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Not Only Rivers and Mountains: Why Story Matters in New Area Studies

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Abstract

Area Studies was accused of storytelling, apparently an academic crime that merited its so-called demise. In this paper, I argue that storytelling is an integral part of academic writing in the humanities and that the rebirth of New Area Studies can be at least in part explained by its stress on narrative. Interdisciplinary investigation of story can help the field re-consolidate itself, because theoretical work can both describe and drive practice, as I show by a translation example. I then look outside New Area Studies to three other fields. First, I examine how historians weave narratives out of agreed facts, using Heidegger's understanding of interpretation and Collingwood's notion of re-enactment to explain the process. Second, I support Milutinović's call for a move from the metonymic to the metaphoric in New Area Studies, by showing how the methods and tools of the later Wittgenstein, including his use of story, can be applied to New Area Studies to produce the surveyable representation, a way of making connections evident. Third, I show how dialogue with narrative theory can support the use of literary texts by researchers in New Area Studies, because the mind itself is literary in nature (following Turner), which means that novels can evoke what it feels like to be in a situation. The paper concludes that storytelling, far from being an embarrassment to New Area Studies, should be at the heart of its methodology and should be further examined in order to tell new stories and to tell them well.

1. Looking Back

Once upon a time, a discipline called Area Studies underwent a 'prolonged character-assassination' that resulted in what was widely proclaimed as its demise (Hodgett 2020: 28). Area Studies was accused by its many enemies as lacking rigour, eschewing 'the building of broader generalizations for mere description and, *worse, storytelling*' (White et al. 2000: 165; my italics). Somehow the declaration of death was premature (Milutinović 2020a: 10) and Area Studies has returned as New Area Studies. Whether it will live happily ever after or not remains to be seen, but the signs are promising (ibid.).

You have just read a story, a narrative with a beginning, a middle and at least the promise of an end. That storytelling should have been seen by the enemies of Area Studies as the ultimate academic sin – worse even than 'mere description' – is, at the least, surprising. Story is everywhere, because we are temporal beings. Once we refer to events that happen at different times, it is necessary to use narrative, which means that the telling of stories is often seen as something distinctively human. Frederic Jameson views narrative as the 'central function or instance of the human mind' (1981: 13) and Mark Currie describes humans as 'narrative animals, as *homo fabulans* – the tellers and interpreters of narrative' (1998: 2). Story is not confined to works of fiction but is found in poetry, advertisements, newspapers, religious texts, conversation and – as I argue here – in academic writing. How to avoid telling stories would itself be a story worth telling. New Area Studies makes its commitment to narrative clear. As Zoran Milutinović asserts: 'To understand a particular world, whether medieval or synchronic – involves some sort of engagement with stories' (2020b: 161). The purpose of this paper is to ask whether an interrogation into narrative itself can support the moves made by New Area Studies as it re-establishes

itself in the academy. I place the paper in dialogue with Milutinović's recent anthology *The Rebirth of Area Studies* (2020).

One reason that New Area Studies currently flourishes is because of its willingness to engage with other disciplines: Susan Hodgett notes that it is undergoing a period of 'rich intellectual curiosity, a boundary-crossing productivity' (2000: 19). In the humanities, to cross boundaries by turning to disciplines outside one's own is a useful strategy (see Boase-Beier, Fawcett and Wilson, 2014: 3) because the soft theories associated with the humanities 'derive their components from sources outside themselves, thus obtaining a more reliable basis than the contrived speculations of aesthetics could ever provide' (Iser 2006: 5). By looking to other disciplines, a theorist can find ways to describe their own field as well as strategies for driving enquiry in that field, as Jean Boase-Beier argues in the context of translation (2010). An example from Translation Studies will illustrate her point, which I contend holds more generally in the humanities.

Introducing their anthology of Holocaust poems and their English translations, Boase-Beier and Marian de Vooght argue against seeing translation as linguistic transfer, for which all that is needed is competence in a source language and access to a good dictionary, even though such a view is intuitive. They stress instead the need for the translator to be attentive to story (2019: 17):

> Translation … is never about getting it right, about approximating the form or content of the original, about making a rough copy for those who do not speak Yiddish, or Latvian or French. It is about recognising someone else's story, understanding the way the teller has chosen to tell it, and passing it on to others.

Their theory functions both as a description *of* practice and as a recommendation *for* practice and matches my own approach to translating for their anthology. In rendering the German poem 'Verzweiflung' [Despair], for example, I found myself

working out in German and then recreating in English the story of the 'Unknown Youth' who wrote this lyric in 1942 in Plötzensee Prison, Berlin. The youth is twenty-one years old, but at the end of the poem he uses a strange arithmetic to calculate his age (in Boase-Beier and de Vooght 2019: 86, my translation):

> I am nineteen. Plus two.
> Nineteen out in the world.
> Two in this monotony.
> These cold, these high
> Walls of grey.

