

A Critical Realist Perspective on Forbidden Love



Pyramus and Thisbe by Abraham Daniëlsz. Hondius (Boijmans, n.d.)

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Storytelling in social sciences

'In every authentic tradition of storytelling and healing that I know of, the storytelling starts with bringing out the psychic content, both the societal and individual' (free translation, Estés, 1992). In the eyes of Estés: 'Historias que son medicina', stories are like medicine. She explains that by means of deep analysis, stories can teach us what to do and when, but also *what not to do*. This can be useful, as our social life is not that transparent; all sorts of things happen to us which we struggle to understand, and for which our ideas often seem inadequate (Benton & Craib, 2010). I think that the practice of social science could partly be seen as a form of storytelling, in which the objects of study are, like the social scientists who study them, reflexive, conscious beings who endow their actions with meaning (Idem). Alisdair MacIntyre, an English philosopher, provides a philosophical foundation for the contemporary emphasis on narrative in social psychology, sociology and social history. This emphasis has developed in each discipline in different ways (Idem). Dan P. MacAdams (1993), influenced by the work of psychoanalyst Carl Jung, argues for the importance of building personal myths for a meaning of life and a sense of identity; Jerome Bruner (1987), a cognitive psychologist, even suggests that there is only narrative; there is no difference between the life as lived and the life as told.

I would like to explore the interaction between the practice of social science and storytelling by using a philosophical approach to analyse a story. Benton & Craib (2010) argue in their book *Philosophy of Social Science: The philosophical foundations of social thought* that while there are many interpretive philosophical approaches, it might be that none of them can make sense of what we do when we fall in love. I want to challenge this thought by analysing a dramatic love story, the story about Pyramus and Thisbe (figure 1). The oldest surviving of the story was published in 8 A.D. in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but even he adapted an existing etiological myth. The theme of forbidden love has since then been used by many authors. These stories generally conclude in a tragic way, mostly with the death of both main characters due to a misunderstanding. Apparently, this plot has been considered to be so important that it could survive multiple decennia and reappear in many stories. Therefore, I want to find out what lessons can be learned from it.

I cannot use a post positivist perspective for my analysis, because in terms of epistemology, the denial of objects existing independently of the discourses that construct them as objects unables me of differentiating between competing truth claims (Norris, 1996). Moreover, ontologically, if discourses do construct their own objects, what constructed the discourses themselves? (Patomäki & Wight, 2000). On the other hand, positivist approaches are also not useful to me, because in those, epistemology and ontology become tied together (Bhaskar, 1989). Therefore, I am using a critical realist perspective to analyse this story, because it claims that there is a reality independent of our experience, but also that this reality is stratified, or layered (Benton & Craib, 2010). It proposes a world composed of complex things that possess certain potentials, powers and capacities to act in certain ways, even if those capacities are not always realized (Bhaskar, 1975).

I am asking, from a critical realist perspective, what main lesson can be learned from the story of Pyramus and Thisbe?

Pyramus and Thisbe

Pyramus And Thisbe, two youngsters living next to each other in the city of Babylon, met each other as soon as they could walk. Because their love increased with time, they would have married if their parents had not forbidden it. However, their parents could not forbid love, which burned equally in the two captive minds. In the wall separating the two houses, there was a narrow crack. Nobody knew it was there, except for the two lovers. They would stand on opposite sides, sighing in turns. 'Envious wall' they said, 'why do you stand in the way of two lovers?' But they were grateful, being conscious of the debt they owed it, because it granted passage to the words destined for loving ears.

One day, they decided to escape their homes and leave the city. They agreed to meet at the tomb of Ninus where they could hide in the shade of the mulberry tree. The next day, after sunset, Thisbe slipped out her house and settled in the shade of the tree; love had made her bold. A lioness approached, intending to slake her thirst in the waters of the nearby spring. The lioness just slaughtered a bullock and her jaws were smeared with blood. Seeing the creature by moonlight, Thisbe was frightened and fled into a dark cave. Fleeing, her cloak slipped from her back. The lioness, passing by the garment when returning to the woods, shredded it with her bloody jaws.

Pyramus arrived later. When he saw the tracks of the lioness in the soft earth, he went pale. Then he found the bloodstained garment. He said, 'one night will be the dead of two lovers. She is far more worthy of life. My soul is that of a criminal! I killed you, wretched girl, when I sent you by night to a place filled with dangers and did not arrive before you.' He walked over to the tree, bound the garment around him and plunged his sword up through his belly. Dying instantly of the spurting wound, he fell backwards and his blood sprayed the fruit of the tree, and the roots soaked by the wound dyed the hanging berries purple.

