetical results as political changes transpire. One is reminded of the cynical saying that in South Africa as soon as the government changes the theologians write a new Bible. This is well shown by Vorster (1984:205): although various statements concerning God’s precepts for society ‘claim to be Biblical they should rather be regarded as products of contextualized theology based on social interaction and legitimatized, as religious convention, by an appeal to Scripture’. That is, the ‘gospel’ simply becomes what is either ‘safe’ or ‘acceptable’ in terms
of the teller’s and the audience’s power base (cf Vorster 1984:216). One can rephrase this issue in terms of this paper’s argument as the failure of (South African) tellers of Biblical stories and the Christian story to do justice to the uniqueness and self-confrontational aspects of these stories. Their versions of these stories simply conform and maintain values and group preferences already existing.

A second example can be taken from the history of research on the parables of Jesus. Following in the wake of the New Hermeneutic, a clear trend developed which regards parable as drastic metaphor and in fact the quintessential narrative form (see, e.g., Funk 1966:125ff, 193-198; TeSelle 1975:72-80). In this perspective, the parables are ‘self-contained’ examples of the disclosive power of language. But the de facto result of such assumptions is quite the contrary. Reading these readings of Jesus’ parables one must admit with Stroup that the stories have simply become ‘susceptible to whatever strong winds of interpretation happen to be blowing at the moment’ (1975:138). To claim some narrative forms to be self-contained and therefore unusually (divinely) powerful is to ignore the basic hermeneutical principle of the interrelation of part and whole: the interpreter simply provides a personally preferred context (Tolbert 1979:41-43; Stroup 1975:138).

Various rhetorical critics have dealt with the problem that people judge stories that reinforce beliefs favourably, which in fact should be questioned, criticised or rejected. It seems that what narrative rhetoric usually achieves is to adjust ideas to people rather than people to ideas. The challenge for rhetorical criticism is to develop the theoretical tools for rhetors/storytellers with which to suggest unfamiliar ideals which exceed people’s beliefs and previous experience. That is, to provide an account of narrative rhetoric that not merely informs on how to persuade with narrative, but to provide the opportunity—or even the obligation—for interpreters of narrative to confront or expand people’s understanding of themselves or life.

Any account of narrative rhetoric should acknowledge how narrative plays a role in expressing the shared values of a culture, but a critical account must explain how rhetors can acquaint people with new and unsuspected possibilities of being and acting in the world.

Our goal is not to eliminate narrative from public discourse but to learn to use the narrative form more critically and more creatively. If stories can be constructed to wall off the senses to the dilemmas and contradictions of social life, perhaps they also can be presented in ways that open up the mind to creative possibilities developed in ways that provoke intellectual struggle, the resolution of contradiction, and the creation of a more workable human order (Bennet & Edelman 1985:161-162).

Before we continue I must stress that not everything in one’s culture/tradition is necessarily bad, oppressive, unethical or in need of improvement. Yet at no stage dare we assume that our traditions, our stories, our interpretations are above
criticism or fully capable of achieving virtue. And, I must stress, the claim is not that our narratives are unbreakable prisons; only that a problem—a very complex one admittedly—exists with regard to the social functions of narrative and storytelling.

4 NARRATIVE RHETORIC

In rhetorical theory narrative is seen as a communicational practice, as a particular cognitive operation within a concrete, historical setting with distinct psychological and social functions (cf, amongs others, Bennett 1978:2-4; Scott 1984:196-200; Farrell 1985; Fisher 1990). Rhetorical criticism approaches narrative from a rather different standpoint than literary criticism, and Fisher (1987:58) argues that the current developments in rhetorical theory concerning narrative is in fact a dialectical synthesis of two traditional strands in the history of rhetoric: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme.

Narration is defined quite broadly as 'symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them' (Fisher 1987:58). Rhetorical theory, however, is not so much interested in defining 'narrative' as in understanding this 'metacode' that allows for the transcultural communication of 'messages about the nature of a shared reality' (cf White 1980:6). In this perspective, it is not merely about a story, but about its telling: a story as 'a mode of social influence' (Fisher 1990:238). A narrative is considered a combination of information provided, intercontextual links, background required to fill out the information at hand and the clarification and appropriation of the social context in which the story (or its interpretation) will be used, assuming that there is a parallel between cognitive structure and everyday communicational forms (see, amongst others, Fisher 1985; Lucaites & Condit 1985; McGee & Nelson 1985).

