

#### 4 The case for narrative

A woman stands outside a tent on a plain, dust blowing in her face. She looks ahead but her gaze is unfocused, her mouth half-open. Something important has happened; but the look shows expectation as well as reaction (the tears are half-checked). Her eyes are narrowed, her face taut. Whatever she sees is not the simple object of her emotion. We recognize apprehension, perhaps fear or regret. Trained in other expressions, we might have difficulty with Kazakh faces and with unfamiliar voice-tones; yet the story that has brought us to this point supplies what we need to know. The woman's husband, a gruff shepherd, has just had a fierce quarrel with her brother—back from service in the navy—who demands a greater share in the running of things. Home from the sea but out of his depth, his knowledge meaningless on the steppe, the brother cannot have a herd of his own until he gets a wife; and on the windswept plain there is only one other family, whose daughter Tulpan (for whom the film is named), refuses his proposal. She is the unattainable, never-seen bride of his dreams, mistress of the homestead he has drawn in fantasy on the lining of his sailor-suit collar. But now he must knuckle down and submit to his tough brother-in-law, perhaps remaining forever unmarried, or leave the isolated yurt for a distant half-mythical city. Loyal to both men, standing between them, the sister suddenly confronts the crisis and it tears her soul. Love for her brother, disappointment on his behalf, resentment of her husband, fears for the future, the apprehension of loss. All seem plainly legible as she stares at the retreating figure of her brother while her husband, too big for his puny horse, rides off in the other direction in search of a lost sheep.

Our response, our being moved, is superficially in our reading of her face, our sympathy a felt evaluation of her expression. So what do we read? It's not a matter of 'basic emotions' (too few), 'human nature' (too vague), or 'universal expressions' (too vacant), but something altogether sharper and more detailed: the contexts, persons, and histories that produce the emotions. This is the power of narrative.

The director of *Tulpan*, Sergey Dvortsevov, a Russian documentary maker, devised his quasi-ethnographic drama as a 'fiction film' because—he explains in an interview in the Extras - you cannot put such scenes in a documentary without overexposing the subjects and betraying their private lives. Or so he explains in an interview included in the Extras. Documentary hides the important, often intimate moments. The truth, therefore, is in the fiction. But fiction doesn't exactly mean making it up. Dvortsevov's commitment to the unstaged actuality is revealed in an unbroken ten-minute sequence of a sheep giving birth—surely the most unlikely, unappetizing climax ever put in a film. Having stalked off in a huff after the row, bent on the city over the horizon, the sailor comes upon a sick ewe, lost on the swirling plain. He approaches the groaning beast tentatively, probing at arm's length; then, bracing himself, hauls out the limp black mucous-covered body of a baby lamb. With an incredible tenderness he crouches over the trembling creature, resuscitates it by mouth, and urges it towards its mother. He is born as a shepherd. Exhausted, he lies back in the dust, stunned by relief, happiness, awe. Again, the emotions are wordless, minimally gestured in face and posture; but we understand.

In giving place to this surprisingly powerful scene—which is acted but real, opportunistic in the way of true ethnography—the director had to reassemble

parts of the story: the reality was too strong, too significant, to be truncated or intercut with made-up scenes. The twin births of sheep and shepherd were his artistic reward. In the interview he stresses the universality and stark simplicity of the lifeworld he was attempting to capture, but also its cultural specificity, the tenderness behind the harshness of daily life, the feel for a unique landscape, the special beauty of the particular. In all this emotions play a crucial role; but their evocation and explanatory power depend on the precision of narrative. This is what good ethnography can do.

### **Why narrative matters**

The importance of narrative is threefold: in the construction, understanding, and reporting of emotions.

1. Narrative is implicated, firstly, in the **construction** and shape of an emotion episode (or, as emotion sceptics might say, ‘in those culturally variable collocations of situated thoughts, feelings and bodily stirrings that English speakers call emotions’). In getting angry, we perceive an offence, take umbrage, attribute blame, tense up, and prepare a response. In feeling ashamed, we commit a blunder, prickle with awareness, blush at the judgment of others, and beat a retreat. Every emotion tells a story. Which is why a latecomer stumbling on rage or laughter hastens to find the cause—the backstory—the better to follow the dénouement.

