Christian *Script*ure:

E(x)vangelical Narratives and Rhetorical Traumas

Eric C. Miller

Bloomsburg University

Abstract: American evangelicalism is heavily invested in a narrative form known as *testimony,* by which individuals may narrate their life stories according to a *before*, *during*, and *after* schema—recounting the sinful period before they converted to Christianity, the significant moment of their repentance and redemption, and the sanctified period of redeemed life that has followed ever since. Useful for personal understanding as well as pedagogy and proselytization, the testimony script has played a pivotal formative role in the development of countless evangelical young people over the past several decades. And yet, because of the formulaic limits that it imposes on every story, testimony is necessarily constraining on its practitioners. When these individuals sometimes break with the faith and rebel against the form, their revised accounts rework the script to emphasize its inherent control, manipulation, and, often, trauma. This essay undertakes a narrative analysis of both evangelical testimony and "exvangelical" memoir to demonstrate how each is governed by a shared set of narrative conventions, for better or worse.

Keywords: *Evangelicalism, Exvangelicalism, Testimony, Memoir, Trauma*

On her first visit to the Playboy mansion, Brenda Marie Davies met a movie star and got bit by a monkey, a pair of particulars either of which may have dominated the memory of that experience had both not been entirely consumed within the swirling anxiety that Jesus was watching. Having come up in the conservative culture of American evangelicalism and applied its tenets to her own life and choices, Davies floated breathless and tense through hallways, bedrooms, and grotto, among sensuous faces and bare skin, her mind and body engaged all the while with the oppressive conviction that she was a failure. Her invitation had come enveloped in seduction and her acceptance had disclosed her as a fraud. The central figure in a tale about and authored ceaselessly by herself, Davies had by then devoted nineteen years to crafting a storyline with contours, along a trajectory bound clearly for points more righteous than this. Like a plot twist in a bad movie, her arrival at the mansion violated the narrative arc, disrupting the exposition and invalidating her authorial labor. Only after a period of internal deliberation and a frantic call to her mother was Davies finally able to reconcile intentions with events, assuring herself in the end that her decisions had followed a rational—perhaps rational*izing*—logic. After all, she reasoned, Christ spent his time with sinners, too.[1]

Though unique in the details, Davies' account is strikingly typical in the thematics, standing in for an entire genre of what are now colloquially dubbed "exvangelical" memoirs.[2] Her book, *On Her Knees: Memoir of a Prayerful Jezebel*, recounts an obediently faithful childhood and a zealous adolescence followed by an early adulthood wracked with doubt, guilt, disillusionment, recrimination, and anger, expressed in rebellion and processed, often, as trauma.

---

[1] Brenda Marie Davies, *On Her Knees: Memoir of a Prayerful Jezebel* (Eerdmans, 2021): 10-18.
[2] The term "exvangelical" is generally attributed to Blake Chastain, who coined it as a Twitter hashtag, launched the Exvangelical Podcast, and has written his own book on the subject. See Chastain, *Exvangelical and Beyond: How American Christianity Went Radical and the Movement that's Fighting Back* (Tarcher, 2024); and Bradley Onishi, "The Rise of #Exvangelical," *Religion & Politics,* April 9, 2019, https://religionandpolitics.org/2019/04/09/the-rise-of-exvangelical.

Like many other exvangelical memoirists, Davies is left at once embittered and activated by the formative experiences of her younger self, resentful of the narrative that she allowed to shape her understanding and inspired to help others avoid its darker effects. Also like her peers, Davies necessarily performs this introspective work within and upon that same narrative scaffolding, hammering away at the beams and boards without restraint but also without the power to break entirely through the protections they have promised or the limits they have imposed. For better or worse, these mark the durable legacy of a simple and resilient storytelling tradition.

Though less liturgical than its mainline cousins, evangelical Christianity does subscribe to at least one ceremonial speech practice—the sharing of personal testimony. Generative of social connection and communal bonding, testimony provides a clear and coherent storyline that the faithful may employ to order, understand, and narrate their lives. Common practice at church services, youth groups, camps, and conferences, the sharing of testimony is second nature to practicing evangelicals, and a key element of their initiation and training. In every case, it is modeled upon one of two narrative arcs—the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, or the parable of the Prodigal Son—each relaying a tripartite structure of sin, repentance, and redemption. Like many other Bible stories, these provide readers with resources for making sense of human life. But unlike many others, these have been adopted and deployed by countless Christian ministries as rhetorical templates to be studied, learned, and mimicked.[3] I am interested in such narratives as rhetorical scripts from which believers continually read, by which their lives are oriented, and against which they sometimes revolt.

[3] Prominent examples are available online from InterVarsity Fellowship and Campus Crusade for Christ, among many others. See the first at https://evangelism.intervarsity.org/how/conversation/30-minutes-shareable-testimony and the second at https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/share-the-gospel/what-is-a-christian-testimony.html.

The testimony script is powerful because it is modeled upon a larger three-part narrative that defines the evangelical worldview. For evangelicals, a literal reading of Genesis documents the decline of human nature into sin, creating a rift between man and God. Because of this rift, human beings stand condemned for their rebellion, and doomed to an eternity of separation. However, because of God's love for humanity, he sends his son to earth in human form, both to minister to the people and to die a sacrificial death on their behalf. By laying down his life, despite his innocence, Christ satisfies the demand for divine justice, paying the penalty incurred by sinful human beings. Finally, an offer of grace is proffered, through which people may be forgiven and redeemed, simply by acknowledging Christ's sacrifice and believing in his divinity. By confessing their sins, seeking forgiveness, and being born spiritually again, Christian converts model their own life stories on the greater narrative of human history, effectively serving as embodied synecdoche for the human condition.