All narratives may be said to disclose possibilities—referring to the depiction of plausible plots, characters and settings. But many narrative possibilities are but variations on familiar topics. The role of narrativity in expressing and applying the shared values of communities has long been acknowledged. An equally important role lies in acquainting people with creative possibilities of awareness and action.

One such manner to achieve this that immediately comes to mind is the narration of fantastic events, characters or plots.

4.1 Fantastic narrative elements

Many stories deal with highly unlikely events, or unbelievable stuff, without necessarily sacrificing narrative integrity. Or, quite obviously, many actions cannot occur outside the stories in which they are depicted. Some, like Jesus walking on water, can exist only within the world of the story, at least as far as many modern
audiences are concerned.

Be this as it may, often such stories are used for already familiar ideas, even though the stories told to convey them contain ‘plausible impossibilities’. Stories with fanciful components may merely reinforce customary values and beliefs, rather than suggesting new ways of living. Such components may symbolise certain general human abilities, but they do not establish that such abilities are within people’s grasp. Stories that employ unusual or fanciful elements do not necessarily thereby disclose unfamiliar possibilities of human conduct. That is, for example, unlikely occurrences, like talking animals in Aesop’s fables, serve maxims such as ‘never say die’ or ‘honesty is the best policy’.

Indeed, many story ‘applications’ of Jesus’ passion does exactly this: retellings suggesting that one should be stoic in suffering, or obedient no matter what. The parables of Jesus particularly fall easy prey to this; many retellings of Jesus’ famous stories portray common sense maxims. This is not to deny that some parables are about good common sense, but—the problematic of this study—stories can and at times should be told for more than affirming community values. In fact, affirming such values can at times be downright dangerous and unethical (and here one can refer to the way the creation narrative and the mission narrative of the church have been told by apartheid theologians; Loubser 1987:92-100 discusses the culmination of this trend in official statements).

Before we continue an important assumption that will not be discussed in detail must be mentioned.

4.1.1 Interpreting narrative
Underlying my discussion is the assumption that with regard to the use of narratives the work of interpretation will be done as best as possible. In other words, and once more an immense problem in its own right is at stake here, anyone engaging a story to be retold, or generating some narrative, also assumes the responsibility to understand that narrative as best one can. Whether listening to a story, or reading one, or telling one, the very act of doing so includes asking questions about that story, trying to understand it. We cannot escape the burden of interpretation. We dare not shirk our responsibility.

It is exactly a rather uncritical participation in the Biblical narratives, I submit, that contributes to the incompetence, the ineffectuality and unproductiveness of current moral and ethical contributions. Notice the easy jump from their narratives to ours in relation to Biblical stories in the following claims:

We are not only invited to be contemporaneous and like-minded with the biblical men. We are not only exhorted to hear the command as they heard it...[T]he command given to them and heard by them becomes directly the command given to us and to be heard by us. Their task becomes our task (Barth 1957:706).
In similar vein Auerbach observes (1953:43) that—in contrast to the ‘static’ literature of Greco-Roman antiquity—New Testament narratives depict a world which is not only ‘entirely real, average, identifiable as to place, time, and circumstances’, but is also earth shattering in its power. ‘Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours...we are to fit our own life into its [the biblical narrative’s] world, feel ourselves to be elements in the structure of universal history’ (:15).

We must consider a story in its context—and even ask about its truth. ‘If, then, it should turn out that the temporal ordering of the world in the plot were a falsification of the real world, the relevance of Mark’s ethic for the real world would be seriously compromised’ (Via 1985:10).