Thisbe did not recognize the colors of the mulberries when she came back. In a moment she found her lover. Pressing kisses on his cold features, she cried, 'Pyramus! What cause has taken you from me? Only then she recognized her cloak and saw that Pyramus' ivory scabbard was empty. 'Love and your own hand have slain you, unhappy one.' She said. 'That hand and love will strengthen me also, giving me the courage for slaughter that I may follow your death. Let me be remembered not only as the wretched cause of your death but also as its companion. Parents, who have been the cause of so much misery to us and to yourselves; grant our mutual wishes and bury us in the same tomb. And you, tree, retain the memory of our deaths and always bear fruit dark with the colors of mourning, the marking of our mingled blood.' So speaking, she lifted the point of the sword at the base of her chest.

Figure 1: Pyramus and Thisbe, free translation of Ovid's *Methamorphosis*

Forbidden love

In the first part of the story, Pyramus and Thisbe are living next to each other, separated by a physical barrier: the wall with the crack. The main theme of this part is that, without being able to see or touch each other, both are convinced of their mutual love. How can this be, and can their conception of love be considered as *real*? The critical realist view on the world entails that it consists of two dimensions: the 'intransitive dimension', an independent reality that is layered, and the 'transitive dimension', in which humans are seen as embodied agents capable of intervening in the world (Benton & Craib, 2010). The intransitive dimension consists of three levels of reality: the real, the actual, and the empirical (Idem). Surely, the chemical processes in the brains of the two lovers could be analysed in an experimental setting and lead to an empirical observation of them being 'in love'. Thus, their love is at least part of the empirical level of the intransitive dimension and can therefore be considered real. Still, these chemical signs of being in a state of love can have multiple explanations when taken outside of isolated, experimental settings and into the actual. They could be in love with anyone. They could be in love with a fantasy in their head. They could be physically in love, but not wanting to act upon it because of their restrictions. However, their ability to speak with each other through the crack in the wall provides them with additional knowledge about the status of their love. According to Roy Bhaskar, beliefs, linguistic conversation, and symbolic gestures are transitive objects (Patomäki & Wight, 2000). Their knowledge, then, is a social product, actively produced by means of antecedent social products (their previous conversations), on the basis of an interaction with its intransitive object (Idem) - their brains being in love. Because this is knowledge of an independently existing reality, it is not totally arbitrary and their perspectives on reality can be trusted to provide better accounts than others (Patomäki, 1992). This being said, it can be stated that the love between these two people not only occurs under experimental conditions, but also in more complex and less predictable conjunctures outside the laboratory, and is therefore part of the actual.

Although the love between Pyramus and Thisbe seems to be real according to my reasoning above, I do have to question if it would have existed without them knowing about it. Would it still have been part of the real level of the intransitive dimension? According to critical realism, the social world is ontologically composed of a fragmented interplay of practices based on various relational, partial perspectives (Patomäki & Wight, 2000). These are represented by their individual perspectives on the situation and the interplay between them is their knowledge produced by communication. Critical realism also states that a more comprehensive perspective is achieved by transcending and adapting these partial perspectives and synthesising them into a broader, non-reductive perspective capable of incorporating the strengths of all (Patomäki & Wight, 2000). Is their love part of this non-reductive perspective? It can be, because critical realism views the above as a continuous process: reality is constantly changing and there can only be a *dynamic* synthesis that is constantly being reformulated (Idem). Thus, Pyramus and Thisbe are rightfully 'grateful' of the crack in the wall, 'being conscious of the debt they owed it, because it granted passage to the words destined for loving ears.' It appears that this passage provides them with the ability to formulate a dynamic synthesis of their individual perspectives and with that, to make their love part of the real.

Unfortunately, the love between Pyramus and Thisbe is forbidden. That is to say, they are also separated by a non-physical barrier: the objection of their parents. Where it is relatively easy to claim that the wall is real - it is simply there - it is much harder to philosophically argue for the reality of the objection. According to critical realism, there are beings in the social world that possess causal powers that can make a difference by changing the course of flow of events that would have otherwise taken place (Layder, 1993). In this part of story, the parents are said to possess the causal power to prevent Pyramus and Thisbe from being together. However, critical realism also states: agents, their intentions, and reasons for these intentions are not enough to account for social causality (Idem). In the critical realist view, social systems are open systems, they are susceptible to external influences and internal, qualitative change and emergence. The crack in the wall can be considered an external influence, leading to the internal and qualitative change of the situation: love develops over time regardless of the restrictions. The objections of the parents may thus be part of the empirical level of the social world, however, when taken into the actual level, the restrictions that were supposed to follow these objections are not. This leads to the conclusion that because both the conditions and the agents who act upon them exist - conditions which are real and not reducible to the discourses of the agents - the forbidden love between Pyramus and Thisbe has come to existence and is able to influence the course of their lives.