This is all fine so far as it goes, unless and until the believer loses faith. At that point, the very cohesiveness of the account becomes a serious liability with which the now ex-evangelical must grapple. Because the evangelical youth movement was so wildly successful in the 1990s and early aughts—fueled by its strong emphasis on apologetics and personal purity—and because the graduates of that training came of age and applied its tenets to mixed effect in the years since, there has been an influx of exvangelical memoirs published in the past two decades or so.[4] In preparation for this essay, I read about a dozen of these, looking for common experiences, arguments, and themes, and always attentive to the ways in which they rely upon or respond to the evangelical testimony script. The result is an argument about the exvangelical

[4] For excellent primers on the centrality of apologetics and purity to evangelical youth ministries during these years, see Thomas E. Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Eerdmans, 2012), and Christine J. Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (University of California Press, 2011).

experience, of which I am also a veteran. In the first part, I situate evangelical testimony and exvangelical memoir within the purview of narrative analysis, explaining how these describe and dictate the experiences of their authors. In the second, I analyze these narratives through the lens of three common themes—apologetics (or the *logos* of the narrative), purity (the *ethos*), and trauma (the *pathos*). Along the way, I demonstrate that the life and the afterlife of an evangelical faith are consciously crafted according to shared narrative conventions, each entirely congruent with the uniquely American desire to begin again (and quite possibly *again*) when a particular life path has run its disappointing course. As I show, Brenda Marie Davies' experience is at once unique and not, given the commonplaces on which these narratives are constructed.

Evangelical Narratives and Narrativity

In recent years scholarly interest in evangelical testimony has been on the rise, with particular attention to conversion narratives more broadly.[5] Often these are focused upon public figures with sullied reputations—preachers with prostitutes, Klansmen with ambitions, presidential candidates with a late-breaking DUI—and sensitive to the convenience of the timing.[6] In each case, the sinful impropriety and its consequences constitute a sort of rock bottom from which the socially prominent sinner may finally see the light and find Jesus, or find him

[5] See, for example, Leland G. Spencer, "Mobilizing Conversion Narratives Toward (Non)Religious Civility: The Case of Chris Stedman's *Faithiest," Journal of Communication and Religion* 42.1 (2019): 20-32; John Lynch, "'Prepare to Believe': The Creation Museum as Embodied Conversion Narrative," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 16.1 (2013): 1-28; Mark Ward Sr, "I Was Saved at an Early Age: An Ethnography of Fundamentalist Speech and Cultural Performance," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 33.1 (2010): 108-144; and Susan F. Harding, "Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion," *American Ethnologist* 14.1 (1987): 167–81.

[6] See, for example, Mark Ward Sr., "The *Apology* Sermon: Jimmy Swaggart's *Mea Culpa*," in *Rhetoric of the Protestant Sermon in America: Pulpit Discourse at the Turn of the Millennium,* Eric C. Miller and Jonathan J. Edwards, eds. (Lexington, 2020), 39-62; Dave Tell, "James McGreevey, 'State House Confession' (12 August 2004)," *Voices of Democracy* 3 (2008): 83-102; David C. Bailey, "Enacting Transformation: George W. Bush and the Pauline Conversion Narrative in *A Charge to Keep*," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11.2 (2008): 215-242; B. R. McGee, "Witnessing and *Ethos*: The Evangelical Conversion of David Duke," *Western Journal of Communication* 62.3 (1998): 217-243; D. B. McLennan, "Rhetoric and Legitimation Process: The Rebirth of Charles Colson," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 19.1 (1996): 5-12; and C. J. G. Griffin, "The Rhetoric of Form in Conversion Narratives," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76.2 (1990): 152-163.

again, revising the story in real time and perhaps redeeming prospects so recently and so sharply on the wane.[7] For most practitioners, however, testimony is a common, sincere, and relatively low-profile affair. It is very simply a story form available for adoption and application to one's own life and times, providing the means to write a life consistent with the scriptures one has read. Whatever small opportunisms may be identified within its works, testimony is primarily a moral tool useful for situating the *before*, *during*, and *after* of one's conversion, and guiding one to act accordingly. Exvangelical memoirs recount the practice often.

Given how many evangelical young people are evangelical from the start, the most common testimony narrative is likely the one that begins in childhood, preempting the dark period of adolescent sin and vice and proceeding instead directly to salvation. Because these testimonies draw their conflict from the inherent fallenness of all human beings rather than from a proven track record of evil acts, they are necessarily less powerful than the other varieties—to speakers as well as audiences. For example, in her contribution to the essay collection *Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church,* Chrissy Stroop recalls testimony-sharing as an "uncomfortable" practice, owing to her early conversion, benign lifestyle, and the attendant dearth of content. "A lot of kids raised in sheltered evangelical environments struggle with this," she writes, "because when your mom or dad led you through the sinner's prayer when you were a toddler, it can be hard to paint a convincing picture of transformation, of a before and after. Many evangelical kids secretly envy the testimonies of adult converts who can tell stories of drug addiction or sexual promiscuity as parts of their preconversion lives that God gave them the

[7] Scholars have examined *de*conversion narratives as well. See, for example, T.J. Geiger II, "Discerning Dangerous Affections in Hell Houses: Inoculation, Counterfeit Love, and *Resentiment*," *Journal of Communication & Religion* 43.4 (2020): 60-76; Brian Simmons, "A Fantasy Theme Analysis of Ex-Christians' Online Deconversion Narratives," *Northwest Journal of Communication* 42.1 (2014): 117-141; Rosemary Avance, "Seeing the Light: Mormon Conversion and Deconversion Narratives in Off- and Online Worlds," *Journal of Media & Religion* 12.1 (2013): 16-24; and Lori L. Fazzino, "Leaving the Church Behind: Applying a Deconversion Perspective to Evangelical Exit Narratives," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29.2 (2013): 249-266.