With ‘interpretation’ I invoke the intricate activity of historical understanding. Interpretation is contextualising. Talking about a text is talking about its context, and the context-text continuum is a matter of imaginative construction. It is a historical undertaking, in a comprehensive sense, concerned with the social, psychological, experiential and religious matters of the people and their activities in, behind and around a story: an elaborate and complex interweaving of questions and possible explanations concerning texts and their contexts which sees influences bouncing back and forth in intricate and unpredictable patterns.

An effort at valid, defendable interpretation is part of the rhetorical critical perspective. The effect of neglecting interpretation is well shown in the following citation (discussed by Frei in a somewhat different context):

I read somewhere in Juan Luis Segundo’s The Liberation of Theology that the meaning of the biblical injunction to ‘turn the other cheek’ under present revolutionary conditions (post-Enlightenment thinking, late capitalist hegemony) is ‘shoot-em between the eyes’ (or words to that effect)! Well, one envies him, the hermeneutical instruments that allowed him to do this. It has a long and honorable tradition. I was unable to check a...claim that Luther interpreted the story of Legion passing into the herd of swine in the following way: They did not actually drown. They swam. They swam and they swam, and they finally went ashore—in Rome! Luther said some other things also, of course, but at this point I think there is a certain similarity between him and Segundo, the only difference being that Luther had a sense of humor (Frei 1992:348).

Rowland (1987:268-271) argues extensively against the naive use of narratives, emphasising the need to establish standards to evaluate moral questions, hence underlining the importance of interpretation.

4.2 Potentiality
To return to the discussion of narrative rhetoric and the evocation of moral possibilities I suggest we examine a deep seated assumption in many of our theories about language and reality (and particularly common sense views). Like other
things, this was formulated by Aristotle.

Aristotle's preference for the actual (ἐνέργεια) over the possible (δύναμις) pervades his thinking. Aristotelian thought stresses ‘the obstinacy of matter, the importance of fact, the sheer thereness of what is.... “Aristotelianism” in practice means the wisdom of experience, the acceptance of encountered facts, the investigation of what is given to us’ (Randall 1960:245-246). Aristotle, in contrast to his predecessors, who posit the world as it is not—the Sophists—or a world that ought to be—Plato—emphasises the world as it is, its positive structure and tendencies. Accordingly, he grounds rhetoric in the actuality of facts or events and their proof. Everything else, ethical and pathetic appeals, stylistic graces, dramatic delivery, is superfluous. The more of reality one grasps, the more easy it is to demonstrate (proof) (Aristot Rhet 1396b.11; cf 1354a.4-6, 1356a.4, 1404a.5-6).

Insisting on the primacy of facts, Aristotle seeks to grant the world its own objective status. He assumes that the world can and should be known and reproduced accurately by linguistic means. The Sophists, however, are not that confident in our ability to know the world as it is, or even sure of any correspondence between objective reality and language:

...that by which we reveal is word (λόγος), but word is not substance and existing things. Therefore, we do not reveal existing things to our friends, but word, which is something other than substances (Gorgias On non-being 84).

In the sophistic tradition the emphasis is not on factuality, but on facts as perceived, interpreted and communicated. They seek not demonstration, but rhetoric; not the accurate presentation of information, but the impact of language on people. For the Sophists rhetoric is an art whose power lies in its capacity to go beyond the world-as-experienced. In essence, they assume the legitimacy and significance of a person’s critical ability. One of the aims of sophistic rhetorical instruction is to make us aware of the potential of language. Whether someone names, proposes, challenges, or defends—or, narrates—one is engaged in a dual activity of disclosing and revealing.

This linguistic ability of humans, the exploration of the possible, the striving to actualise the possible and the discovery that the actualisation constitutes not the end but an origin of yet another set of possibles can be powerfully employed by narrative.

Some stories are not told to explain as a theory explains, but to involve the listener/reader in a way of life. Without dealing explicitly with miracle stories

---

1 With regard to miracle stories it must be emphasised that many other factors should be considered, particularly important aspects such as world view, psychological theories, etc. Whether the miraculous events of a tale are factual—or would move one to consider such
one should remember that many such 'unusual' stories are told in order to con­front one with one's habitual dependence on certain intellectual and interpretive conventions. Such storytelling may achieve this in various ways. A tale may e­voke in listeners a (brief) experience of non-rational awareness; it may interrupt our (Western) tendency to intellectualise everything; a narrative may lead one to challenge one's beliefs about rationality.