He cannot count the years spent in Plötzensee, because they are not part of his life. He contrasts nineteen years in the world with two years behind prison walls, rejecting these two years as not belonging to his story. This rejection paradoxically makes them part of his story, which in turn becomes a monument to the resilience of the human spirit under repression. Tara Bergin describes the whole anthology as a 'collection not just of poems but also of testimonies', and concludes that 'we must keep the stories alive' (Bergin 2020: 54). It makes translational sense to describe both target and source text as stories, rather than as linguistic strings. Story functions here as a thick description of translation and as a translational heuristic: stories are to be recognised and passed on in new languages.

In the next three sections, I build a case for making explicit the relationship between New Area Studies and story by looking outside the field: first, to history; second, to the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein; third, to narrative theory.

2. What the cat did: looking to history

History is one academic discipline that tells stories without being condemned for it. (Many European languages even use the same noun for both 'story' and history', such

as *histoire* in French or *Geschichte* in German.) How is it ever possible to know what went on in earlier times? The most obvious way of recording what happened is to write a list, that is, a chronicle. Sarah Bakewell's life of Michel de Montaigne, for example, includes a three-page 'Chronology' of his life (2011: 329-331), of which these are the first two entries:

> 1533 (28 Feb.): Montaigne is born
>
> 1539?-48: He goes to school at the Collège de Guyenne, Bordeaux

So far, so clear. Chronicle is not what scholars consider to be history, however, because it does not attempt to depict events within a narrative. Judith Woodsworth defines history as follows (2012: xiii):

> A weaving together of different strands, drawing on diverse stores of evidence … a creative, interpretive act, to some extent an act of imagination.

Bakewell's actual biography of Montaigne functions as history because it tells Montaigne's story in the form of twenty attempts at answering the question of how to live in a narrative of 328 pages. Facts are woven together into a larger story.

Historians typically construct their narratives by positing causal links. To adapt an example used by E.M. Forster in his study of the novel (2005: 87), we can see the following sentence as a chronicle:

> The King died and then the Queen died.

The next sentence gives us history:

> The King died and then the Queen died of grief.

In the first sentence, we are given the facts, while the second sentence connects them in one specific way.[1]

[1] Inevitably there is some fluidity with terms such as 'story, 'narrative' etc.: Forster makes a distinction between 'story' and 'plot', for example. The terms are context-relative and can be used without difficulty as long as we remember that.

Martin Heidegger's distinction between 'Auslegung' and 'Deutung' is a useful tool for understanding the narrative process (2010: 144). 'Auslegung' is a German term sometimes translated as 'interpretation', but Heidegger uses it to signify the development of understanding by laying out the facts of a situation (playing on the etymology of 'Auslegung': 'laying-out'). Bakewell is laying out the facts of Montaigne's life in her 'Chronology' above. There can be endless dispute about what should be included or excluded in any listing of events. For example, Julian Barnes's novel *Flaubert's Parrot* includes three chronologies of the life of the novelist Gustave Flaubert: the first is a sequence of his triumphs; the second is a sequence of his disasters; the third is a sequence of quotations from Flaubert about his work (1984: 23-37). Which list do we choose? Do we have to choose? A necessary condition for any chronology, however, is that every event listed is agreed by relevant authorities to have taken place. As Peter Winch argues, the humanities do not function through correspondence to objective facts, but through agreement on what can be held to be true (2008). Bakewell's chronology shows that there is some uncertainty as to when Montaigne actually started school, for example, but also indicates that it is accepted by historians that he *was* educated at the Collège de Guyenne.

Heidegger uses 'Deutung' to signify interpretation, that is, asking what the laid-out facts mean, how they connect, how they correlate. Students of literature can lay out facts about, say, Sam Selvon's 1956 novel *The Lonely Londoners* (2006) by reading it, noting what happens, studying the work of critics and getting some idea of the historical context by attending to textual details or reading co-texts. Once they start to ask questions about characterisation, imagery, thematic significance etc., then they are engaging in 'Deutung', or interpretation proper: what does *The Lonely Londoners* mean? Wittgenstein notes that we have stepped to a different level when we interpret in the sense of 'Deutung' (*Zettel* 234). As Milutinović argues (2020a: 5):

> interpretation does not equal mere description: rather, it is directed towards meaning and significance – Gadamer would say toward *truth* – of the

> phenomenon under study, and acknowledges an interpreter's participation in what is being studied.

With interpretation, a different level of truth is coming into play. It is not just a question of whether or not a certain event can be held to correspond to what we take to be reality. Rather, we are trying to come up with a narrative that coheres. To go back to Forster's example above, we are asking 'Why?' Question: why did the Queen die? Answer: she died of grief. (Or at the hands of an assassin; or after a happy old age in which she forgot the King.). As Forster remarks: 'The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it' (2005: 87). In the foundational text of Western history, the fifth-century BCE *Histories*, Herodotus makes it clear that he intends to investigate 'in particular, the cause of the hostilities between Greeks and non-Greeks' (1998: 30). The longevity of this work must to a large extent be due to the fact that Herodotus tells a persuasive story, not just listing battles between Greeks and Persians, but trying to work out why they took place at all.