strength to give up."[8] Charles Marsh shares this perspective. In his *The Last Days: A Son's Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of the New South,* Marsh remembers hearing others' shocking testimonies with a feeling of deflation. "At youth nights or around campfires on retreats," he writes, "I had tried to relate tales of my own wickedness, but there wasn't much to work with."[9] Recounting her rap sheet in *When We Were on Fire: A Memoir of Consuming Faith, Tangled Love, and Starting Over,* Addie Zierman finds herself clutching at candies. "You were, of course, only a child. But you were a sinner. You once stole a handful of root beer barrels out of the candy jar at Roy and Hilda's house next door." In Zierman's case, the less-than-persuasive narrative under construction was developed very specifically according to the testimony script, presented *as a script* for both personal and pedagogical use. When she signed on for a short-term mission trip to the Dominican Republic, Zierman received a "Field Guide" to help her prepare. Reading it, she recounts, "You learn about how to craft a perfect three-minute testimony. *A carefully prepared testimony, empowered by the Holy Spirit, can be of immediate and effective use in nearly every witnessing situation*, it says. Like an infomercial for God. Like evangelical direct-response marketing. Jesus as a sort of Proactiv Solution for your soul." To Zierman, testimony was introduced not only as a three-*part* process, but also as a three-*minute* process, revised and abridged for casual conversation. She imagines the transgression phase as a sort of transgression *face*, the *before* picture "red and pockmarked" and the *after* "pink and healthy." The field guide also included instructions for delivery that closely resemble those given to students in a 100-level public speaking course. "Begin with an interesting, attention-getting sentence and close with a good conclusion," it advised. "Smile often! Ask the Lord to give you a

[8] Chrissy Stroop, "Now Defunct: Confessions of a Former Short-Term Youth Missionary to Russia," in *Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church,* Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal, eds. (Epiphany Publishing, 2019), 182.
[9] Charles Marsh, *The Last Days: A Son's Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of the New South* (Basic Books, 2001), 66.

happy, radiant face." And finally, "Practice your testimony until it becomes natural."[10] Though candidly artificial as a structuring device, the script may become natural through practice, eventually persuading both speaker and audience that its delineations are true.

Evangelical narratives are thus implicated in Hayden White's distinction between a discourse that *narrates* and one that *narrativizes,* "between a discourse that openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it and a discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself *as a story.*"[11] The evangelical worldview, its testimony template, and their auxiliary storylines all *narrativize* the world in that they superimpose a set of meanings upon the events they record, pressing—often, *forcing*—disparate and chaotic happenings into a narrative mold defined by perfect order and coherence. Universally adopted and deployed by members of the evangelical culture, these rigid narrative structures maintain group cohesiveness by assimilating the willing and excluding the rest. Indeed, even the individual accounts that are assimilated remain subject to a degree of revisionist exclusion in that each submits its internal exposition to a sort of external review, emphasizing the plot points valued by the template and obscuring those that challenge or disrupt its formula. White observes that "every narrative, however seemingly 'full,' is constructed on the basis of a set of events which *might have been included but were left out*," a simple fact that "permits us to ask what kind of notion of reality authorizes construction of a narrative account of reality in which continuity rather than discontinuity governs the articulation of the discourse."[12] In this case, the

[10] Addie Zierman, *When We Were on Fire: A Memoir of Consuming Faith, Tangled Love, and Starting Over* (Convergent Books, 2013), 44-47. Emphasis hers.
[11] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980): 7. Emphasis his.
[12] White, "The Value of Narrativity," 14. Emphasis his.

narrative account is authorized by an evangelical reading of scripture, which is ostensibly authored and authorized by God himself.

The constancy with which evangelical narratives refer even mundane individual behaviors to God as ultimate authority demonstrates White's observation—by way of Hegel—that narrative representation presumes a conflict "between desire, on the one side, and the law, on the other."[13] By situating all of human life and activity within the realm of God's examination and judgment, evangelical narratives cast the sinful desires of fallen human beings against a set of impossibly high heavenly standards. The evangelical worldview is built around and animated by this tension, providing the grounds upon which all subsidiary narratives will stand. Their action is driven in every case by the failure of the protagonist to satisfy the demands of God's law, and textured then in slightly different ways depending on how the protagonist tries to atone for and improve upon that failure. Though mistakes have undoubtedly been made in the past, virtually every evangelical testimony culminates in a redeemed present, necessarily delivered at a moment of repentance and rest—at least until the speaker fails again. On this point, too, White resonates, noting that "every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats."[14] As individual histories posed within and modeled upon the cosmic history of all Creation, evangelical testimonies perform a set of distinctly didactic tasks. They teach both speaker and audience how to think, how to believe, how to behave, and how to understand the relationships governing each realm of human action.

For those who remain in the fold, these narratives often prove helpful when orienting (and re-orienting) a life path that tends ever toward sanctity and away from sin. Certainly, that is their most pragmatic function. And yet, a testimony's *persuasive* potential—its usefulness for

[13] White, "The Value of Narrativity," 16.
[14] White, "The Value of Narrativity," 18. Emphasis his.

what Walter Fisher once termed "narrative rationality"—is always dependent upon the maintenance of narrative "probability" and "fidelity."[15] To persuade, in other words, each narrative must cohere internally while staying true to the experiences of other narrators under comparable circumstances. Because evangelical testimonies impose a particular structure upon every narrator, they are always vulnerable to a sort of chicken-or-the-egg conundrum. (It is never quite apparent whether the script was selected because it was true to the speaker's life or whether the script appears true to life because the speaker selected it.) Since each narrator tailors the story to the testimony script, each scripted story obeys a set of conventions that impose both probability and fidelity upon the events depicted. For all of its utility as a plot device, and despite the sense of identification it engenders among those who tell these stories, the rigid scriptedness of evangelical testimony is inherently vulnerable to critique. Its strength is also its weakness. When young evangelical testifiers come of age and discover that their life experiences have been contracted to fit the description—the depth of their thoughts flattened and the intensity of their feelings constrained—they may abandon their own arguments, choosing instead to review and revise their biographies into a more honest, less formulaic shape. If this abandonment is correspondent to the loss or reorientation of the narrator's faith as well, the revised account may take the form of an exvangelical narrative. But importantly, as we will see, the exvangelical narrator remains constrained by the evangelical narrative conventions, which have by then been far too influential for far too long to be discarded simply. Having conformed to and abided by these ideas for a period of formative years or decades, exvangelical memoirists necessarily turn upon and confront the stories they have written about themselves, challenging the plot points and

[15] Walter Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 51.1 (1984): 8.

altering the outcomes, seeking deliverance all the while but achieving it only by way of deeper entanglement first. When it comes to this particular sort of apostasy, the only way out is through.