Teaching about a state of awareness unfamiliar to one is a significant achieve­ment in its own right. In most cases a listener's spontaneous response to a story will not constitute a permanent or extensive change of character, but this response can still prove useful as an experiential introduction to a new state of mind. Be­tween a narrative experience and a 'real' experience there is continuity—both take place in the same mind after all. One can certainly question whether what is true of narrated characters is also true of oneself, but this is precisely the aim of stories emphasising what is possible or the human potential. So, for example, Je­sus' parables—of which many were told as confrontative devices—provoke acts of self-examination. By apparently describing what, not why, and the particular rather than the general, parables are potentially useful devices for initiating acts of self-confrontation in listeners.

With narrative one can indeed achieve that what Fish—in a reverse appro­priation of the terms discussed above—calls a dialectic performance.

A dialectical presentation...is disturbing, for it requires of its readers a searching and rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by. It is didactic in a special sense: it does not preach the truth, but asks that its readers discover the truth for themselves, and this discovery is often made at the expense not only of a reader's opinions and values, but of [his or her] self-esteem (Fish 1972:1-2).

4.3 Imagination

Another aspect that follows from a consideration of the sophistic tradition is the role of the imagination. Interestingly enough imagination, though self-evidently relevant, is one of those topics seldom considered or scrutinised. Kermode, dis­cussing the dissonances between fiction and reality, provides a helpful paragraph:

The imagination, we recall, is a form-giving power, an esemplastic power; it may re­quire...to be preceded by a 'decreative' act, but it is certainly a maker of orders and concords. We apply it to all forces which satisfy the variety of human needs that are met by apparently gratuitous forms. These forms console, if they mitigate our existen­tial anguish it is because we weakly collaborate with them, as we collaborate with lan­guage in order to communicate. Whether or not we are predisposed towards accep­
stance of them, we learn them as we learn a language... If they appear in shapes preposterously false we will reject them; but they change with us, and every act of reading or writing is a tacit acceptance of them. If they ruin our innocence, we have to remember that the innocent eye sees nothing. If they make us feel guilty, they enable us, in a manner nothing else can duplicate, to submit, as we must, the show of things to the desires of the mind (Kermode 1967:144).

Stories inevitably offer the listener a world in which to live. ‘It is an invitation to experience reality from a particular perspective, to worship a certain god, to follow one way, to adopt heroes, to celebrate hope or sink in despair. Whatever the primary intention of the narrator and whatever the dominant impact of the tale, to hear a story—any story—is to be offered a world...or an account of life in an assumed world’ (Hoffman 1983:330). Most stories in this sense are either mythic or exemplifying: they offer imaginative proposals, pictures of reality.

Narrativity can ignite the imagination: we are enabled to dream dreams, imagine new options, dare to venture on different paths. Stories make us turn loose our critical and creative faculties. It can be a powerful incentive to view the world _sub specie ludi_. We must remember that truth comes not from holding fast to our own conceptions with deadly earnestness, ‘but through continuing to seek new understanding, holding no idea or thought beyond question; we must continue to interact with the extra nos in the dance of life’ (Hoffman 1983:331).

The power of narrative need not serve only optimistic possibilities. For example we can turn to the use of our imagination (a narrative attempt) to illustrate the world’s contingency and the absurdity of the human situation, exactly in order to overcome, to critically deal with our contingency. Kermode (1967:145) cites Sartre who says that ‘the final aim of art is to reclaim the world by revealing it as it is, but as if it had its source in human liberty’. From this statement we can develop two lines of thought. Firstly, narrativity is clearly linked with living and choosing. Secondly, it means that the evocation of possibilities cannot be achieved without a representation of our contingency. That is, the presentation of horror, difference, sometimes even the shapelessness and the utter inhumanity of life can exactly be that which confronts us, to reflect on what must be humanised. In fact, often such contingency must be there, or our _as if_ will be mere fantasy and unrelated to the basic human task of imaginative self-invention.

