THE QUESTION OF NARRATIVE IN CONTEMPORARY HISTORICAL THEORY

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I

In contemporary historical theory the topic of narrative has been the subject of extraordinarily intense debate. Looked at from one perspective, this is surprising; for on the face of it there should be very little to debate about narrative. Narration is a manner of speaking as universal as language itself, and narrative is a mode of verbal representation so seemingly natural to human consciousness that to suggest it is a problem might well appear pedantic.[1] But it is precisely because the narrative mode of representation is so natural to human consciousness, so much an aspect of everyday speech and ordinary discourse, that its use in any field of study aspiring to the status of a science must be suspect. For whatever else a science may be, it is also a practice which must be as critical about the way it *describes* its objects of study as it is about the way it *explains* their structures and processes. Viewed from this perspective, we can trace the development of modern sciences in terms of their progressive demotion of the narrative mode of representation in their descriptions of the phenomena which comprise their specific objects of study. And this explains in part why the humble subject of narrative should be so widely debated by historical theorists in our time; for to many of those who would transform historical studies into a science, the continued use by historians of a narrative mode of representation is an index of a failure at once methodological and theoretical. A discipline that produces narrative accounts of its subject matter as an end in itself seems methodologically unsound; one that investigates its data in the interest of telling a story about them appears theoretically deficient.[2]

1. As R. Barthes remarks: "narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself." See his essay, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" in *Image, Music, Text*, transl. S. Heath (New York, 1977), 79. The narrative mode of representation is, of course, no more "natural" than any other mode of discourse, although whether it is a *primary* mode, against which other discursive modes are to be contrasted, is a matter of interest to historical linguistics. See E. Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris, 1966); and G. Ginette, "Frontières du récit," *Figures II* (Paris, 1969), 49–69. E. H. Gombrich has suggested the importance of the relationship between the narrative mode of representation, a distinctively historical (as against a mythical) consciousness, and "realism" in Western art. See *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York, 1960), 116–146.

2. Thus, for example, M. Mandelbaum denies the propriety of calling the kinds of accounts

Within professional historical studies, however, the narrative has been viewed for the most part neither as a product of a theory nor as the basis for a method, but rather as a *form of discourse* which may or may not be used for the representation of historical events, depending upon whether the primary aim is to *describe* a situation, *analyze* an historical process, or *tell* a story.[3] On this view, the amount of narrative in a given history will vary and its function will change depending upon whether it is conceived as an end in itself or only a means to some other end. Obviously, the amount of narrative will be greatest in accounts designed to tell a story, least in those intended to provide an analysis of the events of which it treats. Where the aim in view is the telling of a story, the problem of narrativity turns on the issue of whether historical events can be truthfully represented as manifesting the structures and processes of those met with more commonly in certain kinds of "imaginative" discourses, that is, such fictions as the epic, the folk tale, myth, romance, tragedy, comedy, farce, and the like. This means that what distinguishes "historical" from "fictional" stories is first and foremost their *contents*, rather than their *form*. The content of historical stories is real events, events that really happened, rather than imaginary events, events invented by the narrator. This implies that the form in which historical events present themselves to a prospective narrator is *found* rather than *constructed*.

For the narrative historian, the historical method consists in the investigation of the documents in order to determine what is the true or most plausible story that can be told about the events of which they are evidence. A true narrative account, on this view, is not so much a product of the historian's poetic talents, as the narrative account of imaginary events is conceived to be, as a necessary

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produced by historians "narratives," if this term is to be regarded as synonymous with "stories." See *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge* (Baltimore, 1977), 25–26. In the physical sciences, narratives have no place at all, except as prefatory anecdotes to the presentation of findings; a physicist or biologist would find it strange to tell a story about his data *rather than* to analyze them. Biology became a science when it ceased to be practiced as "natural history," that is, when scientists of organic nature ceased trying to construct the "true story" of "what happened" and began looking for the laws, purely causal and nonteleological, that could account for the evidence given by the fossil record, results of breeding practices, and so on. To be sure, as Mandelbaum stresses, a *sequential* account of a set of events is not the same as a "narrative" account thereof; the difference between them is the absence of any interest in teleology as an explanatory principle in the former. Any narrative account of anything whatsoever is a teleological account, and it is for this reason as much as any other that narrativity is suspect in the physical sciences. But Mandelbaum's remarks miss the point of the conventional distinction between a chronicle and a history based on the difference between a *merely* sequential account and a narrative account. The difference is reflected in the extent to which the history, as thus conceived, approaches to the formal coherence of a "story." See my essay, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), 5–27.

3. See the remarks of G. Elton, *The Practice of History* (New York, 1967), 118–141; and J. H. Hexter, *Reappraisals in History* (New York, 1961), 8ff. These two works may be taken as indicative of the view of the profession in the 1960s, on the matter of the adequacy of "story-telling" to the aims and purposes of historical studies. For both, narrative representations are an option of the historian, which he may choose or not according to his purposes. The same view was expressed by G. Lefebvre in *La Naissance de l'historiographie moderne* [lectures delivered originally in 1945–1946] (Paris, 1971), 321–326.

result of a proper application of historical "method." The form of the discourse, the narrative, adds nothing to the content of the representation, but is rather a simulacrum of the structure and processes of real events. And insofar as this representation *resembles* the events of which it is a representation, it can be taken as a true account. The story told in the narrative is a "mimesis" of the story *lived* in some region of historical reality, and insofar as it is an accurate imitation it is to be considered a truthful account thereof.

In traditional historical theory, at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, the story told about the past was distinguished from whatever *explanation* might be offered of why the events related in the story occurred when, where, and how they did. After the historian had discovered the true story of "what happened" and accurately represented it in a narrative, he might abandon the narrational manner of speaking and, addressing the reader directly, speaking in his own voice, and representing his considered opinion as a student of human affairs, dilate on what the story he had told indicated about the nature of the period, place, agents, agencies, and processes (social, political, cultural, and so forth) that he had studied. This aspect of the historical discourse was called by some theorists the *dissertative* mode of address and was considered to comprise a form as well as a content different from those of the narrative.[4] Its form was that of the logical demonstration and its content the historian's own thought about the events, regarding either their causes or their significance for the understanding of the *types* of events of which the lived story was an instantiation. This meant, among other things, that the dissertative aspect of an historical discourse was to be assessed on grounds different from those used to assess the narrative aspect. The historian's dissertation was an *interpretation* of what he took to be the true story, while his narration was a *representation* of what he took to be the real story. A given historical discourse might be factually accurate and as veracious in its narrative aspect as the evidence permitted and still be assessed as mistaken, invalid, or inadequate in its dissertative aspect. The facts might be truthfully set forth and the interpretation of them misguided. Or conversely a given interpretation of events might be suggestive, brilliant, perspicuous, and so on and still not be justified by the facts or square with the story related in the narrative aspect of the discourse. But whatever the relative merits of the narrative and the dissertative aspects of a given historical discourse, the former was fundamental, the latter secondary. As Croce put it in a famous dictum, "Where there is no narrative, there is no history."[5] Until the real story had been determined and

4. The distinction between dissertation and narrative was a commonplace of eighteenth-century rhetorical theories of historical composition. See Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* [1783], ed. H. F. Harding (Carbondale, Illinois, 1965), 259–310. See also J. G. Droysen, *Historik*, ed. Peter Leyh (Stuttgart, 1977), 222–280. For a more recent statement of the distinction, see Peter Gay, who writes: "Historical narration without analysis is trivial, historical analysis without narration is incomplete." *Style in History* (New York, 1974), 189. See also the recent survey by S. Bann, "Towards a Critical Historiography," *Philosophy* 56 (1981), 365–385.

5. This was Croce's earliest position on the matter. See "La storia ridotta sotto il concetto

the true story told, there was nothing of a specifically *historical* nature to interpret.

But this nineteenth-century view of the nature and function of narrative in historical discourse was based on an ambiguity. On the one hand, narrative was regarded as only a form of discourse, a form which featured the story as its content. On the other hand, this form was itself a content insofar as historical events were conceived to *manifest themselves* in reality as elements and aspects of stories. The form of the story told was supposed to be necessitated by the form of the story enacted by historical agents. But what about those events and processes attested by the documentary record which did not lend themselves to representation in a story but which could be represented as objects of reflection only in some other discursive mode, such as the encyclopedia, the epitome, the tableau, the statistical table or series, and so on? Did this mean that such objects were "unhistorical," did not belong to history, or did the possibility of representing them in a non-narrative mode of discourse indicate a limitation of the narrative mode and even a prejudice regarding what could be said to *have* a history?

Hegel had insisted that a specifically historical mode of being was linked to a specifically narrative mode of representation by a shared "internal vital principle."[6] This principle was, for him, nothing other than politics, which was both the precondition of the kind of interest in the past which informed historical consciousness and the pragmatic basis for the production and preservation of the kind of records that made historical inquiry possible:

> We must suppose historical narrations to have appeared contemporaneously with historical deeds and events. Family memorials, patriarchal traditions, have an interest confined to the family and the clan. The uniform course of events which such a condition implies is no subject of serious remembrance. . . . It is the state which first presents a subject-matter that is not only *adapted* to the prose of History, but involves the production of such History in the very progress of its own being.[7]

In other words, for Hegel, the content (or referent) of the specifically historical discourse was not the real *story* of what happened, but the peculiar relation between a public present and a past which a state endowed with a constitution made possible.

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generale dell'arte" [1893], in *Primi saggi* (Bari, 1951), 3–41. Croce wrote: "Prima condizione per avere storia vera (e insième opera d'arte) è che sia possibile costruire una narrazione" (38). And: "Ma si può, in conclusione, negare che tutto il lavoro di preparazione tenda a produrre narrazioni di cio ch'è accaduto?" (40), which was not to say, in Croce's view, that narration was in itself history. Obviously, it was the connection with facts attested by "documenti vivi" that made an historical narrative "historical." See the discussion in *Teoria e storia della storiografia* [1917] (Bari, 1966), 3–17, wherein Croce dilates on the difference between "chronicle" and "history." Here the distinction is between a "dead" and a "living" account of the past that is stressed, rather than the absence or presence of "narrative" in the account. Here, too, Croce stresses that one cannot write a genuine history on the basis of "narrations" *about* "documents" that no longer exist, and defines "chronicle" as "narrazione vuota" (11–15).