Exvangelical Memories and Modifications

One of the most compelling features of exvangelical memoir as a genre is that, because it relies upon a sustained reevaluation of and engagement with the author's past practice, it invariably generates storylines far more nuanced and less scripted than a testimony is able to produce, and necessarily casts these stories alongside their counterparts for comparison and contrast. Brenda Marie Davies' account of Hollywood parties attended, glamorous friends made, and internal struggle suffered certainly makes for a better read than the bland narrative she had been crafting as a teenager, and for all of its distinctive quirks, it is not really an outlier among other examples of the type. (In her *Wayward: A Memoir of Spiritual Warfare and Sexual Purity,* Alice Greczyn also recounts her move to Los Angeles in pursuit of an acting and modeling career, where she quickly secured a supporting role alongside Johnny Knoxville and Jessica Simpson in the 2005 film *The Dukes of Hazzard*.) These stories are necessarily driven by internal and external conflicts, deeply enmeshed in familial and community relationships, defined by breaking points and moments of desperation, and always unfolding amid profound, eternal stakes. Though the authors describe their motivations and incentives in terms particular to their own private experience, the shared gravity of the enterprise holds their narratives within a mutual orbit. Of the many and diverse ideas and concepts scrutinized in these works, I have selected three of the most common themes for special consideration. These are *apologetics*, *purity*, and *trauma*.

Apologetics—The E(x)vangelical Logos

For those born and raised during the closing decades of the twentieth century, evangelical education as delivered by Christian schools, Sunday schools, Vacation Bible Schools, and comparable programs was heavily invested in teaching the youth how to defend the faith. C. S. Lewis was enjoying his posthumous heyday, with *The Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity* circulating widely in church communities.[16] Contemporary speaker-writers, like Josh McDowell, Norman Geisler, Lee Stroebel, and Ravi Zacharias, drew large audiences and readerships as well.[17] As the tenor of evangelical religion and politics moved ever rightward and became more deeply entrenched behind culture war ramparts, the ability to defeat the sneering arguments of secularists, pluralists, atheists, and liberals became ever more essential to evangelical public life.[18] Evangelical students came onward as Christian soldiers, surrounded by martial imagery and rigorously trained for such a time as this.[19] Their thought processes and self-concepts were carefully crafted in the light of scripture, which the more serious among them could cite chapter and verse. By the time they graduated high school and set out for Christian colleges, these evangelical youth were well-prepared to argue for their faith.

Though virtually all exvangelical memoirs reflect on Christian apologetics in one way or another, some center the practice more than the rest. Perhaps most prominent among these is Frank Schaeffer's *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back,* which recounts his growth and development as the son and sometime-collaborator of fundamentalist sage Francis Schaeffer.

---

[16] C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Geoffery Bles, 1942); and *Mere Christianity* (Geoffery Bles, 1952).
[17] See, for example, Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Zondervan, 1998); Ravi Zacharias, *A Shattered Visage: The Real Face of Atheism* (Baker, 1993); Norman Geisler, *When Critics Ask: A Handbook on Biblical Difficulties* (Baker, 1992); and Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Thomas Nelson, 1979).
[18] On the dynamics of culture war rhetoric during these years, see Eric C. Miller, "Fighting for Freedom: Liberal Argumentation in Culture War Rhetoric," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 37.1 (2014): 102-125.
[19] On the centrality of masculine and martial rhetoric to evangelicalism during these years, see Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright, 2020).

During the 1970s and until his death in 1984, the elder Schaeffer stood among the most influential figures in the American evangelical community, despite spending most of these years living in a Swiss chateau and ministering to an assortment of expats, drifters, and weirdoes. His many written works and speaking engagements during this time covered an array of topics—from environmental protection to abortion, by way of art, music, philosophy, and politics—but all were carefully linked within a matrix of connections that he termed the Christian *worldview*.[20] Perhaps his most significant contribution to evangelical thought, Schaeffer insisted that propagating the correct worldview meant instructing Christian young people to consider every aspect of human culture through the lens of their Christianity, situating the dizzying complexity of existence safely within the singular cohesiveness of all things in Christ. Frank Schaeffer's book recounts decades of sustained engagement with this mindset that brought him international recognition and political influence before collapsing into disenchantment and alienation.[21] From that final remove he came to appreciate that the explicitly fundamentalist inflection of his father's work has obvious appeal for anyone who hopes to simplify and clarify the baffling ambiguities of the world—a desire that also animates the careful development of clear and coherent personal testimonies. Indeed, though evangelicalism emerged as a mainstream offshoot of Christian fundamentalism in the 1940s, the family resemblance has persisted through several generations.[22] The narrative constructions of each are bound always back to basics.

---

[20] Schaeffer unpacks this idea most directly in *A Christian Manifesto* (Crossway, 1981); see also Eric C. Miller, **"**Civil Religion as *Christian* Religion: Francis Schaeffer's Liberal Fundamentalism," in *The Rhetoric of American Civil Religion: Symbols, Sinners, and Saints,* J. Edwards and J. Valenzano, eds. (Lexington, 2016), 111-128.
[21] Frank Schaeffer, *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back* (Carroll & Graf, 2007).
[22] The best study of fundamentalist rhetoric and politics over the course of the twentieth century is Jonathan J. Edwards, *Superchurch: The Rhetoric and Politics of American Fundamentalism* (Michigan State University Press, 2015).