If historians typically discover and weigh evidence before going on to write narratives, then it is tempting to think that it is possible to select the right facts and to come up with the right story. However, as Winch argues above, work in the humanities cannot be judged to a scientific paradigm. Woodsworth's definition above similarly stresses the role of the imagination. It is not possible to subject the writing of narrative to objective judgement because there can be no objectivity either in laying out facts or in interpreting them. (Which facts to lay out about Montaigne? What to make of the ones that we choose?) Each writer is searching for inference to the *best* explanation (see Lipton 2004), and best explanations differ according to which aspects of a case are being investigated. They can also change over time as new facts come to light, or as reasons arise why certain testimonies must be disregarded, or as new paradigms appear. The best explanation is always contingent upon which questions are being asked, because a story can always be told from another point of view, which gives rise to a plurality of interpretations. In a recent biography of the

Beatles, for example, Craig Brown describes an alleged assault on Bob Wooler by John Lennon, and notes how witnesses and biographers differ markedly in their accounts of what happened (the extent of the injuries sustained by Wooler) and why it happened (what Wooler said to provoke the attack). Brown concludes (2020: 93):

> … no other event in the lives of the Beatles illustrates more clearly the random, subjective nature of history, a form predicated on objectivity but reliant on the shifting sands of memory.

It is, however, reasonable to maintain that an assault by Lennon on Wooler did take place on 21 June 1963. We can agree to refer to the assault as a 'fact', because it is the best explanation for the reminiscences of witnesses. But if we want to interpret the assault, to tell its story, then we have to realise that our account will be one among many. Different agents tell different stories and different biographers must choose which sources to follow. Brown lays out fourteen variations on what happened, following fourteen different sources. Anybody who has ever been in a courtroom will sympathise with his predicament, given that witnesses often contradict each other and that barristers tell opposing but plausible stories. Brown therefore calls history subjective, because choice is key in narrative. (I *choose* what to include in my narrative and what to make of it.) Given that people generally do come to agreement about what can be held to be facts – Montaigne was born in 1533; Lennon assaulted Wooler in 1963 – it is, however, more appropriate in my opinion to speak of the historian's activity as 'intersubjective'. Facts are agreed and possible interpretations are put forward on that basis.

The intersubjectivity of history explains why historians cannot just sit down to write an uncontroversial report in what the philosopher of history R.G. Collingwood calls the 'scissors-and-paste' approach to history, that is, 'repeating statements that other people have made before' (1946: 274). Obvious problems with scissors-and-paste history are: the fallibility of memory; deliberate omission in testimony; deliberate falsification in testimony; the unavailability of certain facts. (The Assyrian language,

for example, became extinct and has been reconstructed from tablets discovered in the modern era. So far, no evidence has been found about how the Assyrian army treated wounds, but it is reasonable to assume that medical practices existed among the military (Finkel 2014: 45)).

For Collingwood, the historian shows autonomy by asking questions (1946: 274). He makes an analogy with the work of the detective, in order to show his recommended procedure (1946: 266 ff.). In classic crime fiction, detectives are typically faced with a murder and a selection of baffling and contradictory clues. Many alternatives will be suggested as the narrative progresses and most of these alternatives will be very plausible and hence paradoxically seem probable (see Kahnemann 2012: 158). At the end of the novel, however, the detective tells a story that weaves together facts and hypotheses and results in the killer being caught, because the detective's story pays attention to all the evidence and brings it together in a way that indicates the truth. In what is sometimes seen as the world's first detective story, Sophocles's fifth-century BCE Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King* (2016), the pattern is the same as in any murder mystery. The arrival of plague in Thebes leads Oedipus to hypothesise that a great crime must have been committed that has brought down the wrath of the gods. When he begins to investigate, by summoning witnesses and asking questions, the evidence is baffling and contradicts his beliefs about his own past, his own story. Eventually he constructs a new story, that he has unwittingly killed his father and married his mother, and he punishes himself by putting out his eyes. Collingwood in turn tells the imaginary story of the murder of John Doe (1946: 266 ff.). His sleuth, Detective-Inspector Jenkins, eliminates a number of suspects and finds the culprit because he knows that he 'must put Nature to the question' (1946: 269), in a bloodless inquisition that looks at evidence and reconstructs what must have happened. The best explanation is put forward, even if many interpretations of why the murder was committed are then possible, and even if we know that justice systems are fallible in the real world.

Collingwood defines such inquisitorial methods as 'imaginative re-enactment'; the task of historians is to think themselves into an *action*, rather than into an *event*, by discerning the thought of the actor (1946: 213). Detectives catch criminals because they read their minds. What made somebody kill John Doe in this way? The distinction between 'action' and 'event' is crucial. An action is seen by Collingwood as the result of choices, which means that history is the history of thought. Jenkins in Collingwood's story assumes that people make choices that have consequences, so that if he can re-enact these choices, then he will have a chance of finding a solution. The historian discovers the mind of a figure from the past much as we discover the mind of a friend who writes us a letter, or a stranger who crosses the street (1946: 219). Bakewell's biography of Montaigne is an attempt to read the mind of that thinker, as in her description of him playing with his cat, based on a famous remark by Montaigne in one of his essays in which he wondered if he was playing with his cat or if his cat was playing with him (2011: 328):

> They looked at each other, and, just for a moment, he leaped across the gap to see himself through her eyes. Out of that moment – and countless others like it – came his whole philosophy.