6. "[E]s ist eine innerliche gemeinsame Grundlage, welche sie zusammen hervortreibt." Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), 83.

7. *Idem*.

Profound sentiments generally, such as that of love, as also religious intuition and its conceptions, are in themselves complete—constantly present and satisfying; but that outward existence of a political constitution which is enshrined in its rational laws and customs, is an *imperfect* Present; and cannot be thoroughly understood without a knowledge of the past.[8]

Hence, the ambiguity of the term "history"; it "unites the objective with the subjective side, and denotes quite as much the *historia rerum gestarum*, as the *res gestae* themselves" and "comprehends not less what has *happened*, than the *narration* of what has happened." This ambiguity, Hegel said, reflects "a higher order than mere outward accident."[9] It was neither narrative per se that distinguished historiography from other kinds of discourses nor the reality of the events recounted that distinguished historical from other kinds of narrative. It was the interest in a specifically political mode of human community that made a specifically historical mode of inquiry possible; and the political nature of this mode of community that necessitated a narrative mode for its representation. As thus considered, historical studies had their own proper subject-matter, which is "those momentous collisions between existing, acknowledged duties, laws, and rights, and those contingencies which are adverse to this fixed system"[10]; their own proper aim, which is to depict these kinds of conflicts; and their own proper mode of representation, which is the (prose) narrative. When either the subject-matter, the aim, or the mode of representation is lacking in a discourse, it may still be a contribution to knowledge but it is something less than a full contribution to *historical* knowledge.

Hegel's views on the nature of historical discourse had the merit of making explicit what was acknowledged in the dominant practice of historical scholarship in the nineteenth century, namely, an interest in the study of political history, but which was often hidden behind vague professions of an interest in narration as an end in itself. The *doxa* of the profession, in other words, took the form of the historical discourse, what it called the true story, for the content of the discourse, while the real content, politics, was represented as being primarily only a vehicle for or occasion of storytelling. This is why most professional historians of the nineteenth century, although they specialized in political history, tended to regard their work as a contribution less to a science of politics than to the political lore of national communities. The narrative form in which their discourses were cast was fully commensurate with this latter aim. But it reflects both an unwillingness to make historical studies into a science, and, more importantly, a resistance to the idea that politics should be an object of scientific study to which historiography might contribute.[11] It is in this

8. *Ibid.*, 83–84.

9. [M]üssen wir für höhere Art als für eine bloß äusserliche Zufälligkeit ansehen." *Ibid.*, 83.

10. *Ibid.*, 44–45.

11. Which is not to say, of course, that certain historians were not averse to the notion of a scientific politics to which historiography might contribute, as the example of Tocqueville and the whole "Machiavellian" tradition, which includes Treitschke and Weber, make clear enough. But it is important to recognize that the notion of the science to which historiography was to contribute was

respect, rather than in any overt espousal of a specific political program or cause, that nineteenth-century professional historiography can be regarded as ideological. For if ideology is the treatment of the form of a thing as a content or essence, nineteenth-century historiography is ideological precisely insofar as it takes the characteristic form of its discourse, the narrative, as a content, that is, narrativity, and treats "narrativity" as an essence shared by both discourses and sets of events alike.

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always distinguished from the kind of science cultivated in the study of natural phenomena. Whence the long debate over the presumed differences between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* throughout the nineteenth century, in which "historical studies" played the role of paradigm of the former kind of science. Insofar as certain thinkers, such as Comte and Marx, envisioned a science of politics based on a science of history, they were regarded less as historians than as philosophers of history and therefore not as contributors to historical studies at all.

As for the "science of politics" itself, it has generally been held by professional historians that attempts to construct such a science on the basis of historical studies gives rise to "totalitarian" ideologies of the sort represented by Nazism and Stalinism. The literature on this topic is vast, but the gist of the argument that sustains it is admirably articulated in the work of the late Hannah Arendt. For example, she wrote:

> In any consideration of the modern concept of history one of the crucial problems is to explain its sudden rise during the last third of the eighteenth century and the concomitant decrease of interest in purely political thinking. . . . Where a genuine interest in political theory still survived it ended in despair, as in Tocqueville, or in the confusion of politics with history, as in Marx. For what else but despair could have inspired Tocqueville's assertion that "since the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future the mind of man wanders in obscurity"? This is actually the conclusion of the great work in which he had "delineated the society of the modern world" and in the introduction to which he had proclaimed that "a new science of politics is needed for a new world." And what else but confusion . . . could have led to Marx's identification of action with "the making of history"? "The Concept of History" in *Between Past and Future* (London, 1961), 77.

Obviously, Arendt was not lamenting the dissociation of historical studies from political thinking, but rather the degradation of historical studies into "philosophy of history." Since, in her view, political thinking moves in the domain of human wisdom, a knowledge of history was certainly necessary for its "realistic" cultivation. It followed that both political thinking and historical studies ceased to be "realistic" when they began to aspire to the status of (positive) sciences.

The view was given another formulation in Karl R. Popper's influential *The Poverty of Historicism* [1944–1945] (London, 1957); Popper concludes:

> I wish to defend the view, so often attacked as old-fashioned by historicists, that *history is characterized by its interest in actual, singular, or specific events, rather than in laws or generalizations*. . . . In the sense of this analysis, *all* causal explanations of a singular event can be said to be historical in so far as "cause" is always described by singular initial conditions. And this agrees entirely with the popular idea that to explain a thing causally is to explain how and why it happened, that is to say, to tell its "story." But it is only in history that we are really interested in the causal explanation of a singular event. In the theoretical sciences, such causal explanations are mainly means to a different end—the testing of universal laws. (143–144)

Popper's work was directed against all forms of social planning based on the pretension of a discovery of laws of history or, what amounted to the same thing in his view, laws of society. I have no quarrel with this point of view. My point here is merely that Popper's defense of "old-fashioned" historiography, which equates an "explanation" with the telling of a story, is a conventional way of both asserting the cognitive authority of this "old-fashioned" historiography and denying the possibility of any productive relationship between the study of history and a prospective "science of politics." See also *Theorien in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, ed. J. Rüsen and H. Süssmith (Düsseldorf, 1980), 29–31.

It is within the context of considerations such as these that we may attempt a characterization of the discussions of narrative in historical theory that have taken place in the West over the last two or three decades. We can discern four principal strains in these discussions: first, that represented by certain Anglo-American analytical philosophers (Walsh, Gardiner, Dray, Gallie, Morton White, Danto, Mink) who have sought to establish the epistemic status of narrativity, considered as a *kind of explanation* especially appropriate to the explanation of historical, as against natural, events and processes.[12] Second, that of certain social-scientifically oriented historians, of whom the members of the French *Annales* group may be considered exemplary. This group (Braudel, Furet, Le Goff, LeRoy Ladurie) regarded narrative historiography as a nonscientific, even *ideological representational strategy*, the extirpation of which was necessary for the transformation of historical studies into a genuine science.[13] Third, that of certain semiologically oriented literary theorists and philosophers (Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Todorov, Julia Kristeva, Benveniste, Genette, Eco), who have studied narrative in all of its manifestations and viewed it as simply one discursive "code" among others, which might or might not be appropriate for the representation of "reality," depending only on the *pragmatic* aim in view of the speaker of the discourse.[14] And finally, that of

12. The arguments set forth by this group are varied in detail, insofar as different philosophers give different accounts of the grounds on which a narrative account can be *considered* to be an explanation at all; and they run in diversity from the position that narrative is a "porous," "partial," or "sketchy" version of the nomological-deductive explanations given in the sciences (this is Carl Hempel's later view) to the notion that narratives "explain" by techniques, such as "colligation" or "configuration," for which there are no counterparts in scientific explanations. See the anthologies of writings on the subject in *Theories of History*, ed. Patrick Gardiner (London, 1959); and *Philosophical Analysis and History*, ed. William H. Dray (New York, 1966). See, in addition, the surveys of the subject by William H. Dray, *Philosophy of History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1964); and, more recently, R. F. Atkinson, *Knowledge and Explanation in History* (Ithaca, 1978). For an early response in France to the Anglo-American debate, see Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire: Essai d'épistémologie* (Paris, 1971), 194–209. And in Germany, *Geschichte-Ereignis und Erzählung*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck and Wolf-Dieter Stempel (Munich, 1973).

13. The basic text is by Fernand Braudel, *Écrits sur l'histoire* (Paris, 1969). But see also, among many other works in a similarly polemical vein, François Furet, "Quantitative History" in *Historical Studies Today*, ed. F. Gilbert and S. R. Graubard (New York, 1972), 54–60; *The Historian between the Ethnologist and the Futurologist*, ed. J. Dumoulin and D. Moisi (Paris/The Hague, 1973), proceedings of a congress held in Venice in 1971, in which the statements of Furet and Le Goff especially should be noted.

14. I stress the term "semiological" as a way of gathering under a single label a group of thinkers who, whatever their differences, have had a special interest in narrative, narration, and narrativity, have addressed the problem of historical narrative from the standpoint of a more general interest in theory of discourse, and who have in common only a tendency to depart from a *semiological theory of language* in their analyses. A basic, explicative text is R. Barthes, *Éléments de Sémiologie* (Paris, 1964); but see also: "Tel Quel," *Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris, 1968). And for a comprehensive theory of "semiohistory," see Paolo Valesio, *The Practice of Literary Semiotics: A Theoretical Proposal* (Urbino, 1978); and *Novantiqua: Rhetorics as a Contemporary Theory* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1980).

A generally semiological approach to the study of narrative has engendered a new field of studies, called "narratology." The current state and interests of scholars working in this field can be glimpsed by a perusal of three volumes of papers collected in *Poetics Today: Narratology I, II,*

certain hermeneutically oriented philosophers, such as Gadamer and Ricoeur, who have viewed narrative as *the manifestation in discourse* of a specific kind of time-consciousness or structure of time.[15]

We might have added a fifth category to this list, namely that of certain historians who can be said to belong to no particular philosophical or methodological persuasion, but speak rather from the standpoint of the *doxa* of the profession, as defenders of a *craft* notion of historical studies, and who view narrative as a respectable way of "doing" history (as J. H. Hexter puts it) or "practicing" it (as Geoffrey Elton would have it).[16] But this group does not so much represent a theoretical position as incarnate a traditional attitude of eclecticism in historical studies—an eclecticism which is a manifestation of a certain suspicion of theory itself as an impediment to the proper practice of historical inquiry, conceived as *empirical* inquiry.[17] For this group, narrative representation poses no significant theoretical problem. We need therefore only register this position as the *doxa* against which a genuinely theoretical inquiry must take its rise—and pass on to a consideration of those for whom narrative is a problem and an occasion for theoretical reflection.