Consider a short sequence from the Tulpan outline: the sailor’s consternation on coming across the lost sheep. His consternation is a product of his striking out for the unknown, the lost sheep that thwarts his plan, the puzzle of what to do next, and the pressure, knowing nothing, to do something.

Consternation is revealed to have an ‘intentional structure’ (Frijda 1986: 98-101) composed of interlinked expectations, frustrations, and resolutions. (‘Intentional’ is meant here in the ordinary sense of ‘bearing an intention’, not in the philosophical sense of having an object.) Or consider the longer sequence, marked by shifting emotions: the sailor’s wary approach to the sheep, his determination to complete the grim task, his relief at the outcome, his joy at what this means for his future and his newfound vocation. The emotions fit together in an unfolding story, embedded within the larger story of life on the steppe. The sequence as a whole and any of its moments depend on what went before and what might come after, not merely in a succession of unrelated points or even a cause-effect chain, but as a thickening strand of meaning, feeling, re-appraisal, anticipation and implication. Though wordless, the sequence is inherently narrative-like in structure.

2. To **understand** the sequence or any of its linked emotions—to figure out the tissue of connexion and implication—is to grasp that structure. A narrative understanding of a narrative construction. (See Chapter 7 for an elaboration of this point.)

3. Likewise, to **report** it is to find words or images to represent the construction in all its phases. A snapshot will not do. (See Chapter 8 on ‘writing emotion’.)

Composition, construal, and recounting thus all involve narrative. These three complementary perspectives on the same events, though analytically distinguishable, are not easy to tease apart. My emphasis in this chapter, however, is mainly on the first, the composition or construction of emotion.

Emotions, as we have seen, are made up of components (events, appraisals, feelings, expressions, actions) corresponding to ‘intentional structures’ that

enable us to distinguish, for example, envy from jealousy. Envy entails thinking that someone else possesses something that we ourselves desire; jealousy, a fear of dispossession by the other, a dread that letting be will mean letting go. Iago is envious, Othello jealous. It is interesting but probably not crucial for their distinctive phenomenology—what it is like to *be* jealous or envious—that envy and jealousy are lexically distinguished. In some languages they are not; in contemporary English, especially among the young, the terms are often confused ('she was jealous of my dress'), though the underlying model of thoughts, feelings and persons (envy two, jealousy three) remains clear. Minimal behavioural scripts for jealousy and envy are probably found everywhere. Why? Because loving, getting, wanting and losing figure among any group of human beings, cradle to grave—beyond which the envious dead come back to haunt us.

In linking narrative to emotion, I am tapping into an ancient line of thought that goes back to Aristotle, whose interest was in the emotive power of *plot*. In an influential modern formulation, the psychologist Richard Lazarus (1991) used the term 'core relational themes' to denote the meanings attached to the relation between person and environment that characterise and motivate particular emotions. Recognisable across cultures, a putative universal, a core relational theme is 'a meaningful plot or scenario' (Lazarus 1994: 309): in the case of anger, 'a demeaning offense against me and mine'; in sadness, the experience of 'an irrevocable loss'; in guilt, a moral transgression. Likewise, cultural psychologist Richard Shweder (1994: 37) refers to the 'narrative structure that gives shape and meaning to the emotion', that is, the script or 'story-like interpretive scheme' that assembles appraisals, feelings and actions in a particular way as 'anger', 'sadness' and so forth. In philosophy, Peter Goldie (2000: 144) relates emotions

to the 'narrative part of a person's life', that is the interleaving of past, present and future in a tissue of expectations and concerns.

### **Is narrative structure imposed or intrinsic?**

In all these discussions a narrative-like structure is seen as intrinsic to the emotion as an event that unfolds through time and among persons pursuing particular goals. Emotions differ, of course, in their duration. Surprise is brief, love is long. Most theorists, seeking clarity, go for the brief, isolable emotions. Staccato not legato. Yet those of greater weight in our lives, the joined up emotions, have a more complex narrative structure; they are the hinges on which our lives turn (Zweig 2011/1939 is a stunning example).