The first sentence could be taken from a novel. The detail of cat and thinker looking at each other is not tractable to empirical verification, but it does lay out imaginatively a crucial moment in Montaigne's life. The second sentence is an interpretation, 'Deutung' based on 'Auslegung'. Together, the two sentences tell a story about the origin of Montaigne's philosophy.

A danger in formulating narrative is that it is easy to impose our own views onto the facts. The anthropology of James Frazer was criticised by Wittgenstein for implying that the only rational way of living was that of Frazer's late-nineteenth-century England, so that people in the past were 'primitive'. Wittgenstein saw Frazer, for example, as incapable of imagining a priest 'who is not basically a present-day English

parson with the same stupidity and dullness' ('Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', p. 125). For Milutinović, writing about Comparative Literature, 'if one approaches *all* third-world texts with the assumption that they are necessarily about embattled nations, one will find in them only what one has put there oneself' (2020b: 159). The search for the definitive story about any area is dangerous. The Nigerian novelist Oyinkan Braithwaite, whose work is discussed below, argues in an interview with Richard Lea that essentialist views of Nigeria are necessarily doomed (2019: 230-1):

> The idea that writers can represent some universal Nigerian experience is a chimera, when a universal Nigerian experience simply doesn't exist, she explains. 'We have a wide divide between classes and we have a wide divide between cultures because we're from different tribes, we have different religions.'

Her assertion is in line with what Milutinović calls the need for the 'rejection of ….the *quest for essences'* (2020b: 162); he argues that it is better to stay close to what we can truthfully describe (2020b: 163). Attention to narrative is one way of rejecting essences, because it shows that there are many stories, and the more stories the better.[2] The ideal (and the reality) is what Hodgett calls 'polyvocality' (2020: 34), just as Bertolt Brecht held that one theory is never enough and that we need to stuff lots of theories 'in our pockets like newspapers' (in Makaryk 1993: vii).

Coherent and persuasive storytelling, as practised by historians, depends then upon the laying-out and the interpretation of facts, imaginatively seeking to infer the best explanation. Milutinović is therefore right to stress the importance of local perspectives in New Area Studies when he argues that scholars need to investigate how people 'create their world, understood not as the mere physical environment, but as a web of meanings …' (2020a: 6). The area is always going to be more than the

[2] Robert McKee contrasts the facts known as 'The Life of Joan of Arc' with the many interpretations that have been written about her: 'Joan's facts are always the same but … the "truth" of her life waits for the writer to find its meaning' (1999: 25).

physical. Every area has its histories; in other words, its stories. To dismiss a discipline for telling stories is to misunderstand the project of the humanities. The use of narrative in New Area Studies is not its weakness, but its strength.

3. Beetles, boxes and metaphors: Looking to Wittgenstein

In his 1953 *Philosophical Investigations*, widely held by scholars to represent his later philosophy, Wittgenstein tells the following story (*PI* 293):

> Suppose that everyone had a box with something in it which we call a 'beetle'. No one can ever look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he [*sic*] knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle. – Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. – But what if the word 'beetle' had a use nonetheless? – If so it would not be the name of a thing. The thing in the box doesn't belong to the language-game at all; not even as a *Something*: for the box might even be empty. – No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.

It is on the face of it a strange way of doing philosophy, a long way from the work of an analytic philosopher like Bertrand Russell. Wittgenstein was himself quite capable of writing traditional philosophy but instead offers this story, in the context of an investigation into pain and private language. (It is possible to see the beetle in the box as a recollection from his time as a schoolteacher, observing his pupils collecting insects. The matchbox cannot be opened or else the creature might escape.) So what is in the box? It might even be nothing. Wittgenstein does not elucidate the story, thus giving it the form of a parable, and it has received a great deal of attention and some very different interpretations (see Stern 2007). I see it as a story that shows (among other things) that we are wasting our time if we look within ourselves for the meaning of 'beetle' (or of any other word), just as we cannot know what pain is only

from our own case (*PI* 293). It fits the general trend in the book to make readers see meaning as use (*PI* 43). If I want to know what a word or an expression means, then I should look at how it is used by people in everyday language. Meaning is public, not private (and story is one way that we make meaning).