II

The *Annales* group have been most critical of narrative history, but in a rather more polemical than a distinctively theoretical way. For them, narrative history was simply the history of past politics and, moreover, political history conceived as short-term, "dramatic" conflicts and crises which lend themselves to "novelistic" representations, of a more "literary" than a properly "scientific" kind. As Braudel put it in a well-known essay:

> [T]he narrative history so dear to the heart of Ranke offer[s] us . . . [a] gleam but no illumination; facts but no humanity. Note that this narrative history always claims to relate "things just as they really happened." . . . In fact, though, in its own covert way, narrative history consists of an interpretation, an authentic philosophy of history. To the narrative historians, the life of men is dominated by dramatic accidents, by the actions of those exceptional beings who occasionally emerge, and who often are the

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III (Tel-Aviv, 1980–1981), I and II. See also two volumes devoted to contemporary theories of "Narrative and Narratives" in *New Literary History* 6 (1975), and 11 (1980); and the special edition of *Critical Inquiry*, "On Narrative," 7 (1980).

15. The positions are set forth in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Le problème de la conscience historique* (Louvain, 1963); and Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, transl. C. A. Kelbley (Evanston, Illinois, 1965); "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," *Social Research* 38 (1971); "Expliquer et comprendre," *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 55 (1977); and "Narrative Time," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980).

16. J. H. Hexter, *Doing History* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1971), 1–14, 77–106. A philosopher who holds a similarly "craft" notion of historical studies is Isaiah Berlin, "The Concept of Scientific History," *History and Theory* 1 (1960), 11.

17. The defense of historiography as an empirical enterprise continues and is often manifested in an open suspicion of "theory." See, for example, E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (London, 1978); and the discussion of this work by Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London, 1980).

masters of their own fate and even more of ours. And when they speak of "general history," what they are really speaking of is the intercrossing of such exceptional destinies, for obviously each hero must be matched against another. A delusive fallacy, as we all know.[18]

This position was taken up rather uniformly by other members of the *Annales* group, but more as a justification for their promotion of an historiography devoted to the analysis of "long-term" trends in demography, economics, and ethnology, that is, "impersonal" processes, than as an incentive to analyze what "narrative" itself consisted of and the basis of its millennial popularity as the "proper" mode of historical representation.[19]

It should be stressed that the rejection of narrative history by the *Annalistes* was due as much to their distaste for its conventional subject-matter, that is, past politics, as to their conviction that its form was inherently "novelistic" and "dramatizing" rather than "scientific."[20] Their professed conviction that political affairs did not lend themselves to scientific study, because of their evanescent nature and status as epiphenomena of processes deemed to be more basic to history, was consistent with the failure of modern politology (I thank J. Topolski for this useful word) to create a genuine science of politics. But the rejection of politics as a fit object of study for a scientific historiography is curiously complementary to the prejudice of nineteenth-century professional historians regarding the undesirability of a scientific politics. To hold that a science of politics is impossible is, of course, as much of an ideological position as to hold that such a science is undesirable.

But what has *narrative* to do with all this? The charge leveled by the *Annalistes* is that narrativity is inherently "dramatizing" or "novelizing" of its subject-matter, as if dramatic events either did not exist in history or, if they do exist, are by virtue of their dramatic nature not fit objects of historical study.[21]

18. F. Braudel, "The Situation of History in 1950," transl. S. Matthews, in *On History* (Chicago, 1980), 11.

19. Furet's position varies according to occasion. In his essay, "Quantitative History," he is criticizes *histoire événementielle*, not because it is concerned with "political facts" or because it is "made up of a mere narrative of certain selected 'events' along the time axis," but rather because "it is based on the idea that these events are unique and cannot be set out statistically, and that the unique is the material par excellence of history." He concludes: "That is why this kind of history paradoxically deals at one and the same time in the short term and in a finalistic ideology." (*Historical Studies Today*, ed Gilbert and Graubard, 54.)

20. Cf. Jacques Le Goff: "The *Annales* school loathed the trio formed by political history, narrative history, and chronicle or episodic (*événementielle*) history. All this, for them, was mere pseudohistory, history on the cheap, a superficial affair." "Is Politics Still the Backbone of History?" in *Historical Studies Today*, 340.

21. In a recent article, Furet indicates that "l'explication historique traditionnelle obéit à la logique du récit," which he glosses as "l'avant explique l'après." The selection of the facts is governed, he continues, by "cette logique implicite, qui privilégie la période par rapport à l'objet, et choisit les événements par rapport à leur place dans une narration, définie par un début et une fin." He goes on to characterize "l'histoire politique" as "le modèle de ce type d'histoire" because politics "au sens large, constitue le répertoire privilégié du changement" and this in turn allows the representation of history in terms of the categories of human freedom ("la liberté des hommes"). It is "la politique" which "constitue l'histoire selon la structure d'un roman." F. Furet, "I metodi

It is difficult to know what to make of this strange congeries of opinions. One can narrativize without dramatizing, as the whole of modernist literature demonstrates, and dramatize without "theatricalizing," as the modern theatre since Pirandello and Brecht makes eminently clear. So, how can one condemn narrative on grounds of its "novelizing" effects? One suspects that it is not the "dramatic" nature of novels that is at issue but a distaste for a genre of literature that puts human agents rather than impersonal processes at the center of interest and suggests that such agents have some significant control over their own destinies.[22] But novels are not necessarily humanistic any more than they are necessarily "dramatic." In any case, the free will–determinism question is quite as much an ideological issue as that of the possibility or impossibility of a science of politics. Therefore, without presuming to judge the positive achievement of the *Annalistes* in their effort to reform historical studies, we must conclude that the reasons they adduce for their dissatisfaction with "narrative history" are jejune.

It may be, however, that what some of them have to say about this topic is only a stenographic reproduction of a much more extensive analysis and deconstruction of narrativity that was carried out in the 1960s by structuralists and post-structuralists, who claimed to demonstrate that narrative was not only an instrument of ideology, but the very paradigm of ideologizing discourse in general.

III

This is not the place for yet another exposition of structuralism and post-structuralism, of which there are more than enough already.[23] But the significance of these two movements for the discussion of "narrative history" can be briefly indicated. This significance, as I see it, is threefold: anthropological, psychological, and semiological. From the anthropological perspective, as represented above all by Claude Lévi-Strauss, it was not "narrative" so much

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delle scienze sociali nella recerca storica e la 'storia totale' " in *La teoria della storiografia oggi*, ed. Pietro Rossi (Milan, 1983), 127. I quote from the French of the original typescript for the convenience of English readers, but the page references are to the Italian version.

22. Thus, Furet holds that "la langage des sciences sociales est fondé sur la recherche des déterminations et des limites de l'action," *Idem*, and concludes that it is necessary, in order for history to become an object of social scientific investigation, "à renoncer non seulement à la forme principale de la discipline: le récit, mais egalement à sa matière preferée: la politique." *Ibid.*, 128.

23. Among which, some of the better ones are: O. Ducrot, T. Todorov, *et alia, Qu'est-ce que le structuralisme?* (Paris, 1968); *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy,* ed. R. Macksey and E. Donato (Baltimore, 1970); *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. J. V. Harari (Ithaca, 1979); and *Structuralism and Since*, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford, 1979). On structuralism and historical theory, see Alfred Schmidt, *Geschichte und Struktur: Fragen einer marxistischen Historik* (Munich, 1971). I have dealt with some of the issues in two books: *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973); and *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, 1978). For a fascinating example of the application of structuralist-post-structuralist ideas to problems of historical inquiry and exposition, see T. Todorov, *La conquête de l'Amérique: La question de l'autre* (Paris, 1982).

as "history" itself that was the problem.[24] In a famous polemic, directed against Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Lévi-Strauss denied the validity of the distinction between "historical" (or "civilized") and "pre-historical" (or "primitive") societies, and therewith the legitimacy of the notion of a specific "method" of study and mode of representing the structures and processes of the former. The kind of knowledge which the so-called historical method was supposed to provide, that is to say, "historical knowledge," was, in Lévi-Strauss's view, hardly distinguishable from the mythic lore of "savage" communities. Indeed, historiography—by which Lévi-Strauss understood traditional, "narrative" historiography—was nothing but the myth of Western and especially modern, bourgeois, industrial, and imperialistic societies. The substance of this myth consisted of the mistaking of a method of representation, narrative, for a content, that is, the notion of a humanity uniquely identified with those societies capable of believing that they had *lived* the kinds of stories that Western historians had *told* about them. The historical, which is to say, the diachronic, representation of events *is* a method of analysis, Lévi-Strauss granted, but "it is a method with no distinct object corresponding to it," much less a method peculiarly adequate to the understanding of "humanity" or "civilized societies."[25] The representation of events in terms of their chronological order of occurrence, which Lévi-Strauss identified as the putative "method" of historical studies, is for him nothing but a heuristic *procedure* common to every field of scientific study, whether of nature or of culture, *prior to* the application of whatever analytical techniques are necessary for the identification of those events' common properties as elements of a *structure*.[26]

The specific chronological scale used for this ordering procedure is always culture-specific and adventitious, a purely heuristic device, the validity of which depends upon the specific aims and interests of the scientific discipline in which it is used. The important point is that, in Lévi-Strauss's view of the matter, there is no such thing as *a* single scale for the ordering of events, but rather as many chronologies as there are culture-specific ways of representing the passage of time. Far from being a science or even a basis for a science, the narrative representation of any set of events was at best a proto-scientific exercise and at worst a basis for a kind of cultural self-delusion. "The progress of knowledge and the creation of new sciences," he concluded, "take place through the generation of

24. C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London, 1966), ch. 9. Lévi-Strauss writes: "[I]n Sartre's system, history plays exactly the part of myth" (254–255). Again: "It suffices for history to move away from us in time or for us to move away from it in thought, for it to cease to be internalizable and to lose its intelligibility, a spurious intelligibility attaching to a temporary internality" (255). And again: "As we say of certain careers, history may lead to anything, provided you get out of it" (262).