Among emotion theorists, Goldie is unusual in allowing considerable time-depth and personal resonance to what I shall call *narrativity* ('the quality or condition of presenting a narrative' [OED]), a concept that usefully spans construction and representation. Emotions are not just flashpoints in the daily round, 'upheavals of thought', in Nussbaum's phrase; they may frame entire sequences of behaviour and shape experience over the long run. Emotions have a vintage, they are not—or not merely—products of the moment. The question is: are we imagining shapes, like dragonish clouds, where none exists? No one regards emotions as anything less than complex affairs; the issue is how they hang together, by necessity or contingency, intention or retrospect? Is it advantageous (adds the hedging ethnographer) to avoid being prescriptive? Suppose that, in discerning structure, it's not a matter of 'either/or' but of 'more or less'.

There's a useful, if *recherché*, parallel with a controversy in historiography. In advancing the case for a narrative approach to emotion we can learn something from the historians' debates about whether narrative shape inheres in events or is imposed retrospectively on mere succession. In doing so, we need not accept the contenders' all-or-nothing options. On the sceptical wing, Louis Mink maintained that 'narrative form in history, as in fiction, is an artifice, the product of individual imagination' (Mink 2001: 218). We can recognise the force of his point without accepting that temporal-causal shape is entirely alien to history-as-lived. (And what form of words, verbal or written, present tense or past historic, is *not* artifice? When has reality excluded imagination?) Similarly, we can accept, in part, Hayden White's (2001: 224) claim that 'historical situations do not have built into them intrinsic meaning in the way that literary texts do', not because historical situations as they happen are meaningless but because the meanings of text and experience are of a different order. The narrating of history responds to the intentionality of human action, the fact that people act with a purpose in mind and with ideas and feelings about the world they engage. Narrativity would only be alien to events were they to be lived by thoughtless beings without intentions or emotions (cf. White 1981, Kearney 2002).

On the realist wing, David Carr's defence of narrative history—I quote his conclusions, not his reasoning—resonates strongly with ethnography:

Narrative has not merely an epistemological but also an ontological value. That is, it is not only a 'cognitive instrument' as Mink claimed—a primary way of seeking, organizing and expressing our knowledge of a part of reality. It is constitutive of our very being, it is our way of existing, of constituting ourselves. (Carr 2001:198)

Further support for the narrativity case—that our understanding responds to *inherent structure*—comes from the seminal work of cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner. In *Actual minds, possible worlds* (1986) and *Acts of meaning* (1990), Bruner sets out the case for narrative as one of two fundamental modes of understanding, the other being the logical-scientific approach that deals in causal explanation, abstraction and generalisation. Narrative, he argues, is better suited to the exploration of meaningful action than the external perspective of positivist science that treats meaning as an ‘overlay’ of ‘behaviour’. Bruner opts for a cultural relativism in tune with American interpretive anthropology of the time, which Clifford Geertz (his preferred anthropologist) had opposed to positivist ‘explanation’. There’s a nice analogy. In the bad old days:

The causes of human behaviour were assumed to lie in [the] biological substrate. What I want to argue instead is that culture and the quest for meaning within culture are the proper causes of human action. The biological substrate, the so-called universals of human nature, is not a cause of action but, at most, a *constraint* upon it or a *condition* for it. The engine in the car does not ‘cause’ us to drive to the supermarket for the week’s shopping, any more than our biological reproductive system ‘causes’ us with very high odds to marry somebody from our own social class, ethnic group, and so on. Granted that without engine-powered cars we would not drive to supermarkets, nor perhaps would there be marriage in the absence of reproductive systems. (Bruner 1990: 20-21; original emphasis)

Few anthropologists today would see culture as a cause. But the larger point holds. We can best understand social interactions through narrative because sociality is shot through with intentions and meanings. More radically, Bruner contends—like Carr—that ‘narrative structure is even inherent in the praxis of social interaction before it achieves linguistic expression’ (1990: 77).

We might put Bruner’s position as follows. The tale needs no teller; it’s written into the stream of life, the way we act and think. I would add ‘and *feel*’; but, curiously, Bruner doesn’t extend his analysis to emotions *per se*, even



though emotion episodes would, presumably, count as ‘acts of meaning’, his principal focus. To be sure, not all emotions qualify as *actions* (regret does little), though most involve action tendencies—the urge to approach or withdraw, strike or embrace. Nonetheless, in his discussion of the elements of narrative proper (stories, anecdotes, fiction), Bruner identifies criteria that apply readily to the construction of emotion.