The broad scope and tenacious longevity of that fundamentalist intellectual method is verified by Rachel Held Evans in her *Faith Unraveled: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask Questions.* A native of Dayton, Tennessee, where her father held a professorship at a college named after William Jennings Bryan, Evans recounts a collegiate experience thoroughly infused with Schaefferian thinking. "We learned that everything from science to history, economics, art, psychology, politics, and literature can be studied from a 'biblical worldview,'" she writes. "The goal of a Bryan College education was to develop a comprehensive approach to life in which we looked at the world wearing Christian glasses."[23] A natural high-achiever and consummate question-asker, Evans excelled in this environment. She earned strong grades, was elected class president, married her college sweetheart, and launched a promising career as a writer, all while nurturing a secret skepticism, developed through her sustained engagement with the big questions. "On the outside," she writes, "I embodied all the expectations I had for myself going into college. I was confident, articulate, ready to change the world. But on the inside, something different was happening. I started to have doubts." Indeed, she explains, "the apologetics movement had created a monster. I'd gotten so good at critiquing all the fallacies of opposing worldviews, at searching for truth through objective analysis, that it was only a matter of time before I turned the same skeptical eye upon my own faith."[24] For Evans, as for Frank Schaeffer, the road to incredulity was paved with honest inquest.

So, too, for Valerie Tarico, whose *Trusting Doubt: A Former Evangelical Looks at Old Beliefs in a New Light* performs a sort of anti-apologetics, a defense of the concerns that

---

[23] Rachel Held Evans, *Faith Unraveled: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask Questions* (Zondervan, 2010), 75. Though Bryan College's location in Dayton invited homage to the "Great Commoner," the fundamentalist approach Evans describes is far more reminiscent of Schaeffer. The popular association between Bryan and fundamentalism has been debunked by Kristy Maddux, "Fundamentalist Fool or Populist Paragon," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 16.3 (2013): 489-520.
[24] Evans, *Faith Unraveled,* 83.

undermined her initial defenses. Tracing her first doubts back to her teenage years, Tarico characterizes the experience in terms familiar to Schaeffer and Evans. The changes in her thinking "chewed away" at her self-concept, her relationship with her parents, and, importantly, at "the carefully constructed world view that I had built during years of listening to my elders and thinking and reading." This had been "a world view with clean lines and clean answers, not always simple, but solid. Now parts seemed a little fuzzy, dubious. I didn't like the feeling and I certainly didn't trust it."[25] Tarico recalls confronting this uneasy feeling through additional reading, writing, Bible study, discussion with peers and teachers, and, ultimately, enrollment at Wheaton College, where she hoped to dispel her own doubts through focused intellectual labor. When those doubts grew and proliferated instead, she felt irretrievably lost.

Indeed, among those exvangelical writers who attribute their crisis of faith primarily to intellectual causes, the loss of narrative certainty and solidity is a recurring theme. Having spent years or decades training in apologetics and so crafting a perfect understanding of the human story and of their own place within it, these exvangelicals report finding themselves suddenly and hopelessly bewildered. In Tarico's case, that intellectual disorientation came alongside physical manifestations, including a "frightening eating disorder" and "suicidal depression."[26] Evans lost her evangelical faith in reaction to the rightwing Christianity of the George W. Bush years, but gained an equally perplexed audience of readers via her blog and books, platforms that also invited a steady barrage of invective from her family, friends, acquaintances, and adversaries.[27] For Schaeffer, the loss of his carefully crafted religious worldview and political ideology was amplified by his connections and his fame, resulting in still greater dislocation,

[25] Valerie Tarico, *Trusting Doubt: A Former Evangelical Looks at Old Beliefs in a New Light* (Oracle Institute Press, 2017), 1.
[26] Tarico, *Trusting Doubt,* 4.
[27] Evans, *Faith Unraveled,* 181.

disaffection, and abuse. He sorts the emails he received during this time into a pair of categories, one authored by evangelical "Church Ladies" and the other by "profanity-spewing thugs," each lending strange context to the other. "It was as if I'd stumbled into a Sunday school picnic at a Tourette's syndrome convention," he writes.[28] In these examples and others, the central importance of narrative rationality to the evangelical *logos* and the earth-shaking disruption of its confrontation and loss come clearly into focus. Evangelicalism tells a simple story about the origins, direction, and meaning of life on earth, a story that is adopted, localized, and applied by each evangelical believer. If either of these stories loses its persuasiveness, the other necessarily fails as well. Then an exvangelical narrative may begin to unfold in their place, written on those same lines but in a markedly different idiom.

Purity – The E(x)vangelical Ethos

A comparable and parallel phenomenon concerns the central importance of *purity culture*, a set of social and sexual norms propagated by evangelical writers, speakers, institutions, and organizations during this same timeframe. Most exvangelical memoirists recount a troubled relationship with the concept of purity, and practically all of these recall reading or otherwise imbibing Joshua Harris' 1997 memoir *I Kissed Dating Goodbye.*[29] This book—which Harris has since renounced—was published to much fanfare, arriving amidst the nationwide campaigns of *True Love Waits, Silver Ring Thing,* and *Pure Freedom*, each imploring young people to pledge sexual abstinence until marriage. These combined to launch a purity craze in the late 1990s and early aughts, cultivating in a generation of evangelical young people a passionate desire to live

[28] Schaeffer, *Crazy for God,* 3.
[29] Davies, *On Her Knees,* xi-xii; Alice Greczyn, *Wayward: A Memoir of Spiritual Warfare and Sexual Purity* (River Grove Books, 2021), 45-50; Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Revolution,* (Convergent Books, 2019), 16; Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (Touchstone, 2018), 261-262.

free from a particular sort of passionate desire. As Christine Gardner has observed, these campaigns were rhetorically savvy affairs, shifting from the stern language of moral prohibition into the empowered frame of individual choice, and so inspiring teenagers to *choose* purity as willing agents, rather than simply obeying an injunction on sex. In response to this direction, participants voiced their *I shall* to anticipate and preclude a hectoring *thou shalt not*.[30] Empowering in the moment, this appeal was fraught with later complications, as Gardner observes. Her analysis is confirmed by any number of writers who were there as well.