25. "We need only recognize that history is a method with no distinct object corresponding to it to reject the equivalence between the notion of history and the notion of humanity." *Ibid.*, 262. See also 248–250, 254.

26. "In fact history is tied neither to man nor to any particular object. It consists wholly in its method, which experience proves to be indispensable for cataloguing the elements of any structure whatever, human or non-human, in their entirety." *Ibid.*, 262.

anti-histories which show that a certain order which is possible only on one [chronological] plane ceases to be so on another."[27]

Not that Lévi-Strauss was opposed to narrative as such. Indeed, his monumental *Mythologiques* was intended to demonstrate the centrality of narrativity to the production of cultural life in all its forms.[28] What he objected to was the expropriation of narrativity as the "method" of a "science" purporting to have as its object of study a "humanity" more fully realized in its "historical" than in its "pre-historical" manifestations. The import of his criticism was therefore directed at that "humanism" in which Western civilization took so much pride but the ethical principles of which it seemed to honor more in the breach than in the observance. This was the same "humanism" which Jacques Lacan sought to undermine in his revision of psychoanalytical theory, Louis Althusser wished to expunge from modern Marxism, and Michel Foucault had simply dismissed as the ideology of Western civilization in its most repressive and decadent phase.[29] For all of these—as well as for Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva—not only "history" in general but "narrativity" specifically were merely representational practices by which society produced a human "subject" peculiarly adapted to the conditions of life in the modern *Rechtsstaat.*[30] Their arguments on behalf of this view are too complex to be represented here, but the nature of their kind of hostility to the notion of "narrative history" can be suggested by a brief consideration of Roland Barthes's essay of 1967 on "The Discourse of History."

In this essay, Barthes challenged the distinction, basic to historicism in all its forms, between "historical" and "fictional" discourse. The point of attack chosen for this argument was the kind of historiography that favored a narrative representation of past events and processes. Barthes asked:

> Does the narration of past events, which, in our culture from the time of the Greeks onwards, has generally been subject to the sanction of historical "science," bound to the underlying standard of the "real," and justified by the principles of "rational" exposition—does this form of narration really differ, in some specific trait, in some indubitably distinctive feature, from imaginary narration, as we find it in the epic, the novel, and the drama?[31]

27. *Ibid.*, 261, n.

28. C. Lévi-Strauss, *L'Origine des manières de table* (Paris, 1968), part II, ch. 2.

29. See Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (London, 1977), 81–82; H. White, "Michel Foucault," in Sturrock, ed., *Structuralism and Since.*

30. J. Derrida, "The Law of Genre," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), 55–82; and "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *L'Écriture et la differance* (Paris, 1967), ch. 10. Julia Kristeva writes: "In the narrative, the speaking subject constitutes itself as the subject of a family, a clan, or state group; it has been shown that the syntactically normative sentence develops within the context of prosaic and, later, historic narration. The simultaneous appearance of *narrative* genre and *sentence* limits the signifying process to an attitude of request and communication." "The Novel as Polylogue" in *Desire in Language* (New York, 1980), 174. See also Jean-François Lyotard, "Petite économie libidinale d'un dispositif narratif . . . " in *Des dispositifs pulsionnels* (Paris, 1973), 180–184.

31. R. Barthes, "Le discours de l'histoire," *Social Science Information* (Paris, 1967), English translation by Stephen Bann; "The Discourse of History" in *Rhetoric and History: Comparative Criticism Yearbook*, ed. Elinor Shaffer (Cambridge, England, 1981), 7.

It is obvious from the manner in which he posed this question—with the placement of the words "science," "real," and "rational" between inverted commas—that Barthes's principal aim was to attack the vaunted objectivity of traditional historiography. And this is precisely what he did—by exposing the ideological function of the narrative mode of representation with which it has been associated.

As in his theoretical appendix to *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes did not so much oppose science to ideology as distinguish between progressive and reactionary, liberating and oppressive ideologies.[32] In the "Discourse of History" he indicated that history could be represented in a number of different modes, some of which were less "mythological" than others inasmuch as they overtly called attention to their own process of production and indicated the "constituted," rather than "found," nature of their referents. But, in his view, traditional historical discourse was more retrograde than either modern science or modern art, both of which—in his view—signaled the *invented* nature of their "contents." Historical studies, alone among the disciplines pretending to the status of scientificity, remained a victim of what he called "the fallacy of referentiality."

Barthes purported to demonstrate that "[a]s we can see, simply from looking at its structure, and without having to invoke the substance of its content, historical discourse is in its essence a form of ideological elaboration," or to put it more precisely, an imaginary elaboration, by which he meant a "speech-act," that was "performative" in nature, "through which the utterer of the discourse (a purely linguistic entity) 'fills out' the place of the subject of the utterance (a psychological or ideological entity)."[33] It should be observed that, although Barthes here refers to historical discourse in general, it is historical discourse endowed with "narrative structure" that is his principal object of interest; and this for two reasons. First, he finds it paradoxical that "narrative structure, which was originally developed within the cauldron of fiction (in myths and the first epics)," should have become, in traditional historiography, "at once the sign and the proof of reality."[34] But second, and more importantly, narrative was, for Barthes, following Lacan, the principal instrumentality by which society fashions the narcissistic, infantile consciousness into a "subjectivity" capable of bearing the "responsibilities" of an "object" of the law in all its forms.

In the acquisition of language, Lacan had suggested, the child also acquires the very paradigm of orderly, rule-governed behavior. In the development of the capacity to assimilate "stories" and to tell them, however, Barthes adds, the child also learns what it is to be that creature which, in Nietzsche's phrase, is capable of making promises, of "remembering forward" as well as backward, and of linking his end to his beginning in such a way as to attest to an "integrity" which every individual must be supposed to possess if he is to become

32. R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, transl. Annette Lavers (New York, 1972), 148–159.
33. Barthes, "The Discourse of History," 16–17.
34. *Ibid.*, 18.

a "subject" of (any) system of law, morality, or propriety. What is "imaginary" about any *narrative* representation is the illusion of a centered consciousness capable of looking out on the world, apprehending its structure and processes, and representing them to itself as having all of the formal coherency of narrativity itself. But, in Barthes's view, this is to mistake a "meaning" (which is always constituted rather than found) for "reality" (which is always found rather than constituted).[35]

Behind this formulation lay a vast mass of highly problematical theories of language, discourse, consciousness, and ideology, with which the names of both Lacan and Althusser especially were associated. Barthes drew upon these for his own purpose. This purpose was nothing less than the dismantling of the whole heritage of nineteenth-century "realism"—which he viewed as the pseudo-scientific content of that ideology which appeared as "humanism" in its sublimated form.

It was no accident, for Barthes, that "realism" in the nineteenth-century novel and "objectivity" in nineteenth-century historiography had developed *pied-à-pied.* What they had in common was a dependency on a specifically narrative mode of discourse, the principal purpose of which was to substitute surreptitiously a conceptual content (a *signified*) for a *referent* that it pretended merely to describe. As he had written, in the seminal "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" (1966):

> Claims concerning the "realism" of narrative are therefore to be discounted. . . . The function of narrative is not to "represent," it is to constitute a spectacle. . . . Narrative does not show, does not imitate. . . . "What takes place" in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally *nothing*; "what happens" is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming.[36]

This passage refers to narrative in general, to be sure, but the principles enunciated were extendable to historical narrative as well. Whence his insistence, at the end of "The Discourse of History," that "in objective history, the real is never more than an unformulated signified, sheltering behind the apparently all-powerful referent. This situation characterizes what might be called the *realistic effect* [*effet du réel*]."[37]

Much could be said about this conception of narrative and its supposed ideological function, not least about the psychology on which it is based and the ontology which it presupposes. It is—obviously—reminiscent of Nietzsche's thought about language, literature, and historiography and, insofar as it bears upon the problem of historical consciousness, it does not say much that goes beyond "The Uses and Abuses of History for Life" and *The Genealogy of Morals.* This Nietzschean affiliation is openly admitted by such post-structuralists as Derrida, Kristeva, and Foucault, and it is this Nietzschean turn in

35. "[B]eyond the narrational level begins the world," R. Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" in *Image, Music, Text*, 115.

36. *Ibid.*, 124.

37. Barthes, "The Discourse of History," 17.

French thought over the last twenty years or so that serves to distinguish the post-structuralists from their more "scientistic" structuralist predecessors, as represented by Lévi-Strauss, Roman Jakobson, and the early Barthes. Post-structuralism has little in common with the aspiration of those historians among the *Annales* group who dreamed of transforming historical studies into a kind of science. But the "de-construction" of narrativity carried out by Barthes and the post-structuralists is consistent with the objections which the *Annalistes* raised against the narrative mode of representation in historiography.

IV

Barthes's formulation of the problematics of "narrative history" points up a significant difference, however, between discussions of this subject which developed in France in the 1960s and those which had taken place in the previous two decades in the Anglophone philosophical community, dominated at that time by analytical philosophy. The most apparent difference lies in the consistency with which narrative was defended by the analytical philosophers, both as a mode of representation and as a mode of explanation, in contrast to the attacks upon it emanating from France. Different accounts were given by different philosophers of the bases for the conviction that narrative was a perfectly valid mode of representing historical events and even of providing an explanation of them. But in contrast to the French discussion, in the Anglophone world narrative historiography was viewed for the most part not as an ideology, but rather as an antidote for the nefarious "philosophy of history" à la Hegel and Marx, the presumed ideological linchpin of "totalitarian" political systems.

Here, too, however, the lines of debate were muddied by the issue of history's status as a science and discussion of the kind of epistemic authority that historical knowledge could claim in comparison with the kind of knowledge provided by the physical sciences. There was even a vigorous debate within Marxist circles, a debate which reached a culmination in the 1970s, over the extent to which a Marxist, "scientific" historiography should be cast in a narrativist, as against a more properly analytical, mode of discourse. And in this debate issues similar to those which divided the *Annalistes* from their more conventional co-professionals had to be addressed. But here narrativity was much less a matter of concern than the issue of "materialism *versus* idealism."[38] On the whole, among both historians and philosophers and among both Marxist and non-Marxist practitioners of these disciplines, no one seriously questioned the legitimacy of distinctively "historical" studies, as Lévi-Strauss had done in France, or the adequacy, at some level, of the narrative to represent veraciously and objectively the "truths" discovered by whatever methods the individual historian happened to have used in his research, as Barthes and Foucault did in France. Some social scientists raised such

38. Cf. Anderson, 14, 98, 162.

questions, but given the tenuousness of their own claims to methodological rigor and the exiguousness of their "science," they bore little theoretical fruit with respect to the question of "narrative history."[39]

The differences between these two strains of discussions of historical narrative also reflected fundamentally different conceptions of the nature of discourse in general. In literary and linguistic theory, the discourse is conventionally thought of as any unit of utterance larger than the (complex) sentence. What are the principles of discourse-formation, corresponding to those rules of grammar which preside over the formation of the sentence? These principles are obviously not grammatical themselves, since one can construct chains of grammatically correct sentences that do not aggregate or coalesce into a recognizable discourse.