Wittgenstein's is a literary approach to philosophy that defeats any expectation that language is only there to give us information. He asserts that 'really one should write philosophy only as one writes a poem' (*Culture and Value* p. 28). Poetry is associated by linguists with the metaphorical rather than the metonymic axis of language (see Jakobson 1956) and Milutinović analogously argues that New Area Studies must move from the metonymic to the metaphoric (2020b: 169):

> the insights offered by Area Studies should be metaphorical rather than metonymical … A metaphorical model of knowledge would abandon all pretence that a total, integrated knowledge is possible …

If metonym is to do with contiguity, metaphor is simultaneously to do with similarity and with dissimilarity (Jakobson 2010; Milutinović 2020b: 170). When William Shakespeare's Romeo proclaims that 'Juliet is the sun' (*Romeo and Juliet* 2.2.3), the audience infers that there must be similarities between Juliet and the star in the sky, whilst remaining aware that Romeo is *not* stating that she is an astronomical phenomenon. There is a paradox here. Juliet and the sun belong to different orders. To proclaim that Juliet is a person – where the orders are the same – is typically not an informative thing to say, unless somebody thought that she was a pet cat or she was being debated in the philosophy of mind. There is, however, what Milutinović calls an 'intensity of insight' (2020b: 170) in Romeo's reference to Juliet as sun, because it shows the audience what she means to him in a number of surprising ways, even if it offers no information about her biology or her biography, and so remains far from any claim to total knowledge (ibid.). To attempt to offer a conclusive decoding of the metaphor is impossible. I cannot say that 'Juliet is the sun' is equivalent to 'Juliet is life-giving', for example, without losing aspects of what Romeo

is trying to express about how his life has been turned upside down by meeting Juliet. Similarly, I cannot replace the opening lines of Gerard Manley Hopkins's sonnet 'The Windhover' (1985: 30) with my prose summary that follows:

> I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
> dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn falcon …
>
> This morning I saw a falcon announcing day, silhouetted against the patchy sky of dawn …

The prose summary, though it might be useful to a student, fails to maintain the connotations and implicatures of Hopkins's language. it is similarly a mistake to change the poem's title to 'Christ', even if critics do interpret the poem in this way. The falcon is a metaphor for Christ and its power comes from suggesting but not confirming connections in the mind of the reader. To decode the title or the poem is to miss the point. I can decode a message that is written as a cipher and that only admits of one solution, but any poem or a story will bring about multiple echoes in readers, which is why McKee sees story as '*metaphor for life*' (1999: 25).

The whole of the *Investigations* can be seen as narrative in nature, both because it tells a number of actual stories (the beetle in the box (*PI* 293), the shopping trip (*PI* 1), the builders (*PI* 2) etc.) and because it tells a larger story about language itself, which is what makes it such an important book in the history of philosophy. Wittgenstein describes it as an album containing points that keep being approached from different directions, resulting in a number of sketches (*PI* pp. 3-4). A reading of the *Investigations* is similar to being with somebody taking you through a selection of photographs, showing picture after picture and describing them, whilst drawing you into dialogue. The cumulative effect of the parables, the questions, the dialogues, the discussions and the examples is formidable. Jon Cook and Rupert Read, writing about the poem 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' by Wallace Stevens, imagine an analogous series of short stories, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at Language', which

would be a series of scenarios designed to make the reader re-examine their language; they conclude: 'But actually, one doesn't have to imagine that series: Wittgenstein did actually write it' (2010: 484). The *Investigations* fights against our tendency to see language only as a way of picturing the world, a position associated with Wittgenstein's earlier work and shown in Augustine's account of language, cited and critiqued in *PI* 1. Wittgenstein's notion of the language-game (*PI* 15) teaches us that language can be used in a variety of ways and that we are in danger when we universalise about it: in the story of the beetle in the box above, the beetle was even not part of the language-game being played. Even something outwardly as simple as a trip to the shops (*PI* 1), where we might expect to find just different examples of the same kind of transactional language, involves different activities (such as counting, or recognising colours). For Wittgenstein, the term language-game is chosen in order to stress that the 'speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life' (*PI* 23). If I play rugby, for example, then I will use certain words (such as 'goal') in a different way from my friends who play soccer. The same word has different uses: to indicate kicking an oval ball over a crossbar but between two posts, or to indicate kicking a spherical ball under a crossbar but between two posts. Two different stories are being told, and I can see this once I pay attention to Wittgenstein's larger story.

There is a tendency, going back to the Socrates of Plato, to divide texts arbitrarily into content and form, rather than looking at the texts themselves and how they function as unities. Matt Madden, discussing his presentation of the same domestic story in ninety-nine different drawings (following Raymond Queneau), concludes that the debate needs to be moved away from the eternal battle between form and content or style and substance to a new model: 'form as content, and substance inseparable from style' (2006: 1). Wittgenstein can support this task by his assertion that meaning is 'a physiognomy' (*PI* 568). If I want to know what somebody is feeling, then it is a good idea to look at their face. If I want to know what a Shakespeare sonnet or an advertisement or a joke means, then I similarly need to look at the physiognomy,

which in literary texts is the result of choice. And if I want to write metaphorically, then I need to look at the choices that I make in my writing. Wittgenstein notes that poems are written in the language of information but that they are not about transmitting information (*Zettel* 160), because the impressions that poems make on their readers go beyond that (*Zettel* 170). Story does more than tell us facts. In successful narrative – like the beetle in the box – the level is moved from metonymic to metaphorical.