Narrative requires...four crucial grammatical constituents if it is to be effectively carried out. It requires, first, a means for emphasizing human action or ‘*agentivity*’—action directed toward goals controlled by agents. It requires, secondly, that a *sequential order* be established and maintained—that events and states be ‘linearized’ in a standard way. Narrative, thirdly, also requires a sensitivity to what is canonical [ie. usual] and *what violates canonicity* in human interaction. Finally, narrative requires something approximating a *narrator’s perspective*: it cannot in the jargon of narratology, be ‘voiceless’. (1990: 77; my italics)

How might these features of narrative apply to the constitution of emotion (distinct from its retelling or narration)?

1 *Agentivity* corresponds to a focus in appraisal on the cause or source of the eliciting event, for example in the attribution of blame in anger or guilt, the kindness that leads to gratitude, the threat implied in fear.

2 *Sequential order* corresponds to the time-bound property of emotions as initiated by changes in circumstances and marked by phases in the unfolding of the episode. This is a critical difference between an emotion and a mood.

3 *Violations of the canonical*—reversals of fortune, breaches in the quiet surface of everyday life—are what trigger prototypical emotions like rage and disgust. Emotions are prompted by changes in the relation of self to environment that impinge on our concerns (Frijda 1986, Lazarus 1991).

4 *Narrator's perspective* corresponds to the egocentric perspective of emotional appraisal, the me-focus that identifies changes relevant to one's well-being. In narrative theory this property is called focalization.

More recent attempts to set criteria for narrative could equally be applied to emotion. David Herman proposes that prototypical narratives represent:

(i) a structured time-course of particularized events which introduces (ii) disruption or disequilibrium into storytellers' and interpreters' mental model of the world evoked by the narrative....conveying (iii) what it's like to live through that disruption, that is, the 'qualia' (or felt subjective awareness) of real or imagined consciousness undergoing the disruptive experience. (2007: 9)

In like manner, classical narratologists like Todorov (and before him Propp) have focussed on the disruption that spurs the narration.

Todorov argued that narratives prototypically follow a trajectory leading from an initial state of equilibrium, through a phase of disequilibrium, to an endpoint at which equilibrium is restored (on a different footing) because of intermediary events. (Herman 2007: 10)

Which would be a pretty good definition of an emotion! As we have seen, independently of narratologists, emotion theorists, point to the eliciting event, the appraisal of harm or benefit, the subjective feelings or qualia, the transformation of consciousness and bodily state, and the restorative or consummating action.

These striking parallels do not justify a blunt claim that emotions *are* narratives—they don't *represent* anything, even if they communicate a 'story'. The claim is rather that emotions resemble narratives in structure—a resemblance underplayed by most writers on these matters despite frequent recourse to literary examples (Oatley 2012 a notable exception). Given the common factors in how emotions and narratives are put together it's hardly surprising that literature—the realist novel, but also drama and narrative non-

fiction—offers some of the sharpest insights into the construction of emotion, as well as lessons for the ethnographer, that conflicted figure whom Edmund Leach saw as novelist manqué. Nor is it surprising that the narrative arts deal mainly in emotion. They work with the same ingredients.

In Chapter 7 I present some literary examples. But let's first consider what anthropology can do. My focus here will be on the *composition* of emotion rather than on the way we understand and report, though obviously these perspectives overlap, as will their illustrations.

### **Narrative and social dramas: restoring the detail**

The novelist and the ethnographer find common cause in a special concern with particulars, the odds and ends that get left behind in theoretical discussion as excess baggage. Without a firm grasp of the actuality there is no safe step to cross-cultural comparison, let alone grand theory. In developing arguments, the well-worked example scores over the matrix of variables, the flow chart or the summary formula. Such is the lesson of fieldwork. Yet disciplinary history is haunted by a sense of incompleteness, the shadow of things left out. Which perhaps explains why each new theoretical movement tends to bring a recovery, or at least a recognition, of what its predecessor ignored. Paradigms get abandoned *not* when their conceptual flaws are exposed but when discards find a place in a new kind of theory, or when shots from afar are seen to bear too high a cost in collateral damage. Emotions are the first casualties of anthropological theorizing. How then to put them back in?