Obviously, one candidate for the role of organon of discourse-formation is logic, the protocols of which preside over the formation of all "scientific" discourses. But logic yields place to other principles in poetic discourse, principles such as phonetics, rhyme, meter, and so on, the exigencies of which may authorize violations of logical protocols in the interest of producing formal coherencies of another kind. And then there is rhetoric, which may be regarded as a principle of discourse-formation in those speech events which aim at persuasion or impulsion to action rather than description, demonstration, or explication. In both poetic and rhetorical speech, the communication of a *message* about some extrinsic referent may be involved, but the functions of "expression" on the one side and of "conation" of the other may be given a higher order of importance. Therefore, the distinctions among "communication," "expression," and "conation" permit the differentiation, in terms of function, among different kinds of rules of discourse-formation, of which logic is only one and by no means the most privileged.

Everything depends, as Roman Jakobson put it, on the "set" (*Einstellung*) toward the "message" contained in the discourse in question.[40] If the conveyance of a message about an extrinsic referent is the primary aim of the discourse, we can say that the communication function predominates; and the discourse in question is to be assessed in terms of the clarity of its formulation and its truth-value (the validity of the information it provides) with respect to the referent. If, on the other hand, the message is treated as being primarily an occasion for expressing an emotional condition of the speaker of the discourse (as in most lyrics) or for engendering an attitude in the recipient of the

39. See the remarks of Daniel Bell and Peter Wiles in Dumoulin and Moisi, eds., 64–71, 89–90.

40. Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics" in *Style in Language*, ed. T. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 352–358. This essay by Jakobson is absolutely essential for the understanding of theory of discourse as it has developed within a generally semiological orientation since the 1960s. It should be stressed that whereas many of the post-structuralists have taken their stand on the arbitrariness of the sign and a fortiori the arbitrariness of the constitution of discourses in general, Jakobson continued to insist on the possibility of intrinsic meaning residing even in the phoneme. Hence, whereas discursive "referentiality" was regarded as an illusion by the more radical post-structuralists, such as Derrida, Kristeva, Sollers, and the later Barthes, it was not so regarded by Jakobson. Referentiality was simply one of the "six basic functions of verbal communication." *Ibid.*, 357.

message, conducing to an action of a particular kind (as in hortatory speeches), then the discourse in question is to be assessed less in terms of its clarity or its truth-value with respect to its referent than in terms of its performative force—a purely pragmatic consideration.

This functional model of discourse relegates logic, poetic, and rhetoric alike to the status of "codes" in which different kinds of "messages" can be cast and transmitted with quite different aims in view: communicative, expressive, or conative, as the case may be.[41] These aims are by no means mutually exclusive; indeed, every discourse can be shown to possess aspects of all three of these functions. And this goes for "factual" as well as "fictional" discourse. But considered as a basis for a general theory of discourse this model permits us to ask how *narrative* discourse in particular utilizes these three functions. And more relevantly to our purpose in this essay, it permits us to see how contemporary discussions of the nature of narrative history have tended to ignore one or another of these functions in order either to save narrative history for "science," on the one side, or consign it to the category of "ideology," on the other.

Most of those who would defend narrative as a legitimate mode of historical representation and even as a valid mode of explanation (at least, for history) stress the communicative function. On this view, a history is conceived to be a "message" about a "referent" (the past, historical events, and so on) the content of which is *both* "information" (the "facts"), on the one side, and an "explanation" (the "narrative" account), on the other. Both the facts in their particularity and the narrative account in its generality must meet a correspondence, as well as a coherence, criterion of truth-value. The coherence criterion invoked is of course that of logic, rather than those of poetic or rhetoric. Individual propositions must be logically consistent with one another and the principles conceived to govern the process of syntagmatic combination must be consistently applied. Thus, for example, although an earlier event can be represented as a cause of a later event, the reverse is not the case. By contrast, however, a later event can serve to illuminate the "significance" of an earlier event, but not the reverse (for example, the birth of Diderot does not illuminate the significance of the composition of *Rameau's Nephew*, but the composition of *Rameau's Nephew* illuminates, retrospectively, as it were, the "significance" of the birth of Diderot). And so on. . . .[42]

41. As Jakobson's student, Paolo Valesio, puts it: "every discourse in its functional aspect is based on a relatively limited set of mechanisms . . . that reduce every referential choice to a formal choice." *Novantiqua*, 21. Hence, for Valesio,

> it is never a question . . . of pointing to referents in the "real" world, of distinguishing true from false, right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, and so forth. The choice is only between what mechanisms to employ, and these mechanisms already condition every discourse since they are simplified representations of reality, inevitably and intrinsically slanted in a partisan direction. The mechanisms always appear . . . to be gnoseological, but in reality they are *eristic*: they give a positive or a negative connotation to the *image* of the entity they describe in the very moment in which they start describing it. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

42. The example is that of Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, England, 1965).

The correspondence criterion is another matter, however. Not only must the singular existential statements that comprise the "chronicle" of the historical account "correspond" to the events of which they are predications, the narrative as a whole must "correspond" to the general configuration of the sequence of events of which it is an account. Which is to say that the sequence of "facts" *as they are emplotted* in order to make a "story" out of what would otherwise be only a "chronicle," must correspond to the general configuration of the "events" of which the "facts" are propositional indicators.

For those theorists who stress the communication function of narrative historical discourse, the correspondence of the "story" to the events it relates is established at the level of the conceptual content of the "message." This conceptual content may be thought to consist either of the factors which link events in chains of causes and effects or of the "reasons" (or "intentions") motivating the human agents of the events in question. The causes (necessary if not sufficient) or reasons (conscious or unconscious) for events taking place[43] as they in fact did are set forth in the narrative in the *form* of the story it tells.

On this view, the narrative form of the discourse is only a *medium* for the message, having no more truth-value or informational content than any other formal structure, such as a logical syllogism, a metaphorical figure, or a mathematical equation. Considered as a code, the narrative is a vehicle rather in the way that the Morse code serves as the vehicle for the transmission of messages by a telegraphical apparatus. Which means, among other things, that as thus envisaged the narrative code adds nothing in the way of information or knowledge that could not be conveyed by some other system of discursive encodation. This is proven by the fact that the *content* of any narrative account of real events can be extracted from the account, represented in a dissertative format, and subjected to the same criteria of logical consistency and factual accuracy as a scientific demonstration. The narrative actually composed by a given historian may be more or less "thick" in content and more or less "artistic" in its execution; it may be more or less elegantly elaborated—in the way that the "touch" of different telegraphers is conceived to be. But this, the proponents of this view would have it, is more a matter of individual "style" than of "content." In the historical narrative, it is the "content" alone that has "truth-value." All else is "ornament."

This notion of narrative discourse fails, however, to take account of the enormous number of *kinds* of narratives that every culture disposes for those of its members who might wish to draw upon them for the encodation and transmission of messages. Moreover, every narrative discourse consists, not of one single code monolithically utilized, but rather of a complex set of codes, the interweaving of which by the author—for the production of a story infinitely rich in suggestion and variety of affect, not to mention attitude toward and subliminal evaluation of its subject-matter—attests to his talents as

43. See Dray, *Philosophy of History*, 43–47, 19.

an artist, as master rather than as the servant of the codes available for his use. Whence the "density" of such relatively informal discourses as those of "literature" and "poetry" as against those of "science." As the Russian textologist J. Lotman has remarked,[44] the artistic text carries much more "information" than does the scientific text, because the former disposes more codes and more levels of encodation than does the latter. At the same time, however, the artistic as against the scientific text directs attention as much to the virtuosity involved in its production as it does to the "information" conveyed in the various codes employed in its composition.

It is this complex multilayeredness of discourse and its consequent capacity to bear a wide variety of interpretations of its meaning that the *performance model of discourse* seeks to illuminate. From the perspective provided by this model, a discourse is regarded as an apparatus for the *production of meaning*, rather than as only a vehicle for the transmission of information about an extrinsic referent. As thus envisaged, the "content" of the discourse consists as much of its form as it does of whatever information might be extracted from a reading of it.[45] It follows that to change the form of the discourse might not be to change the information about its explicit referent, but it would certainly change the meaning produced by it.

For example, a set of events simply listed in the chronological order of their original occurrence is not, *pace* Lévi-Strauss, devoid of meaning. Its meaning is precisely the kind which any list is capable of producing—as Rabelais's and Joyce's use of the genre of the list amply attests. A list of events may be only a "thin" chronicle (if the items in the list are presented chronologically) or a "slim" encyclopedia (if organized topically). In both cases the same information may be conveyed, but different meanings are produced.

A chronicle, however, is not a narrative, even if it contains the same set of facts as its informational content. And this because a narrative discourse *performs* differently from a chronicle. "Chronology" is no doubt a "code" shared by both chronicle and narrative, but narrative utilizes other codes as well and produces a meaning quite different from that of any chronicle.

It is not that the code of narrative is more "literary" than that of chronicle—as many historians of historical writing have suggested. And it is not that the narrative "explains" more or even explains more fully than does the chronicle. The point is that narrativization produces a meaning quite different from that produced by chronicalization. And it does this by imposing a discursive form on the events which comprise its own chronicle by means that are poetic in nature. Which is to say that the narrative code is drawn from the performative domain of poiesis rather than that of noesis. This is what Barthes meant when he said: "Narrative does not *show*, does not *imitate*. . . . [Its] function is not to '*represent*,' it is to *constitute* a spectacle." (My italics.)

44. J. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, transl. R. Vroon (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1977), 9–20, 280–284.

45. *Ibid.*, 35–38.