4.4 Narrative polyvalency
A popular suggestion with regard to the communicative power of storytelling is that the polyvalent character of narratives be used as a tool for discovering new possibilities. A well known example of narrativity’s supposed multivalency is, once more, the gospel parables. Tolbert (1979:30) emphasises that ‘competent scholars’ ‘arrive at equally valid, though different, interpretations of the same parable’. Hence, she argues, the parable form ‘itself must be open to multiple
interpretations'. The 'dynamic indeterminacy' of these narrative forms compels interpretation, so that the interpreter must provide the focus through which the world view of the story is understood. Hence the interpreter becomes 'co-creator' of the story (cf Tolbert 1979:115). Rather than an obstacle, polyvalency is seen as an asset: something to be exploited in order to confront various modern problems. The 'flexibility and ambiguity' basic to the literary form is the key to new meanings, an 'opportunity' to create meanings (cf:65).

It is undoubtedly true that indeterminacy may prompt us to explore a wide range of possibilities, leading us to recognise that our preferred values and beliefs are not the only alternatives. But we should be hesitant to endorse polyvalency as a strategy for narrative rhetoric to create moral possibilities. The problem of how storytelling should be interpreted (i.e., dealing with polyvalence or indeterminacy) does not deal with the rhetorical problem of directing attention to specific possibilities previously unsuspected by audiences. People naturally interpret stories to make them consistent with their views—and reject as incoherent or lacking in fidelity those which they cannot accord with their beliefs—so that the rhetorical problem of arousing awareness of new or critical possibilities is clearly not dealt with by emphasising the multivalency of narrativity. If rhetorical theory is not to condemn us to live within the limits of our own moral images, it must explain how compelling moral possibilities can be evoked and how ambiguity can be reduced.

Dealing with similar problems (with political narrative in mind), but recommending interesting and useful strategies is the study by Bennett and Edelman (1985). They point out that often the 'truths' of various social groups become premises for competing accounts of daily life. 'When an account fashions the "facts" of a situation around a priori assumptions, history seems clear and undeniable because the analytical perspective has made it so' (:162). So a vicious cycle ensues: apparently we support the belief that truth is multiple and everyone is entitled to his or her own version, but in reality we find that 'stereotypical narrative selectively excludes inconsistent or contradictory information, leaving the psychological impression that one is experiencing reality-driven objectivity' (:162). Thus, supposed polyvalency, posing as tolerance, in fact becomes ways of domination and dehumanising. Bennett and Edelman suggest, after analysing criteria for evaluating narrative accounts (along the lines of descriptive adequacy, testability, and openness to change based on challenge and feedback) that our narratives should be designed to 'focus contradictions and normative dilemmas within the same story' (:170). Rather than uncontrolled multivalency, they propose controlled openness.

The seedbed of creative use and creative reception of narrative lies, we believe, in learning to recognize and appreciate the inevitability of contradictory stories, the mul-
tiple realities they evoke, and their links to the conditions of people’s lives....The goal of narrative analysis...[is] an understanding of the strains that make alternative narratives inevitable and a recognition of the diversity of human frustrations, aspirations, satisfactions, and imaginative constructions (Bennett & Edelman 1985:170-171).

4.5 Telling and showing

Booth (1982:3-8, passim) reminds us of the ‘devices of the storyteller’. Narrators can ‘tell’ their audiences what an event, or a character’s behaviour means, or they can employ various narrative devices to ‘show’ what it means.

Commentary (‘telling’) serves various purposes in a rhetoric of possibility. It may, for instance, call attention to a performance which otherwise might be overlooked. Rhetors may likewise call people’s attention to their own behaviour. Also, when people can discern the possibility which a performance reflects, commentary may initiate or reinforce their evaluations.

The most pressing need for commentary occurs when an account of a performance is inherently ambiguous. Thus, if someone lacks the appropriate pre-knowledge, reflection on an account alone will fail to reveal any possibility; it must be made revealing through commentary. Understanding the role of commentary provides useful insights about narrative rationality, as the description of scenes, characters, actions, and events does not always permit self-reliant reasoning. The described facts and internal consistency of a story are seldom sufficient to warrant judgements about whether the events or actions they depict are constructive, new or creative. ‘As long as the critical results of the narrative paradigm rely only on the immanent narrative of the text and the critic’s personal judgment, the claims made for the paradigm’s usefulness and applicability will continue to exceed its range and capability’ (Warnick 1987:182). Rhetors often must ‘tell’ their audiences what they mean.