This is not to argue that New Area Studies scholars should start to fill their work with parables and Wittgensteinian thought experiments, although it is not to rule out that possibility. The ideal is rather Wittgenstein's notion of the 'surveyable representation' (*PI* 122), which can both describes a practice and suggests ways of proceeding.[3] Wittgenstein defines the surveyable representation as something that 'produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in "seeing connections" (ibid.). The surveyable representation brings out aspects of phenomena. His example is the colour octahedron, which shows different aspects from the colour wheel (*Philosophical Remarks* 51-52). The surveyable representation allows new aspects to dawn for the reader (*PPF* 118) because it makes connections, just as Forster stresses that by bringing causal connections into a narrative, the novelist can capture readers' curiosity and keep them reading: the death of the Queen is connected with her grief, and that new aspect is interesting for the reader (2005: 87). The stories in the *Investigations* are surveyable representations: they bring out new aspects, they change the way that the reader thinks. Metaphorical tools are offered – language is like an old city (*PI* 18), words are analogous to tools in a toolbox (*PI* 11), learning a language is like learning the moves that chess pieces can make (*PI* 31) – that show language in new ways. Wittgenstein offers this instruction for practice (PI 79):

[3] Wittgenstein's German expression 'übersichtliche Darstellung' [overviewing representation] is often given in English as 'perspicuous representation', based on an earlier translation of the *Investigations* by Elizabeth Anscombe.

> Should it be said that I'm using a word whose meaning I don't know, and so am talking nonsense? – Say what you please, so long as it does not prevent you seeing how things are. (And when you see that, there will be some things that you won't say.)

We need to keep our eye on the facts, on how things are, which may involve a lot of hard work. And then we can say what we please, which means that there will always be different stories told about historical events, different novels written about the same area, different translations done of the same book. We have a radical pluralism, with the proviso that some stories – such as those that deny the Holocaust – will not be told, by responsible historians, because they do not look at how things are (see Wilson 2021).

By embracing storytelling at a metaphorical level, New Area Studies can attain the richer language that Kahnemann argues is necessary for constructive criticism (2012: 418). Moving to the metaphorical involves rejecting essentialism and the search for total knowledge. It involves the recognition that story is primary, that metaphor is about more than giving information, and that many narratives are needed. Even the indictment of Area Studies for its use of the story quoted at the beginning of this paper (White et al. 2000: 165) is inevitably framed as a narrative, as is the attack on Eastern European Area Studies as described by Wendy Bracewell (2020: 99):

> The [critical] narrative has focused on the conscription of western East European Studies to Cold War and post-1989 geo-politics and the ways in which the resulting knowledge has been compromised and rendered suspect.

The enemies of Areas Studies, condemning it for using narrative, use narrative. As I argued above, narrative is inevitable, because we are temporal beings. Significantly, Bracewell refers to her own essay about Eastern Europe as 'this sketch' (2020: 107), using the same term as Wittgenstein (above) for his later work.[4] By providing such

[4] Wittgenstein's German term for 'sketches' is *Bilder*, which could also be translated as 'pictures' or 'images'.

sketches at the metaphorical level, New Area Studies can learn from Wittgenstein's project, *not* by adopting a philosophical theory but by applying his methods. The story is not something that we can divorce from the area, as I shall make clear in Section 5 below.

In Wittgenstein's method, we have the refusal to offer total explanation demanded by Milutinović. The *Investigations* begins with a motto taken from the dramatist Johann Nestroy, which acts as a warning against expecting too much from any philosophical investigation (*PI* p. 2):

> The trouble about progress is that it always looks much greater than it really is.

The book that follows constantly attempts to make its readers see things differently (cf. *PI* 66). It offers heuristics, such as the language-game or the form of life, for investigating particular cases. It addresses everyday language not linguistic theory. Wittgenstein is thus able to tell a rich story of human interaction that is metaphorical and that involves his reader in the investigation. The insights and tools can and should be applied elsewhere (see Read 2007).[5]

Making up a story – as well as reading one – is itself a language-game for Wittgenstein (*PI* 23). It is the language-game that New Area Studies needs to play and if researchers know that it is a language-game, then there is a better chance of selecting new and vital stories and playing the language-game of storytelling well.

4. Wanderers and Old Believers: Looking to narrative theory

Researchers in New Area Studies do not just tell stories but use the stories of others as a source, including fictitious texts such as novels. Milutinović argues that 'Area

[5] See Wilson (2016) for an application of Wittgenstein's story to Translation Studies, for example.

Studies should include studying literature not merely as a component of an area, but as a great repository of cultural understandings' (2020a: 15). Given that literature is by its nature fictive, how can this move be justified? In this section I examine narrative theory to see if it supports Milutinović's move.