In her *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free,* for example, Linda Kay Klein observes that, from childhood on, she was made to feel that her body was dangerous—a "stumbling block" over which the men and boys in her life would invariably trip and fall. "By the time I was in high school and had my first boyfriend," she writes, "I had been 'talked to' about how I dressed and acted so many times that my annoyance was beginning to turn into anxiety. It began to feel like it didn't matter what I did or wore; it was *me* that was bad."[31] This matter of self-conscious personal purity is important to evangelical thinking because it is believed to be an indicator of one's *ethos,* a form of admissible evidence that confirms or disconfirms the sincerity of one's faith practice. Anyone can *speak* like a true Christian, the thinking goes, but the proof is in the purity, in the lived commitment made physically manifest in the day-to-day life and decisions of the speaker-agent. "So if you want to assess who's really a Christian and who's not—and *lots* of people do—you need a proxy," Klein writes, "some externally measurable quality that is deemed representative of the person's internal commitment. Among single people in the church, one of the most popular proxies is sex."[32]

[30] Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy,* 27.
[31] Klein, *Pure,* 4.
[32] Klein, *Pure,* 10-11. Emphasis hers.

Whatever else may be noted about evangelical attitudes toward sexuality—and there is much to be noted, especially as these concern women—the defense of personal purity and maintenance of virginity outside of marriage serve as the definitive proof-texts of evangelical integrity. Like several other exvangelical memoirists, Klein identifies the concept of virginity as particularly problematic since it is at once equivocal and absolute, precious while held and irretrievably gone once lost. Though virginity, by definition, refers to a lack of experience with sex, the expansive reach of purity culture suggests that virginity is imperiled by a host of behaviors preceding intercourse. Purity is compromised by immodest dress and flirtatious behavior, by sexual fantasizing and masturbation, by handholding, kissing, and touching, by a variety of other mental or physical acts performed outside of marriage, or by any appearance of impropriety suggesting such deviations to one's vigilant and garrulous friends. Virtually anything that an unmarried evangelical person thinks or does concerning sexuality is condemnable as a contamination of that person's purity, drawing hard lines around individual conduct and patrolling these boundaries through rigorous scrutiny. (It also goes without saying, of course, that *all* same-sex attractions and intimacies are strictly forbidden, given that such relationships are supposed essentially illegitimate.) For Klein, the close association between character and purity within evangelical contexts places sexual sins in a class of their own, beyond the standards governing or pardoning other offenses. "You can be born again and have your slate wiped clean of lying, stealing, even murder," she writes. "And if you do these things again later but honestly apologize to God, your sin is forgiven. But sex outside of marriage is the only 'sin' that I have ever heard described as changing *you.*"[33]

[33] Klein, *Pure,* 11-12.

The potential drawbacks to this sort of gendered and sexualized impression management are not difficult to imagine, and they are thus central to most exvangelical memoirs authored by women. In *Wayward,* Alice Greczyn depicts some of them in painful detail. The child of restless and ultra-devout parents who followed God's call widely and chaotically throughout her adolescence, Greczyn spent most of her formative years making and leaving friends while living in a tent or pop-up camper in other people's backyards and driveways. Her fundamentalist homeschooling prepared her to spend a summer in India as a member of Youth With a Mission when she was seventeen, but not for the suspicion and judgment with which her peers and leaders would reflexively treat her during the tour. When one of her male teammates developed a crush—followed quickly by bitterness and resentment that his feelings were not reciprocated—he arranged an intervention in which he and others accused Greczyn of being inadvertently flirtatious and so leading the boys into sin.[34] A few years later, when he caught up with her in Los Angeles, this same boy cultivated a fresh friendship with Greczyn before assuring her that God had called him to be her husband—a call that her pious and patriarchal father confirmed over the phone. After years of narrow Christian education and its instinctive deference to male leadership, Greczyn consented to an engagement and very nearly married this guy before his overbearing and manipulative behavior finally pushed her to a sharp break—both with him and with the religious culture that he represented.[35] Like Klein, Greczyn recalls a suffocating self-consciousness inflicted by the moral judgments of her family and friends, all of whom stood apparently ready and willing to police her behaviors for violations both deliberate and not. When her story takes the post-evangelical turn, a slow and arduous healing process is allowed finally to begin.

[34] Greczyn, *Wayward,* 194-199.
[35] Greczyn, *Wayward,* 233-258.

These experiences are echoed by Davies, who joins Klein and Greczyn in suggesting that the oppressive (if superficially elective) purity of her teenage years left her woefully unprepared for romantic relationships as an adult, and stubbornly bound to the guilt that would harass her throughout her acclimation. Having committed herself to abstinence until marriage and having honored that commitment through years of temptations, Davies reached a breaking point of her own and decided on a whim to sleep with "Brandon" after their second date. "Brandon was doing me a favor," she writes. "He was a bite of buttered bread in my starving belly. He was a one-off sexual partner in a sea of a future many. Once my 'virginity was gone,' I could date. I'd have flings, I'd explore desire. I'd be free. Well, free of everything but guilt. I expected the guilt to persist forever."[36] And yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, Davies' one-off fling colluded with her guilt complex to attach her tightly to Brandon despite some red flags, culminating in an unhappy marriage, a divorce, and years of subsequent disorientation, all of which could have been preempted, she suggests, by the experience and wisdom derived from some healthy adolescent impurity. Davies' memoir is also representative in its somber and remorseful reflection on the bright, beautiful, and naïve girl its author used to be, a well-meaning and obedient child led unwittingly down a path to disappointment, frustration, heartache, and despair.

Across these works, exvangelical memoirists seek to dispel harmful evangelical beliefs about sexuality, replacing them instead with a set of views at once more nuanced and less severe. Central to the exvangelical experience, this revision critiques an influential set of biblical interpretations and prods evangelicals to abandon a popular means of assessing Christian character and credibility. In her *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation,* idiosyncratic Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber presses this case directly. "I'm here to tell you," she writes, "unless your

[36] Davies, *On Her Knees,* 52.

sexual desires are for minors or animals, or your sexual choices are hurting you or those you love, those desires are not something that you need to 'struggle with.' They are something to listen to, make decisions about, explore, perhaps have caution about. But struggle with? Fight against? Make enemies of? No."[37] In this way, the new narratives constructed by exvangelical memoirists continue to rely upon, respond to, and work against the conventional purity animating their previous stories.