In his masterwork, *The Emotions*, Frijda calls the price of generalisation 'information loss', for which reason he favours 'descriptive analysis' over

'reduction to basic dimensions' (1986: 186). One direct way of recovering the information—more favoured by contemporary philosophers than psychologists—is through introspection. To observe our own unfolding emotions, catch them on the wing, is to glimpse what escapes the booth in the lab. But as Frijda cautions, 'introspection is an act of consciousness that has awareness as its object, and not the object that was intended in the first place' (187). To think about your emotions while having them, to scan your anger instead of your offender, is to lose the relation between subject and object, 'the relationship with the world' which is definitive of the experience of emotion.

For the anthropologist, too, introspection of emotion ('reflexivity') cannot recover what generalisation misses. (Frijda's point bears on the problem of using our own emotions as an ethnographic resource.) Yet pure description is not enough. To advance knowledge, rather than merely to pique curiosity, what we need is a theoretical handle on the vicissitudes of emotions in action. But where can we find it? One proven means of investigating the dynamics of social processes is the 'extended case method' developed by the Manchester school of anthropology. Mid-century ethnographers—notably Max Gluckman and Victor Turner—followed factional disputes and witchcraft trials through all their twists and turns to show how structural tensions between generations, leadership contenders, and organisational principles could be explored through 'social dramas' (Turner 1957, 1981). Rather than looking for structural contradictions in a static framework, as in standard functionalism, you followed tensions as they emerged in action, diagnosing the stress points, for example, between matrilineal descent and patriarchal authority. From contrarities issued conflicts that unfolded in predictable ways: the pattern in the flux. The success of the

method owed much to the manifold form of relationships in the small-scale communities observed by anthropologists of the time. People were connected and divided—but always *related*—at many levels, through kinship, political alliance, witchcraft accusations, land tenure, religion. Breaches at one level were spanned at another. Patrilineal foes were matrilineal friends. Like the subplots of a TV soap, with its quarrelsome small-town cast, the social drama develops through these breakings and mendings.

But does the extended case method work with emotion? The tentative answer is yes. Tentative because—somewhat surprisingly—it hasn't often been tried, and because anthropology has new priorities in a globalising world where interconnexion flourishes at higher levels (cyberspace, the imagined community). The method can extend only so far.

Somebody who did try is A. L. Epstein, whose *In the midst of life* (1992) remains one of only a handful of ethnographic studies with an emotional focus. Epstein's rather old-fashioned book was ignored in the emerging 'anthropology of emotion' of the 1990s. It came out when more exciting approaches—social constructionism, ethnopsychology, person-centered anthropology—were in vogue. And it drew on a biological theory of emotion at a time when, in the social sciences, the word *biology* required scare quotes, as if the natural sciences were a Western folk theory. (The scientist in question, Silvan Tomkins, has had a strange afterlife in so-called 'affect theory', principally in Cultural Studies.)

Epstein's ethnography of the Tolai people of the New Hebrides focuses, as did his Manchester colleagues, on local disputes. But his aim is to explore the distinctive cultural shape and social ramifications of what he calls, following Tomkins, 'affect', a term he uses synonymously with 'emotion'.

My hope is...to show through the evidence of dispute material some of the *kinds of emotion that are generated within particular relationships* and at the same time to illustrate the emotional tone of these relationships. In addition, I believe that the use of material of this kind has a further value of its own: first, insofar as any dispute is concerned with contested aims, in *exposing the emotional roots* as distinct from the legal basis of those claims; and, second, in demonstrating how *appeal to the emotions can play a central and regular part in dispute-management* itself. (Epstein 1992: 117; italics added)

What was new about this? The first objective recalled functionalism, in which stereotyped sentiments defined structured relationships. It also recalled the Culture and Personality work of Bateson and Mead, whose indefatigable mission, wherever they alighted, was to test the emotional temperature, the ethos of the community, and to uncover 'emotional roots' in patterns of child rearing. Epstein's last-named objective was more firmly contemporary. Although working to very different agendas, other students of emotion in Oceania were also exploring the pragmatics of emotion discourses (Lutz 1988, White 1992). Feeling was saying was doing.