The impact of such ‘revealing’ narrative commentary is fairly clear. If the possibilities disclosed by the ‘telling’ confirm pre-existing beliefs, those listening or reading may agree with it. If commentary raises unfamiliar possibilities (neither confirmed nor denied in their beliefs or experience) the audience can choose to accept the rhetor’s authority that one can perceive these possibilities. Judging the rhetor’s reliability does not necessarily affect the value of commentary, the point is that narrative rationality has limits and that ethos plays an important role in storytelling. ‘Thus rhetoric retains a presumption of reality, calling attention to the ethos—the interest—of its maker and typically also to the interest of its audience’ (McGee & Nelson 1985:144).

The other way to make accounts revealing (of possibilities) is to allow the narrative itself to show forth meaning. That is, by employing essential narrative details, the narrative explains itself. The careful selection of narrative particulars can be used to disclose a specific possibility. When ‘showing’, it is important how a rhetor reduces the ambiguity of an account and the implications of the nar-
rative strategies used to do so. Showing should deal with the problem whether the account implies possibilities beyond the context in which it first occurs; disclosing through (often invented) plots or events that certain possibilities are both conceivable and attainable. Displaying possibilities of conduct and exhorting them are different functions, and a narrative can 'show' how certain possibilities are desirable, whether by commentary, extended argument, or plots which link possible conduct with successful outcomes or positively viewed protagonists.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS: NARRATIVE, SELF-CONFRONTATION AND FREEDOM

The role of narrative in expressing and applying the shared values of communities has long been acknowledged. An equally important role lies in acquainting people with creative possibilities of awareness and action. It is important to approach narrative rhetorically for at least two reasons: rhetoric may be seen as 'a human potentiality to understand the human condition' (Scott 1976: 266), and a rhetoric of possibility is central to moral argument.

To picture our interdependence with our narratives I borrow a metaphor from sociology. Berger (1966:199) has likened the human world to a puppet theater in which persons play their roles suspended from subtle strings pulled about according to the logic of the theater:

For a moment we see ourselves as puppets indeed. But then we grasp a decisive difference between the puppet theater and our own drama. Unlike the puppets, we have the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved. In this act lies the first step toward freedom.

While even the revolutionary must begin somewhere, that is, in a narrative or tradition, the freedom anyone retains in a tradition or story and one's capacity to change or reject it are both substantial and complex. It is wrong to suggest that we are, of necessity, prisoners of our stories. We can gain critical distance from the narratives that have influenced us and thereby exert a certain freedom over against them. Paradoxically, it is through narrative itself that we can find the provocation to an act of self-confrontation whereby one challenges not only one's beliefs, but one's very sense of self and way of life.

Obviously narrative expression as a rhetorical strategy is also susceptible to questionable uses. Not only is the as if of a story not so easily applied to life, but narratives are not neutral as romantic ethnology would have us believe. They become authentic or inauthentic according to the 'interests' which they serve. These interests can be those of critical emancipation or ideological domination.

Central to the rhetorical enterprise is the evocation of possibilities for being human. And it is narrativity in particular that can disclose such possibilities. Through storytelling, rhetors can confront the states of awareness and intellectual
beliefs of audiences; through it they can show them previously unsuspected ways of being and acting in the world.

In our quest to understand and employ the narrative form we should include the 'rhetoric of possibility' so that our stories and tellings will address people in terms of our capacity to become what we are not, and bring to our attention things we do not already feel, know, or understand.

WORKS CONSULTED


Barth, K 1957. The doctrine of God. Edinburgh: T & T Clark. (CD 2/2.)


Prof Dr P J J Botha, Dept of New Testament, University of South Africa, P O Box 392, PRETORIA, 0001 Republic of South Africa.