Trauma – The E(x)vangelical Pathos

Together, then, the apologetic *logos* and purity *ethos* conducting both evangelical testimony and exvangelical memoir facilitate a traumatic *pathos*, framing its content in equal and opposite ways. For their part, evangelicals present their scripted narratives and rigid moral commitments as means of *protection,* methods for insulating their youth from the deceptions and seductions of a dangerous world. Without such clear and simple standards, evangelical teenagers may be overwhelmed by the stimuli to which they are increasingly exposed, spiraling out of control and finding themselves lost, perplexed, and used, misled and waylaid by evolutionism, socialism, atheism, or worse, perhaps with a venereal disease or an abortion as well, to say nothing of a tarnished reputation and a compromised witness in any case. And yet, exvangelical memoirs counter that, for all of their simplicity and clarity, evangelical narratives are committed less to truth than to control, providing Christian parents, churches, colleges, and other authorities with a useful means of maintaining cohesiveness through enforced conformity. Though evangelical narratives promise safety and security from the deceitful ideas and traumatic experiences of secular life, many exvangelical memoirists suggest that such narratives ultimately left them hopelessly vulnerable. Reaching adolescence and adulthood with a stunted

[37] Bolz-Weber, *Shameless,* 139.

understanding of the world and its concerns, their first exposures to life outside of the evangelical bubble devastated their childlike worldviews, complicated their relationships, wracked them with a host of fears, anxieties, and guilt feelings about sex, and condemned them to the very condition of dissatisfaction, depression, and trauma that their tidy storylines had promised to forestall. This is the apogee of the exvangelical narrative case.

Though there is a thread of psychoanalytic theory linking childhood life scripts directly to adult traumas, exvangelical memoirists have found a theoretical grounding instead in a pair of more singular late-twentieth-century texts—Wendell Watters' *Deadly Doctrine: Health, Illness, and Christian God-Talk* and Marlene Winell's *Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving Their Religion.*[38] Each of these books seeks to pathologize the practice of faith, either from the angle of problematic beliefs imposed upon kids or the crushing dislocations suffered by adults when such beliefs are finally surrendered. Winell's work, in particular, has ridden the exvangelical wave into fresh relevance and new print runs, as her diagnosis of "Religious Trauma Syndrome" has spoken to a generation of defectors hoping to diagnose the complex pain and confusion of their early experiences with faith. In her *You Are Your Own: A Reckoning with the Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity,* for example, Jamie Lee Finch analyzes her own crisis of faith from a "psychological and behavioral perspective," attentive to the "harmful beliefs" of evangelicalism, especially when these are "implanted in the developing minds of vulnerable children."[39] Finch's account runs the gauntlet of exvangelical concerns, locating sources of trauma in her visceral-intellectual struggles with

[38] On the relevance of "life scripts" to transactional analysis, see Eric Berne, *Games People Play* (Vintage, 1969) and Claude Steiner, *Scripts People Live: Transactional Analysis of Life Scripts* (Grove Weidenfield, 1990). The other two are Wendell Watters, *Deadly Doctrine: Health, Illness, and God-Talk* (Prometheus Books, 1992) and Marlene Winell, *Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving Their Religion* (New Harbinger, 1993).

[39] Jamie Lee Finch, *You Are Your Own: A Reckoning with the Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity* (Self-Published, 2019), 22-23.

ideas like sin, penitence, and hell, the disorienting claims of young-earth creationism in a vast and expanding universe, the paranoia inherent to "spiritual warfare" with demons and Satan through prayer, the crippling worry she felt for the souls of her unchurched and Catholic friends, the redemptive violence of Christ's torture and death, the years of corporal punishment she absorbed at the hands of righteous adults, the isolation she felt from her classmates at school, her anxieties about the looming Rapture and the End Times, and, of course, the stifling self-scrutiny she practiced at the urging of purity culture.[40] Together, these influential forces placed Finch at the mercy of frequent panic attacks, and lead her by turns into the arms of what she calls a "charismatic Evangelical cult."[41] Later, when she left it all behind, the break was necessarily unclean, dooming her to years of introspective labor and professional counseling before she was finally able to achieve something like closure with her past.

The concurrences here are too numerous and too uniform to bear detailed examination. In her *When I Spoke in Tongues: A Story of Faith and its Loss,* Rebecca Wilbanks recalls her bout with depression and suicidal thoughts, culminating in a forced hospitalization for anorexia nervosa.[42] Zierman writes that her crisis of faith left her isolated, depressed, and borderline alcoholic before she was saved by a sympathetic psychiatrist and a course of eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy.[43] Having recounted her post-faith period of depression and suicidal thoughts early in her book, Tarico closes by preparing her readers for four therapeutic "stages of recovery."[44] Klein's book is built around interviews with dozens of estranged evangelicals, describing crises from alienation and depression to cutting and post-

[40] Finch, *You Are Your Own,* 25-58.
[41] Finch, *You Are Your Own,* 46.
[42] Jessica Wilbanks, *When I Spoke in Tongues: A Story of Faith and its Loss* (Beacon Press, 2018), 100-112.
[43] Zierman, *When We Were on Fire,* 193-209.
[44] Tarico, *Trusting Doubt,* 245-247.