So the aims were not original, nor was the method. But the lasting interest of the study lies in its descriptions. In them we recover some of the effectual detail that functionalism had scorned in quest of principle: the life of the social organism, where functionalists had seen only structure. Emotions emerge, more roundedly, as vital ever-changing aspects of relationships: motivating, commentating on, and directing social action. As Epstein demonstrates, it's not enough to report the shame-based modesty that inhibits a Tolai brother and sister, to show the affective tug of matrilineal authority, or to make emotion a mere function of the social order. You have to trace how appropriate sentiments emerge in action and how emotions with different developmental origins and countervailing tendencies come into play. You have to attend to their *narrative*

structure. In one case study, a man beats and shames his wife when she helps her brother in his taro garden. He is jealous of her attention but also resentful of the stronger productive ties between brother and sister in the matrilineal group and of his own exclusion as an affine (1992: 117-123). The public assault—he tears off her clothes in front of the brother—offends the sibling taboo, colouring the quarrel and reaching into deeper emotional territory. At a tribal moot, the brother cautiously disavows anger (his feelings assuaged by compensation) and keeps up a show of affinal respect; but third parties reproach the husband for lack of *varmari*, a word meaning ‘love’ and ‘care’. It is this long-term sentiment that characterises the married relation and which lends it stability in the face of competing matrilineal claims. In another case, a dying wife appeals to her husband to care properly for the children and remember ‘our love’—the word, the sentiment, carrying moral force and existential value beyond conventional duty (123).

What strikes us about these vignettes is not that they confirm or defy stereotype (*So what?* we should ask), but that emotions are the very substance of the encounters. They have a narrative shape it is the ethnographer’s task to reveal. In being owned by the participants—as actors in a ‘social drama’ rather than ciphers of structure—emotions transcend simple scripts. They feed off and respond to social structure constructively, rather than merely serving it. And they become the focus of reflection and debate. What are the right emotions in this situation, for this or that person? How can hearts be suitably stirred or calmed? In social dramas, as Turner noted, ‘whether juridical or ritual processes of redress are invoked against mounting crises, the result is an increase in what one might call social or plural *reflexivity*, the ways in which a group tries to

scrutinize, portray, understand, and then act on itself' (1981: 152; original emphasis). Turner's eye was steadily on structural principles and their affective underpinnings; but in Tolai social dramas, as in Java and Nias, the reflexive focus is on the play of living emotion and on deliberate acts of emotion work. The dramas seem to say: Sort out the emotions and the rest will fall into place.

At least, that is how it looks, how it feels, and how it pans out. (For a fuller example, see Beatty 2015: Chapter 16.) Niha heart-speech is a virtuoso riff on this theme, a relentless plucking of heart strings, while Javanese efforts aim at smoothing out emotions to *avoid* social dramas. When trouble looms and the unavoidable erupts, again it's emotions—shame, *pernah*, anger—that are the point of interest, the issues to be worked through. To get them right, to make up or calm down, is to rearrange persons and situations, to tweak the narrative constituents, to restore the status quo. 'It is not technical skill or special brilliance that the Arapesh demand either in men or in women,' wrote Margaret Mead; 'it is rather correct emotions, a character that finds in co-operative and cherishing activity its most perfect expression' (Mead 1935: 142).

Epstein brings this process of emotional adjustment into view, as well as indicating what cannot be brought to light. For his larger point, which takes time to make—and patience in the reader—is that in the 'multistranded relations' of kin-based communities, surface disturbances have deep and obscure roots. 'An observer following the case sees clearly enough that the parties are deeply aggrieved, but what is upsetting them may not always be immediately plain nor easy to disentangle' (128). A passionate dispute over some trivial offence will often have its origins 'in the complex and frequently conflicting feelings generated within a given set of culturally defined relationships' (130). The



healing process of local justice must engage those deeper feelings and their sources.

We don't all live in tribal communities, to be sure; but what we bring to an encounter from our scattered relationships and clinging pasts must affect how we respond to the present challenge, whether as actors or observers. Our emotions have a historical dimension, as psychoanalysis has always insisted. The hitch these days is in the unavailability of the data and the relative thinness of the encounter, not in the invisible nexus of causes and meanings (a perennial problem). So, at least, it must seem to the virtual ethnographer, the student of globalisation, and the corporate anthropologist. Either way, in the tribal village or the dark web, the writer who skimps narrative, like the theorist who deals in snapshots or simulations, makes light of the emotional freight.

Epstein takes the extended case method as far as it will go, and then a bit further. The problem is that once you start pulling on a strand it's hard to stop—a predicament endemic to ethnography because fieldwork always begins *in medias res*.