It is generally recognized that one way of distinguishing poetic from prosaic discourse is by the prominence given in the former to patterning—of sounds, rhythms, meter, and so on—which draws attention to the form of the discourse quite apart from (or in excess of) whatever "message" it may contain on the level of its literal verbal enunciation. The form of the poetic text produces a "meaning" quite other than whatever might be represented in any prose paraphrase of its literal verbal content. But the same can be said of the various genres of *Kunstprosa* (oratorical declamation, legal brief, prose romance, novel, and so on), of which the historical narrative is undeniably a species; only here, the patterning in question is not that of sound and meter so much as that of the rhythms and repetitions of motific structures which aggregate into themes, and of themes which aggregate into plot-structures. This is not to say, of course, that such genres do not also utilize the various codes of logical argumentation and scientific demonstration; for indeed they do. But these codes have nothing to do with the production of the kind of meaning that is effected by narrativization.

Certain narrative discourses may have arguments embedded within them, in the form of "explanations" of *why* things happened as they did, set forth in the mode of direct address to the reader, in the author's own voice, and perceivable as such. But such arguments are more properly considered as a "commentary" on, rather than a part of, the narrative. In historical discourse, the narrative serves to transform a list of historical events that would otherwise be only a chronicle into a story. In order to effect this transformation, the events, agents, and agencies represented in the chronicle must be encoded as "story-elements," that is to say, characterized as the kinds of events, agents, and agencies that can be apprehended as elements of specific "story-types." On this level of encodation, the historical discourse directs the reader's attention to a secondary referent, different in kind from the events that make up the primary referent, namely, the "plot-structures" of the various story-types cultivated in a given culture.[46] When the reader recognizes the story being told in an historical narrative as a specific kind of story, for example, as an epic, romance, tragedy, comedy, or farce, he can be said to have "comprehended" the "meaning" produced by the discourse. This "comprehension" is nothing other than the recognition of the "form" of the narrative.

The production of meaning, in this case, can be regarded as a performance, because any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories. Since no given set or sequence of real events is *intrinsically* "tragic," "comic," or "farcical," but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story-type on the events, it is the choice of the story-type and its imposition upon the events which endow them with meaning. The effect of such emplotment may be regarded as an "explanation" if one chooses so to

46. See my *Metahistory*, "Introduction: The Poetics of History," 1–38; and *Tropics of Discourse*, chs. 2–5.

view it, but in this case it would have to be recognized that the generalizations that serve the function of universals in any version of a nomological-deductive argument are the *topoi* of literary "plots," rather than the causal laws of science.

This is why a narrative history can legitimately be regarded as something other than a scientific account of the events of which it speaks—as the *Annalistes* have rightly argued. But it is not sufficient reason to deny to narrative history substantial "truth-value." Narrative historiography may very well, as Furet indicates, "dramatize" historical events and "novelize" historical processes, but this only indicates that the truths in which narrative history deals are of an order different from those of its social-scientific counterpart. In the historical narrative the systems of meaning-production peculiar to a culture or society are tested against the capacity of any set of "real" events to yield to such systems. If these systems have their purest, most fully developed, and formally most coherent representations in the "literary" or "poetic" endowment of modern, secularized cultures, this is no reason to rule them out as *merely* imaginary constructions. To do so would entail the denial that literature and poetry have anything valid to teach us about "reality."

V

The relationship between historiography and literature is, of course, as tenuous and difficult to define as that between historiography and science. In part, no doubt, this is because historiography in the West arises against the background of a distinctively "literary" (or rather "fictional") discourse which itself had taken shape against the even more archaic discourse of "myth." In its origins, historical discourse differentiates itself from literary discourse by virtue of its subject-matter ("real" rather than "imaginary" events), rather than by its form. But form here is ambiguous, for it refers not only to the manifest appearance of historical discourses (their appearance *as* stories) but also to the systems of meaning-production (the modes of emplotment) which historiography shared with "literature" and "myth." This affiliation of narrative historiography with literature and myth should provide no reason for embarrassment, however, because the systems of meaning-production shared by all three are distillates of the historical experience of a people, a group, a culture. And the knowledge provided by narrative history is that which results from the testing of the systems of meaning-production originally elaborated in myth and refined in the alembic of the hypothetical mode of fictional articulation. In the historical narrative, experiences distilled into fiction as *typifications* are subjected to the test of their capacity to endow "real" events with meaning. And it would take a *Kulturphilistinismus* of a very high order to deny to the results of this testing procedure the status of genuine knowledge.

In other words, just as the contents of myth are tested by fiction, so too the forms of fiction are tested by (narrative) historiography. If in similar manner the content of narrative historiography is subjected to tests of adequacy to the

representation and explanation of another order of "reality" than that presupposed by traditional historians, this should be seen less as an opposition of "science" to "ideology," as the *Annalistes* often seem to view it, than as a continuation of the process of mapping the limit between the imaginary and the real which begins with the invention of "fiction" itself.

The historical narrative does not, as narrative, dispel false beliefs about the past, human life, the nature of the community, and so on; what it does is test the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of "imaginary" events. Precisely insofar as the historical narrative endows sets of real events with the kinds of meaning found otherwise only in myth and literature, we are justified in regarding it as a product of *allegoresis*. Therefore, rather than regarding every historical narrative as "mythic" or "ideological" in nature, it is more correct to regard it as allegorical, which is to say: it says one thing and means another.

As thus envisaged, the narrative figurates the body of events that serves as its primary referent and transforms these "events" into intimations of patterns of meaning that any *literal* representation of them as "facts" could never produce. This is not to say that an historical discourse is not properly assessed in terms of the truth-value of its factual (singular existential) statements taken individually and the logical conjunction of the whole set of such statements taken distributively. For unless an historical discourse acceded to assessment in these terms, it would lose all justification for its claim to represent and provide explanations of specifically "real" events. But such assessment touches only that aspect of the historical discourse which is conventionally called its "chronicle." It does not provide us with any way of assessing the content of the narrative itself.

This point has been made most tellingly by Louis O. Mink, who has written:

> One can regard any text in direct discourse as a logical conjunction of assertions. The truth-value of the text is then simply a logical function of the truth or falsity of the individual assertions taken separately: the conjunction is true if and only if each of the propositions is true. Narrative has in fact been analyzed, especially by philosophers intent on comparing the form of the narrative with the form of theories, as if it were nothing but a logical-conjunction of past-referring statements; and on such an analysis there is no problem of *narrative truth*. The difficulty with the model of logical conjunction, however, is that it is not a model of narrative at all. It is rather a model of a chronicle. Logical conjunction serves well enough as a representation of the only ordering relation of chronicles, which is " . . . and then . . . and then . . . and then . . . and then . . . ." Narratives, however, contain indefinitely many ordering relations, and indefinitely many ways of *combining* these relations. It is such a combination that we mean when we speak of the coherence of a narrative, or lack of it. It is an unsolved task of literary theory to classify the ordering relations of narrative form; but whatever the classification, it should be clear that a historical narrative claims truth not merely for each of its individual statements taken distributively, but for the complex form of the narrative itself.[47]

47. Louis O. Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument" in *The Writing of History:*

But the "truth" of "narrative form" can display itself only indirectly, that is to say, by means of *allegoresis*. What else could be involved in the representation of a set of real events as a tragedy, comedy, farce, and so on? Is there, for example, any test, logical or empirical, that could be applied to determine the truth value of the assertion by Marx that the events of "the 18th Brumaire of Louis Buonaparte" constitute a "farcical" re-enactment of the "tragedy" of 1789?[48] Marx's discourse is certainly assessable by the criteria of factual accuracy in his representation of particular events and the logical consistency of his explanation of why they occurred as they did. But what is the truth-value of his figuration of the whole set of events, achieved by narrative means, as a farce? Are we intended to take this as only a figure of speech, a metaphorical expression, and therefore not subject to assessment on grounds of its "truth-value"? To do so would require that we dismiss the narrative aspect of Marx's discourse, the story he tells about the events, as mere ornament and not an essential aspect of the discourse as a whole.

Marx's assertion of the farcical nature of the events he describes is made only indirectly (by means of the aphorism that opens his discourse and by his narrativization of the events, the story he makes of them), which is to say, allegorically. This does not mean that we would be justified in assuming that Marx did not intend us to take this assertion "seriously" and to regard it as "truthful" in its content. But what is the relation between the assertion of the farcical nature of the events and the "facts" registered in the discourse, on the one side, and the dialectical analysis of them given in the passages in which Marx, speaking in his own voice and as a putative "scientist" of society, purports to "explain" them, on the other? Do the facts confirm the characterization of the events as a farce? Is the logic of Marx's explanation consistent with the logic of the narrative? What "logic" governs this narrativizing aspect of Marx's discourse?

The logic of Marx's explicit argument about the events, his explanation of the facts, is manifestly "dialectical," that is, his own version of Hegel's logic. Is there another "logic" presiding over the representation of the events as a "farce"? This is the question which the threefold distinction among the chronicle of events, the explanation of them given in direct discourse as commentary, and the narrativization of the events provided by *allegoresis* helps us to answer. And the answer is given at the moment we recognize the allegorical

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Literary Form and Historical Understanding, ed. R.H. Canary and H. Kozicki (Madison, Wisconsin, 1978), 143–144.

48. "Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the *Montagne* of 1848 to 1851 for the *Montagne* of 1793 to 1795, the Nephew for the Uncle. And the same caricature occurs in the circumstances attending the second edition of the eighteenth Brumaire." Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Buonaparte" in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works* (New York, 1969), 97. This is not merely an aphorism. The *whole work* is *composed* as a farce. Cf. White, *Metahistory*, 320–327; and H. White, "The Problem of Style in Realistic Representation: Marx and Flaubert" in *The Concept of Style*, ed. B. Lang (Philadelphia, 1979), pp. 213–229.

aspect of the characterization of the events of "the 18th Brumaire" as a "farce." It is not "fact" that legitimates the representation of the events as a "farce," and it is not "logic" that permits the projection of the fact as a "farce." There is no way in which one could conclude on logical grounds that any set of "real" events is a farce. This is a judgment, not a conclusion; and it is a judgment that can be justified only on the basis of a poetic troping of the "facts" so as to give them, in the very process of their initial description, the aspect of the elements of the story-form known as "farce" in the literary code of our culture.