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the project itself helped Klein bridge a multi-year estrangement from her own evangelical family.[45] Greczyn suffered panic attacks and insomnia, and experimented with self-harm before finding relief in therapy.[46] And Davies recalls years of persistent repression and anxiety leading to an unhappy marriage, infidelity, and divorce, followed then by more years of alcohol abuse, reckless behavior, bad relationships, a sexual assault, and an abortion before she was able to strike bottom and rebound. Suffice it to say, these authors agree that the mental and emotional consequences of post-evangelical adaptation are serious and often severe.[47]

Clearly, this sort of experience is very common among exvangelical memoirists, and the question of whether the sum of the effects constitutes trauma-in-earnest appears to have been affirmatively answered—at least in their minds. There is a difference in kind, perhaps, between the experiences of writers who recall *psychological* manipulation and abuse, and those, like Julie Scheeres in *Jesus Land,* Kristy Burmeister in *Act Normal: Memoir of a Stumbling Block,* and Emily Joy Allison in *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing,* who document physical and sexual violence suffered in evangelical settings.[48] And yet, operating in concert, these works seem to trace all such violations back to a common source in evangelical theology and culture, facilitated and enabled by distinctly *rhetorical* forces. The ideas, evidences, and lines of reasoning that construct and insulate the evangelical narrative edifice are the very same that have shaped evangelical thinking, belief, practice, morality, and self-conception, leading ultimately and perhaps invariably to the types of internal conflicts that

[45] Klein, *Pure,* 258.
[46] Greczyn, *Wayward,* 300-304.
[47] Charles Marsh's latest book makes this case explicitly as well. See *Evangelical Anxiety: A Memoir* (HarperOne, 2022).
[48] Emily Joy Allison, *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing* (Broadleaf Books, 2021); Kristy Burmeister, *Act Normal: Memoir of a Stumbling Block* (Flipped Mitten Press, 2018); Julia Scheeres, *Jesus Land*: *A Memoir* (Counterpoint, 2005).

these authors describe. In that sense, it is perhaps reasonable to catalogue the more serious of these torments as *rhetorical traumas*, arising within and perpetuated by a context suffused with particular arguments, appeals, and pre-fabricated narrative structures. When the veterans of this experience recount it on paper, their writing constitutes a form of rhetorical therapy, an opportunity to reinscribe a life against and away from intolerable events.

Conclusion

For me, personally, the argument constructed and asserted by this diversity of exvangelical memoirs is persuasive, with caveats. I grew up in the heart of the Pennsylvania Dutch country, adjacent to the Amish and within a devoutly evangelical community, surrounded on all sides by intense, definitive religiosity. As a teenager and a young adult, I remained extremely devoted to the faith, dividing my time between church services, youth groups, coffee houses, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, summer camps, conferences, and a host of short-term mission opportunities. After a year at a rigorously evangelical college, I transferred to a secular university—not because I grappled with any doubts, but because I felt called to minister to the lost. During these years I struggled fervidly with my beliefs about science, politics, and morality, watching as if from outside or above as my faith fought, faltered, and ultimately, failed. I am well-acquainted with the accommodations and adaptations described in these works. I understand the vertigo attendant to a collapsing worldview, the lasting repression and guilt wrought by a capitulated purity, the alienation and awkwardness these changes implant between family and friends, and the years of careful introspection required to move finally beyond it all to a place of internal peace and acceptance. I have lived and processed these things as well. And though I never quite thought of myself as *traumatized* by them, I can see the case for such a diagnosis now.

For the millions of American evangelicals who continue to live and practice the faith each week, and perhaps for millions more who have left the faith quietly behind, the arguments advanced by exvangelical memoirists may seem hyperbolic. (Here as elsewhere, there is a tendency to assume that one's own experiences with an institution—whether that be a business, a church, the police, or something else—must be broadly representative, and we might all do well to entertain the possibility that they are not.) But at minimum, these accounts present evidence that Religious Trauma Syndrome is real, validating Winell's work and pressing for preventative measures. In establishing the residual psychic power of religious-political ideas and arguments among those who have tried to discard them, these works may help us understand better the operative psychic power of these ideas and arguments among those who continue to embrace them without reserve. At a historical moment when Christian Nationalism is on the rise and Christian symbols have featured prominently among insurrectionary elements, these insights may prove especially valuable.[49] Cleanly parallel to American myths about rebirth and renewal, the commonplaces of evangelical thought and speech may lend themselves also to darker mythic potentials and applications.

Advanced in ideas, arguments, and appeals, and enmeshed within particular narrative structures, much of the damage documented in these books is of a distinctly rhetorical character, suggesting that rhetorical critics may have an opportunity for interventions within therapeutic contexts. If narrative analysis is useful for dissecting the persuasive power of stories—and this essay certainly suggests that it is—then such analysis may prove especially useful for those

[49] Philip R. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2022); Sarah Posner, *Unholy: How White Christian Nationalists Powered the Trump Presidency, and the Devastating Legacy They Left Behind* (Random House, 2021); Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (Bloomsburg, 2020); and Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (Simon & Schuster, 2017).

seeking to understand and disarm the persuasive power that certain stories continue to exercise over their private minds and hearts. Having built their lives around and upon these narrative conventions, exvangelicals must first dismantle and then reconstruct their own thinking, erecting new frames in place of the old structures by first redrafting the designs. I can testify that this is slow, deliberate, difficult, and explicitly rhetorical work. Even as a still-devoted teenager, after sitting through so many church services and youth group gatherings and listening to so many nearly identical testimonies, I recall thinking that it would be nice, just once, to hear a divergent account—for some bold soul to stand before us and say that he had devoted his youth to drinking, to gambling, to fast cars and disreputable women, to forbidden books and illicit ideas, to long conversations with strange characters in smoke-filled rooms and to staying out all night, and so lived happily ever after. That expression of shameless independence eluded me for a very long time, but arrives finally in many of the works considered here. Of these, perhaps Alice Greczyn provides the most fitting coda:

> I made a sacred commitment to myself one night: that I would live in my humanity in any way I desired. I had health, money, and knowledge that I would only be young once. So, I made a conscious decision in the sparkling quiet of my heart. I gifted myself with a delayed adolescence. I let myself do whatever, whenever, and whoever I wanted. It was my own private recompense for all those years of being obedient and responsible. I traveled, I danced, I drank, I fucked, I did drugs, and I relished every single moment of it. My only regret is not letting myself live in such freedom sooner.[50]

If her words jar, Greczyn's sentiments are symmetrical to the religious trauma she endured, and perfectly intelligible as a rejoinder to it. Hers is but one of many potential resolutions to such a

[50] Greczyn, *Wayward,* 315-316.

harrowing story, each in some way reliant on rhetorical analysis. When narratives bind, rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the means of liberation.