There can have been few domestic disputes that came before the village forum that did not have a long and complex history or did not build on old resentments. But little of this background was likely to emerge in the course of the hearing itself. Much of it of course was well known to many of the villagers who made up the audience, and into it the present claims and counter-claims of the protagonists could now be slotted (158).

The *real* story is always some way back in the past. The emotions on parade, whether long-prepared, situational, individual or collective, have more than a structural and incidental context; they have roots, which is why Epstein finds himself constantly surprised by bursts of anger and upwellings of grief. Each dispute taps into older disputes, reviving hard feelings, slights and slurs that go

back decades. A woman brings a case against her maternal grandmother for driving away her brothers and speaking ill of their dead mother (1992: 153-162). As accusations multiply and insults fly, a history of bridewealth contributions paid, diverted, and denied opens up a chronicle of opportunism and neglect. But the facts reassembled for judgment suddenly give way before long-buried grief that has all parties, even the mediator, weeping. And when Epstein pulls on *this* strand it leads in a quite different direction, losing itself in a tangle of emotionally-charged dealings with *tambu*, the shell money which Tolai handle, hoard and release with 'compulsive interest'. As both a medium of exchange and a sacred money (the word is cognate with taboo) *tambu* links bridewealth partners and the living with the dead. A deceased relative cannot enter the Abode of Spirits until the accumulated *tambu* are dispersed, in an odd aggressive splurge, among surviving kin. In Epstein's literally interminable case (those strands), the plaintiff's parents had died before reaching their full estate and before their proper obligations could be discharged; hence the meeting breaks down when emotions linked to the circulation of *tambu* are triggered. Epstein follows through with a Freudian excursus into *tambu*-love.

It's like a story told backwards, as deep as memory. And it presents a problem that is not just empirical but theoretical and, beyond that, literary. A concern with the constitution of emotions turns into a problem of selection and reporting. The puzzle is not simply where will it end, but how did it begin? Those aspects of narrativity I earlier applied to emotion—agency, sequence, breach, focalization—are all in evidence as the dramas play out, but the boundaries of each case seem arbitrary.

In one of his prefaces, Henry James remarked that ‘really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter for him’ (1984: 1041). In their selective handling of the data and their modelling of cases, ethnographies are, in this sense fictional; even—one thinks of *The Nuer*—geometrically exquisite. There’s an obvious trade-off between detail and explanatory power. In getting the story right, identifying what’s significant, it’s easy to let the particulars overwhelm the general; but in limiting detail, we risk losing the reality altogether—Frijda’s information loss—and end up explaining nothing. In dealing with emotions, how do you know what’s essential and what’s contingent, especially when so much is out of reach? In drawing the causal boundary around a complicated case, Epstein settles on material factors—the dues of brideprice and marriage—as his springs and motives; but he doesn’t leave it there. Perhaps the concern with surface and depth should have sounded the alarm. In Epstein’s hands it leads not to ethnographic scepticism—how can we know about the past and make good on our ignorance?—but back to a kind of faith. That the powerful feelings surrounding tambu are not self-explanatory we can readily accept; yet for most readers an appeal to the Viennese verities at this point will no longer do: the tropical hut is too far from the brocaded Freudian couch. Assertions that the affective load of tambu derives from ‘anal erotism’, and that the enormous hoops of shell money displayed at ceremonies are giant anuses or vaginas, are claims unsupported by developmental evidence (193-197)—a bizarre twist in the tale.

If the story runs out, as fieldwork stories do, better to recognise the limits of ethnography than fall back on supposition and cliché.

Where does that leave us? The case for narrative established, we have come some way in sketching its *ethnographic* value; but whole regions of emotional life remain elusive – not just the traditional territory of psychoanalysis, the suburbs of the soul, but the historical hinterland and living reality, the life incarnate.

The extended case method might provide a mapping of local emotional worlds, but it can't cope with idiosyncrasy, temperament and character, or with the invisible branching past, all of which infiltrate emotional encounters. It shows us how emotions are triggered and framed, but nothing about their 'phenomenology', what it means and feels like to be a certain named Tolai facing defeat, triumph or humiliation. What works for village feuds and tribal moots undershoots with emotion. A thicker narrative is needed, a firmer grip on its personal and biographical constitution. In the next chapter I develop an analytical perspective on the biographical dimension of emotional episodes, show what happens when this is ignored, and finish with two extended examples of emotionally vital ethnography.