If there is any logic presiding over the transition from the level of fact or event in the discourse to that of narrative, it is the logic of figuration itself, which is to say, tropology. This transition is effected by a displacement of the facts onto the ground of literary fictions or, what amounts to the same thing, the projection onto the facts of the plot-structure of one or another of the genres of literary figuration. Or, to put it yet another way, the transition is effected by a process of transcodation, in which events originally transcribed in the code of chronicle are re-transcribed in the literary code of the farce.

To present the question of narrativization in historiography in these terms, of course, is to raise the more general question of the "truth" of literature itself. On the whole, this question has been ignored by the analytical philosophers concerned to analyze the logic of narrative explanations in historiography. And this because, it seems to me at least, the notion of explanation which they brought to their investigation ruled out the consideration of figurative discourse as productive of genuine knowledge. Since historical narratives refer to "real" rather than "imaginary" events, it was assumed that their "truth-value" resided either in the literal statements of fact contained within them or in a combination of these and a literalist paraphrase of statements made in figurative language. It being generally given that figurative expressions are either false, ambiguous, or logically inconsistent (consisting as they do of what some philosophers call "category mistakes"), it followed that whatever explanations might be contained in an historical narrative should be expressible only in literal language. Thus in their summaries of explanations contained in historical narratives, these analysts of the form tended to reduce the narrative in question to sets of discrete propositions, for which the simple declarative sentence served as a model. When an element of figurative language turned up in such sentences, it was treated as only a figure of speech, the content of which was either its literal meaning or a literalist paraphrase of what appeared to be its grammatically "correct" formulation. But in this process of literalization, what gets left out is precisely those elements of figuration, tropes and figures of thought, as the rhetoricians call them, without which the narrativization of real events, the transformation of a chronicle into a story, could never be effected. If there is any "category mistake" involved in this literalizing procedure, it is that of mistaking a narrative account of real events for a literal account thereof. A narrative account is always a figurative account, an allegory. To leave this figurative element out of consideration in the analysis of a narrative is not only to miss its aspect as allegory; it is also to miss the performance in language by

which a chronicle is transformed into a narrative. And it is only a modern prejudice against allegory or, what amounts to the same thing, a scientistic prejudice in favor of literalism, that obscures this fact to many modern analysts of historical narrative. In any event, the dual conviction that, on the one hand, truth must be represented in literal statements of fact and, on the other, that explanation must conform to the scientific model or its commonsensical counterpart, has led most analysts to ignore the specifically "literary" aspect of historical narrative and therewith whatever "truth" it may convey in figurative terms.

VI

Needless to say, the notion of literary, even mythical, truth is not alien to those philosophers who continue to work in a tradition of thought that has its modern origin in Hegelian idealism, its continuator in Dilthey, and its recent, existentialist-phenomenological avatar in Heideggerian hermeneutics. For thinkers in this line, "history" has always been less an object of study, something to be explained, than a mode of being-in-the-world which both makes possible "understanding" and invokes it as a condition of its own deconcealment. This means that historical knowledge can be produced only on the basis of a kind of inquiry fundamentally different from those cultivated in the (nomological-deductive) physical sciences and the (structural-functional) social sciences. According to Gadamer and Ricoeur, the "method" of the historico-genetic sciences is hermeneutics, conceived less as decipherment than as "inter-pretation," literally "translation," a "carrying over" of meanings from one discursive community to another. Both Gadamer and Ricoeur stress the "traditionalist" aspect of the hermeneutical enterprise, or what amounts to the same thing, the "translational" aspect of tradition. It is tradition which unites the interpreter with the *interpretandum*, apprehended in all the strangeness that marks it as coming from a "past," in an activity productive of the establishment of the individuality and communality of both. When this individuality-in-communality is established across a temporal distance, the kind of knowledge-as-understanding produced is a specifically historical knowledge.[49]

So much is familiar to any reader of this tradition of philosophical discourse and utterly foreign to traditional historians as well as to those who wish to transform historiography into a science. And why not? The terminology is figurative, the tone pious, the epistemology mystical—all of the things that traditional historians and their more modern, social scientifically oriented counterparts wish to expunge from historical studies. Yet this tradition of thought has a special relevance for the consideration of our topic, for it has

49. H.-G. Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness" in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow and W. Sullivan (Berkeley, 1979), 106–107, 134; and P. Ricoeur, "Du conflit à la convergence de méthodes en exégèse biblique" in R. Barthes, P. Beauchamps, *et alia, Exégèse et hermeneutique* (Paris, 1971), 47–51.

been left to one of its representatives, Paul Ricoeur, to attempt nothing less than a metaphysics of narrativity.

Ricoeur has confronted all of the principal conceptions of discourse, textuality, and reading on the current theoretical scene. He has, moreover, surveyed exhaustively contemporary theories of historiography and the notions of narrative advanced in both contemporary philosophy of history and social science. On the whole, he finds much to commend in the analytical philosophers' arguments, especially as represented by Mink, Danto, Gallie, and Dray, who view narrative as providing a kind of explanation different from, though not antithetical to, "nomological-deductive" explanations. Ricoeur, however, holds that narrativity in historiography conduces more to the attainment of an "understanding" of the events of which it speaks than to an "explanation" that is only a softer version of the kind found in the physical and social sciences. Not that he opposes understanding to explanation. These two modes of cognition are related "dialectically," he maintains, as the "unmethodical" and "methodical" aspects of all knowledge that deals with (human) actions rather than with (natural) events.[50]

The "reading" of an action, according to Ricoeur, resembles the reading of a text; the same kind of hermeneutic principles are required for the comprehension of both. Since "history is about the *actions* of men in the past," it follows that the study of the past has as its proper aim the hermeneutic "understanding" of human actions.[51] In the process of attaining this understanding, explanations of various sorts are called for, in much the same way that explanations of "what happened" in any story are called for on the way to the story's full elaboration. But these explanations serve as a means for understanding "what happened," rather than as ends in themselves. Thus, in the writing of the historical text, the aim in view should be to represent (human) events in such a way that their status as parts of meaningful wholes will be made manifest.[52]

To grasp the meaning of a complex sequence of human events is not the same as being able to explain why or even how the particular events that comprise the sequence occurred. One might be able to explain why and how every event in a sequence occurred and still not have understood the meaning of the sequence considered as a whole. Carrying over the analogy of reading to the process of understanding, one can see how one might understand every sentence in a story and still not have grasped its "point." It is the same, Ricoeur maintains, in our efforts to grasp the meaning of human actions. Just as texts *have* meanings that are not reducible to the specific words and sentences used in their composition, so too do actions. Actions *produce* meanings by their consequences, whether foreseen and intended or unforeseen and unintended,

50. P. Ricoeur, "Explanation and Understanding: On Some Remarkable Connections among the Theory of the Text, Theory of Action, and Theory of History," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. C. E. Reagan and D. Stewart (Boston, 1978), 165.

51. *Ibid.*, 161.

52. *Ibid.*, 153–158.

which become embodied in the institutions and conventions of given social formations.[53] To understand historical actions, then, is to "grasp together," as parts of wholes that are "meaningful," the intentions motivating actions, the actions themselves, and their consequences as reflected in social and cultural contexts.[54]

In historiography, Ricoeur argues, this "grasping together" of the elements of situations in which "meaningful action" has occurred is effected by the "configuration" of them through the instrumentality of "plot." For him, unlike many commentators on historical narrative, "plot" is not a structural component of fictional or mythical stories alone, but is crucial to the historical representations of events as well. Thus he writes:

> Every narrative combines two dimensions in various proportions, one chronological and the other nonchronological. The first may be called the episodic dimension, which characterizes the story made out of events. The second is the configurational dimension, according to which the plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events.[55]

But this "plot" is not imposed by the historian on the events; nor is it a code drawn from the repertoire of literary models and used "pragmatically" to endow what would otherwise be a mere collection of facts with a certain rhetorical form. It is "plot," he says, which figures forth the "historicality" of events. Thus, he writes, "[t]he plot . . . places us at the crossing point of temporality and narrativity: to be historical, an event must be more than a singular occurrence, a unique happening. It receives its definition from its contribution to the development of a plot."[56]

On this view, a specifically historical event is not one that can be inserted into a "story" wherever the writer wishes; it is rather a kind of event that can "contribute" to "the development of a plot." It is as if the plot were an entity in process of development prior to the occurrence of any given event, and any given event could be endowed with "historicality" only in the extent to which it could be shown to contribute to this process. And, indeed, such seems to be the case, because for Ricoeur, "historicality" is a structural mode or level of "temporality" itself.

Time, it would appear, is possessed of three "degrees of organization": "within-time-ness," "historicality," and "deep temporality." These "degrees of organization" are reflected in turn in three kinds of experiences or representations of time in consciousness: "ordinary representations of time, . . . as that 'in' which events take place"; those in which "emphasis is placed on the weight of the past and, even more, . . . the power of recovering the 'extension' between birth and death in the work of 'repetition' "; and, finally, those which seek to

53. P. Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," in Rabinow and Sullivan, eds., 83–85.

54. *Ibid.*, 77–79.

55. P. Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), 178–179.

56. *Ibid.*, 171.

grasp "the plural unity of future, past, and present."[57] In the historical narrative—indeed, in *any* narrative, even the most humble—it is narrativity which "brings us back from within-time-ness to historicality, from 'reckoning with' time to 'recollecting' it." In short, "the narrative function provides a transition from within-time-ness to historicality," and it does this by revealing what must be called the "plot-like" nature of temporality itself.[58]

As thus envisaged, the narrative level of any historical account has a referent quite different from that of its "chronicle" level. While the chronicle represents events as existing "within time," the narrative represents the aspect of time in which endings can be seen as linked to beginnings to form a continuity within a difference. The "sense of an ending" which links a terminus of a process with its origin in such a way as to endow whatever had happened in between with a significance that can only be gained by "retrospection," is achieved by the peculiarly human capacity of what Heidegger called "repetition." This "repetition" is the specific modality of the existence of events in "historicality," as against their existence "in time." In "historicality" conceived as "repetition," we grasp the possibility of "the retrieval of our most basic potentialities inherited from our past in the form of personal fate and collective destiny."[59] And this is why, among other reasons, to be sure, Ricoeur feels justified in holding "temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporarility as its ultimate referent."[60] It is this contention which justifies, I think, speaking of Ricoeur's contribution to historical theory as an attempt to contrive a "metaphysics of narrativity."