Misunderstanding

In the second part of the story, Pyramus and Thisbe, determined to live together, decide to escape their restrictive environment. The two characters expect that their decision will allow them to become closer, but interestingly, the opposite happens. Outside their familiar environment, many contextual factors are shaping the course of the story, leading to a misunderstanding and eventually, the tragic death of both main characters. How could this happen?

Thisbe arrives first at the scene, together with a contextual factor of major importance: the lioness. Thisbe is frightened by the creature, and decides to hide in a cave. By doing this, she acts as a being that possesses causal powers and she changes the flow of events that would have otherwise taken place. Her intention to do this ('I am going to hide in a cave') is reasoned ('in order not to be killed by the lioness') and is causally efficacious, even though she might not realize the role of her decision (Patomäki & Wight, 2000). However, it cannot be stated that the story would have ended differently if she had decided not to flee. For different tendential causes can bring about similar trends and episodes and the same kinds of causes can bring about different kinds of events, depending on the totality of relevant causal processes and complexes (Idem). She might have been attacked by the lioness. And what if she would not have lost her scarf in the flight? Would Pyramus have waited for her? Would he have stumbled upon another dangerous creature when looking for her and be killed himself? Or would he maybe have thought that she had not come, and simply left? This reasoning is never-ending, and it is better to accept that reality can be influenced by internally and externally related elements, and to focus on what *did* happen.

Pyramus arrives after Thisbe has left, and this is when their partial perspectives on reality begin to diverge. They diverge in so far that the synthesis of their relational perspectives does no longer lead to a broader, non-reductive perspective capable of

incorporating the strengths of all. This is why Pyramus can no longer *understand* reality. Pyramus uses a positivist-Humean account of cause, generally known as the 'covering law' model (figure 2):

If event A occurs, then event B must occur. (the covering law)
Event A has occurred

Therefore event B must (had to) occur

Figure 2: the covering law model (Hume, 1967/1739)

Because this model is based solely at the level of co-joined events, it does not really constitute an explanation at all. This model cannot sustain the distinction between an accidental and a necessary sequence of events. There may be a correlation between the bloodstained garment and the absence of Thisbe, but is there a causal connection? In this situation, both the ontological perspective of Pyramus (The blood on the scarf is that of Thisbe) and his related theory of causality (Thisbe has been slaughtered and dragged away by a murderous creature) are false and misleading. Pyramus his reasoning must have been somewhat like the following:

'I find the bloodstained garment of Thisbe on the ground (event A), Thisbe has been killed and dragged away by a murderous creature (event B).

The first has occurred,
so the latter must also be true.'

Had he investigated the situation more elaborately in order to find out what possible brought about changes to the situation he expected outside of his immediate interpretation; that is, if he had made sure that Thisbe was actually attacked by a creature, and that she was actually killed, he could have formed a better perspective on the nature of reality at that point in time. Even worse, Pyramus immediately assumes that the death of Thisbe is his fault, because he sent her by night to a place filled with dangers and did not arrive before her. In order to make one explanandum (him finding the bloodstained garment of Thisbe on the ground) intelligible to himself, Pyramus creates his own interpretative (narrative) explanation. However, he fails to include existential and causal hypotheses about the real world (Patomäki & Wight, 2000). He does not realize that events are caused by causal powers existing in the world within which we dwell as a very small part of it, unable to understand the large parts of it (Idem).

Thisbe, when discovering her dying lover, formulates it well: 'love and your own hand have slain you, unhappy one.' However, she also points to herself as the wretched cause of his death which is, again, debatable.

Lessons

How does critical realism help us learn from this story about what we should and what we should not do when we fall in love? Of course, there are many more aspects of this story that can be analysed and which can teach us multiple important lessons, but I think that the critical realist perspective I have used here to analyse the story provides me with at least one important lesson. This lesson consists of two parts. The first part has to do with the fact that reality is constantly changing, which allows us only to establish a dynamic synthesis of our partial perspectives on it, which is constantly being reformulated. If we feel that we are in love with someone, we have to recognize, appreciate and incorporate the partial perspective of the other person into a more comprehensive account, in order to find out if our perspective on reality corresponds with the intransitive dimension of the world - to find out if we are both in love with each other and if this love is real. To do this, we must use transitive objects like beliefs, linguistic conversations and symbolic gestures. This relates to the second part of the lesson. If we do not use these transitive objects, and create our own interpretative (narrative) explanations to make explananda intelligible to ourselves, our connection to the intransitive dimension of the social world becomes distorted. This may lead us to take irrational, rash actions. If we do not want our personal myths to have tragic endings, we have to view the material and the ideational as a whole. A whole that is necessary to investigate as an integral system with all its necessary interconnections, and not as isolated fragments out of context. Only then can we achieve a broader, non-reductive perspective on the fragmented interplay of practices that ontologically compose our social world.

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