Literature can of course have documentary value for researchers. Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (2006), for example, tells the story of new arrivals from the West Indies to 1950s London and can be mined for details of language, dress, behavioural patterns and so on. Braithwaite's *My Sister, The Serial Killer* (2019) similarly offers snapshots of life in twenty-first-century Lagos. To read it is to be informed that the police are more likely to investigate a case if money is involved, for instance. To ascertain whether this description is true or not would of course need further inquiry. As Milutinović notes, no historian would base their research on a historical novel, but historical novels remain 'significant for studying popular interpretations of history …' (2000b: 157). It would be unwise to write a description of the 1842 British retreat from Afghanistan using solely George MacDonald Fraser's novel *Flashman* (1969). Yet this text, based on historical sources but narrated by a fictional self-serving coward (the school bully Flashman from Thomas Hughes's 1857 novel *Tom Brown's Schooldays*), serves as an ironic comment on nineteenth-century British foreign policy, 'undermining heroic accounts of imperial achievement' (de Groot 2010: 88). It deserves consideration because of how it can make us question the historical sources, such as Vincent Eyre's patriotic account of the disastrous withdrawal (1828), on which Macdonald Fraser draws for Flashman's description of the final massacre of the British forces.

Fictive works can have more than documentary value, however. *The Lonely Londoners* is read and studied today not just because it offers a wealth of examples about immigration to Britain but because it is judged as making its readers feel what it was like to be part of that experience. Hodgett argues that 'in order to understand a place

better, a researcher must find out 'what it feels like to be *there*' (2020: 38). Literature can aid with this task because it causes poetic effects in readers. Adrian Pilkington asserts that literariness can be defined 'in terms of cognitive events triggered in minds/brains by linguistic stimuli' (2000: 189) and that literature is a two-way process in which writers articulate their feelings and experiences and critics and readers 'do the same with the writer's assistance' (2000: 47). To read *My Sister, The Serial Killer* is to encounter an attempt to articulate what it feels like to be a young woman working as a nurse in Lagos. It is also to be encouraged to articulate our own response to this situation, especially when it is complicated by story: the nurse's affection for her boss clashes with her desire to protect his would-be murderer (who happens to be her sister).

Cora Diamond argues that many works of literature attempt 'to lead their audience to new moral responses … to enlarge the reader's moral and emotional sensibilities' (1982: 30). Such attempts are possible because of how narrative works. Paralleling Heidegger's distinction between 'Auslegung' and 'Deutung', narrative stylistics makes a distinction between plot and discourse, which can be defined as the abstract storyline and the represented storyline respectively (following Simpson 2004: 20). The plot of *My Sister, The Serial Killer* (2019) is the abstract storyline of a young woman, Korede, torn between loyalty to her sister (who has developed the habit of killing her boyfriends) and her own sense of justice (which becomes acute when the sister targets Korede's beloved boss); the discourse is the plot's 'development, elaboration, embellishment' (Stockwell, 2007: 19), for example, how Brathwaite delineates character, constructs the first-person narrator point of view and uses the present tense.

Novels can make people feel things because of the rich phenomenological experience that they offer when storyline and plot are integrated, which explains why literary works can matter to their readers. Jenefer Robinson asks how it is possible for her to

feel compassion for Leo Tolstoy's eponymous heroine Anna Karenina (who throws herself under a train when she feels life to be intolerable), given that this woman never existed (2005: 143). There is a difference between feeling compassion for Anna and feeling compassion for the sufferings of, say, the dying Wittgenstein, while reading about his life, given that Wittgenstein's existence was instantiated, and that he did die from cancer. It is both possible and rational to be upset at what happened to people in the past. But to shed tears for Anna, or for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's fictional suicide Werther, seems analogous to getting depressed because there are no unicorns to be seen in the local park. Nevertheless, people do shed tears for Anna and Werther. There are even reports of eighteenth-century young men dressing like Werther and taking a pistol to their own head in the so-called 'Werther effect', so moved were they by his story (Moyal-Sharrock 2009: 180). Can we push the analysis any further?

In a study of what he terms the 'literary mind', Mark Turner (1998) argues that narrative is basic to the way in which the human mind functions, so that language results from story. His theory reverses the common view that sees story as a product of language (Turner 1998: 168). We are hard-wired to narrative. One consequence of story being basic is that the mind interprets events as actions, as Collingwood argues (above). Turner gives an example: when somebody speaks of a photocopier 'chewing up a document' (1998: 28). Here a source story about eating (an actor chews food) is projected onto a target story about a machine damaging a document. The result is a parable, a projected story. Parable occurs at both the macro and the micro levels: whole works are parabolic in this cognitive sense, but even 'sentences are small stories' (Turner 1998: 161). We cannot avoid story because of our cognitive makeup. It is basic to human behaviour because of the nature of the mind, as well as because of our temporal nature, which implies that novels, plays and poems can be tools for research, as in the following example from Translation Studies.

Rosemary Arrojo (2017) uses literature as a way of rethinking translation by examining how translators have been portrayed in fiction, such as Pierre Menard, eponymous hero of a 1939 short story by Jorge Luis Borges (2000). In Borges's narrative, the twentieth-century translation into Castilian by Menard of the seventeenth-century Castilian novel *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes intends to produce work that will coincide – word for word and line for line – with the work of Cervantes. The product is seen as a supreme act of translation because it replicates the prose of the earlier author (Cervantes) in the modern world of the translator (Menard). Very acute questions are raised about translation and the role of the translator by this story, which is why the text is fundamental for Arrojo's enquiry. She refers to a 'fictional turn' in translation studies (2017: 2) and explains her project as follows (2017: 1):

> This book has been engendered by my long-held conviction that fictional representations of the work of translators will shine a special, often unexpected light on the scene of translation as an asymmetrical encounter between different languages, interests and perspectives.

Arrojo sees the depiction of translators in literature as a counterweight to the sober reflections of theory. Literary depiction brings out aspects of the translator's life that tend to get ignored by theorists, such as the ethical dilemmas in which many translators find themselves when caught between the demands of translation commissioner and target text.

Narrative theory therefore both explains why researchers in New Area Studies turn to literature and also why they are right to do so. Winch argues that 'a historian or sociologist of religion must have some religious feeling if he [*sic*] is to make sense of the religious movement he is studying and understand the considerations which govern the lives of its participants' (2008: 82), and the point holds equally for enquiry in New Area Studies. In his note on 'Further Reading' for his edition of the anonymous nineteenth-century Russian text *The Way of a Pilgrim*, for example, Andrew Louth

recommends various historical studies of the Old Believers, but goes on to assert (2017: 196):

> Still better than any of these books, so far as evoking the world of the wanderers and the Old Believers is concerned, are the short stories of Nikolai Leskov, especially 'The Sealed Angel' …

The choice of verb is crucial: the stories of Leskov, though fictive, 'evoke' a form of life and can therefore be used for study and research.

The texts cited in this paper are primarily written narratives, such as Selvon (2006) or Braithwaite (2019). The points made apply also to oral tellings, however. Many written stories grow out of oral traditions, such as the Homeric epics or the Gospels. Following Turner (1998), we can locate narrative in the mind rather than in the text. It is convenient to document stories by writing them down for easy retrieval, but stories can be accessed by talking to people and one of the most common research tools in the humanities is simply to ask people to tell their story, and to listen attentively.

5. Looking forward

Reports of the death of Area Studies were, then, greatly exaggerated, as Hodgett describes at the conclusion of her story of the discipline (2020: 40):

> Despite all the odds, and in a new century, we continue discussing the significance of area to our lived world, in our everyday stories and lives, in our commonplace studies.

In this paper, I have examined narrative and conclude that it is the use of narrative that has enabled New Area Studies to re-establish itself in the academy. I have used work from outside New Area Studies to come to this conclusion. By turning to history, I showed that facts can be woven into narratives because we live in time, and that the

nature of narrative allows interpretation, which can furnish us with the best explanation for a particular case. By turning to the later work of Wittgenstein, I showed how his philosophy supports the call for New Area Studies to engage with narrative at the metaphorical level. By turning to narrative theory, I offered support to the way that New Area Studies engages with literature, because literature can make its readers feel what it was like to be alive at a certain time or place, given that story is primary. Clearly, there are other disciplines and other thinkers that can be brought into the debate, while New Area Studies can itself support other disciplines, such as International Relations and Comparative Politics, as Hodgett notes (2000: 19). The field itself is an interdiscipline.

Interdisciplinary dialogue supports the redefinition of the key term 'area' in terms of narrative, following Milutinović (2020b: 161):

> rivers and mountains become a particular area, distinguishable from another, when alongside them a specific tradition of storytelling takes root.

With area we are dealing not just with physical features, but with 'intersubjectively shared webs of meaning' (ibid.). There is nothing automatically given about a particular area, because labels are not objective but 'co-produced by local actors' (Bracewell 2000: 96). Once a river has been named, it is part of a story. Once a mountain has been mapped, it is part of a story. Our language, following Wittgenstein, is never only about transmitting information but is a practice that builds meaning. The rivers and mountains of Mesopotamia were named and mapped over 4000 years ago, and now the reconstruction of Akkadian languages has made it possible to read stories told by people who lived there at that time. The ancient Babylonian epic poem *Gilgamesh* (1989: 51), for example, speaks in its first tablet of:

> The raging flood-wave, which can destroy even a stone wall.

A raging flood-wave destroying a stone wall? That sounds like a narrative worth hearing, a narrative worth recounting and interpreting. Which story will be told to Gilgamesh and to those who listen alongside him? What will happen? What will it

signify? What other stories have come from Mesopotamia? What do they have to say? Which stories are being written there today, both inside and outside the academy? All these questions are pressing for just this one area in this world of ours. It therefore looks likely that the story of New Area Studies will have a happy end after all, because – paradoxically – that end is never likely to come. As the Brothers Grimm might have put it: if they haven’t died, then they are still alive today.

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