The significance of this metaphysics of narrativity for historiographical theory lies in Ricoeur's suggestion that the historical narrative must, by virtue of its narrativity, have as its "ultimate referent" nothing other than "temporality" itself. Placed within the wider context of Ricoeur's *oeuvre*, what this means is that he has assigned historical narrative to the category of symbolic discourse, which is to say, a discourse whose principal force derives neither from its informational content nor from its rhetorical effect, but rather from its imagistic function.[61] A narrative, for him, is neither an icon of the events of which it speaks, an explanation of these events, nor a rhetorical refashioning of "facts" for a specifically persuasive effect. It is rather a symbol, which mediates between different universes of meaning "configuring" the dialectic of their relationship in an image. This image is nothing other than the narrative itself, that "configuration" of events reported in the chronicle by the revelation of their "plot-like" nature.

Thus, in telling a story, the historian necessarily reveals a plot. This plot "symbolizes" events by mediating between their status as existants "within

57. *Idem.*
58. *Ibid.*, 178.
59. *Ibid.*, 183–184.
60. *Ibid.*, 169.
61. P. Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," in Reagan and Stewart, eds., 98.

time" and their status as indicators of the "historicality" in which these events participate. Since this historicality can only be indicated, never represented directly, this means that the historical narrative, like all symbolic structures, "says something other than what it says and . . . consequently, grasps me because it has in its meaning created a new meaning."[62]

Ricoeur grants that in characterizing symbolic language in this way, he has all but identified it with "allegory," but this is not to say that it is only fantasy. This is because, for Ricoeur, allegory is a way of expressing that "excess of meaning" present in those apprehensions of "reality" as a dialectic of "human desire," on the one side, and "cosmic appearance," on the other.[63] An historical narrative, then, can be said to be an allegorization of the experience of "within-time-ness," the figurative meaning of which is the structure of temporality. The narrative expresses a meaning "other" than that expressed in the chronicle, which is an "ordinary representation of time . . . as that 'in' which events take place." This secondary or figurative meaning is not so much "constructed" as "found" in the universal human experience of a "recollection" that promises a *future* because it finds a "sense" in every relationship between a past and a present. In the plot of the historical story, we apprehend a "figure" of the "power of recovering the 'extension' between birth and death in the work of 'repetition.' "[64]

For Ricoeur, then, narrative is more than a mode of explanation, more than a code, and much more than a vehicle for conveying information. It is not a discursive strategy or tactic that the historian may or may not use, according to some pragmatic aim or purpose. It is a means of symbolizing events without which their "historicality" cannot be indicated. One can make true statements about events without symbolizing them—as in chronicle. One can even explain these events without symbolizing them—as is done all the time in the (structural-functional) social sciences. But one cannot represent the *meaning* of historical events without symbolizing them, and this because "historicality" itself is both a reality *and* a mystery. All narratives display this mystery and at the same time foreclose any inclination to despair over the failure to solve it by revealing what might be called its form in "plot" and its content in the meaning with which the plot endows what would otherwise be *mere* event. Insofar as events and their aspects can be "explained" by the methods of the sciences, they are, it would seem, thereby shown to be neither "mysterious" nor particularly "historical." What can be explained about historical events is precisely what constitutes their non- or a-historical aspect. What remains after events have been explained is both "historical" and "meaningful" insofar as it can be understood. And this remainder is understandable insofar as it can be "grasped" in a symbolization, that is, shown to have the kind of meaning with which plots endow stories.

62. P. Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," in *ibid.*, 233.
63. *Idem.*
64. Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," 178–184.

It is the success of narrative in revealing the meaning, coherence, or significance of events that attests to the legitimacy of its practice in historiography. And it is the success of historiography in narrativizing sets of historical events that attests to the "realism" of narrative itself. In the kind of symbolization embodied in the historical narrative, human beings have a discursive instrument by which to assert (meaningfully) that the world of human actions is both real and mysterious, that is to say, is mysteriously real (which is not the same thing as saying that it is a real mystery); that what cannot be *explained* is in principle capable of being *understood*; and that, finally, this understanding is nothing other than its representation in the form of a narrative.

There is, then, a certain necessity in the relationship between the narrative, conceived as a symbolic or symbolizing discursive structure, and the representation of specifically historical events. This necessity arises from the fact that human events are or were products of human actions and these actions have produced consequences that have the structures of texts—more specifically, the structure of narrative texts. The understanding of these texts, considered as the products of actions, depends upon our being able to reproduce the processes by which they were produced, that is to say, our ability to narrativize these actions. Since these actions are in effect *lived* narrativizations, it follows that the only way to represent them is by narrative itself. Here the form of discourse is perfectly adequate to its content, since the one is narrative, the other what has been narrativized. The wedding of form with content produces the symbol, "which says more than what it says," but in historical discourse always says the same thing: "historicality."

Ricoeur's is surely the strongest claim for the adequacy of narrative to the realization of the aims of historical studies made by any recent theorist of historiography. He purports to solve the problem of the relationship between narrative and historiography by identifying the content of the former (narrativity) with the "ultimate referent" of the latter (historicality). In his subsequent identification of the content of "historicality" with a "structure of time" that cannot be represented except in a narrative mode, however, he confirms the suspicions of those who regard narrative representations of historical phenomena as being inherently "mythical" in nature. Nonetheless, in his attempt to demonstrate that historicality is a content of which narrativity is the form, he suggests that the real subject of any discussion of the *proper form* of historical discourse ultimately turns on a theory of the *true content* of "history" itself.[65]

VII

My own view is that all theoretical discussions of historiography become

65. This essay was completed and in press before I had an opportunity to take account of Ricoeur's latest work, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago, 1983). This work, in my view, puts the whole problem of narrative, not to mention philosophy of history, on a new and higher plane of discussion.

enmeshed in the ambiguity contained in the notion of "history" itself. This ambiguity does not derive from the fact that the term "history" refers both to an object of study and to an account of this object, but rather from the fact that the object of study itself can be conceived only on the basis of an equivocation. I refer of course to the equivocation contained in the notion of a general *human* past that is split into two parts, one that is supposed to be "historical," the other "unhistorical." This distinction is not of the same order as that between "human events" and "natural events," on the basis of which historical studies constitute an order of facts different from those studied in the natural sciences. The differences between a life lived in nature and one lived in culture are sufficient grounds for honoring the distinction between natural events and human events on the basis of which historical studies and the human sciences in general can proceed to work out methods adequate to the investigation of the latter kind of events. And once an order of generally human events is conceptualized, and this order is further divided into human events past and human events present, it is surely legitimate to inquire to what extent different methods of study may be called for in the investigation of those designated as past as against those called for in the investigation of events designated as present (in whatever sense "present" is construed).

But it is quite another matter, once this human past is postulated, to further divide *it* into an order of events that is "historical" and another that is "nonhistorical." For this is to suggest that there are two orders of humanity, one of which is more human, *because it is more historical*, than the other.

The distinction between a humanity, or kind of culture, or kind of society that is historical and another that is nonhistorical is not of the same order as the distinction between two periods of time in the development of the human species: pre-historical and historical. For this distinction does not hinge on the belief that human culture was not developing prior to the beginning of "history" or that this development was not "historical" in nature. It hinges rather on the belief that there is a point in the evolution of human culture after which its development can be represented in a discourse different from that in which this evolution in its earlier phase can be represented. As is well-known and generally conceded, the possibility of representing the development of certain cultures in a specifically "historical" kind of discourse is based on the circumstance that these cultures produced, preserved, and used a certain kind of record, written records. But the possibility of representing the development of certain cultures in a specifically historical discourse is not sufficient grounds for regarding cultures whose development cannot be similarly represented, because of their failure to produce these kinds of records, as continuing to persist in the condition of "prehistory."

And this for at least two reasons: one is that the human species does not enter into "history" only "in part." The very notion of "human species" implies that if any part of it exists "in history" the whole of it does. Second, the notion of the entrance "into history" of any part of the human species could not properly be conceived as a purely intramural operation, a transformation that

certain cultures or societies undergo that is merely internal to themselves. On the contrary, what the entrance into history of certain cultures implies is that their relationships to those cultures that remained "outside" of history have undergone radical transformations, so that what had formerly been a process of relatively autonomous or autochthonous relationships now becomes a process of progressive interaction and integration between the so-called "historical" cultures and those "non-historical." This is that panorama of the domination of the so-called "higher" civilizations over their "neolithic" subject cultures and the "expansion" of Western civilization over the globe that is the subject of the standard narrative of the world-history written from the point of view of "historical" cultures. But this "history" of "historical" cultures is by its very nature, as a panorama of domination and expansion, at the same time the *documentation* of the "history" of those supposedly "non-historical" cultures and peoples who are the victims of this process. So that, we could conclude, the very records that make possible the writing of a history of historical cultures are also the records that make possible the writing of a history of the so-called "non-historical" cultures. It follows that the distinction between historical and non-historical fractions of the human past, based on the distinction between the kinds of records available for their study, is as tenuous as the notion that there are two kinds of a specifically human past, the one that can be investigated by "historical" methods, the other investigatable by some "non-historical" method, such as anthropology, ethnology, ethnomethodology, or the like.

Insofar, then, as any notion of "history" presupposes a distinction within the common human past between a segment or order of events that is specifically "historical" and another order that is "non-historical," this notion contains an equivocation, because insofar as the notion of "history" indicates a generally human past, it cannot gain in specificity by dividing this past into an "historical history" on the one side and a "non-historical history" on the other. In this formulation, the notion of "history" simply replicates the ambiguity contained in the failure to distinguish adequately between an object of study (the human past) on the one side and discourse about this object on the other.

Does the recognition of the tissue of ambiguities and equivocations contained in the notion of "history" provide a basis for understanding recent discussions of the question of narrative in historical theory? I noted earlier that the notion of narrative itself contains an ambiguity of the same kind as that typically found in the use of the term "history." Narrative is at once a mode of discourse, a manner of speaking, and the product produced by the adoption of this mode of discourse. When this mode of discourse is used to represent "real" events, as in "historical narrative," the result is a kind of discourse with specific linguistic, grammatical, and rhetorical features, that is, "narrative history." Both the felt adequacy of this mode of discourse for the representation of specifically "historical" events and its inadequacy as perceived by those who impute to narrativity the status of an "ideology" derive from the difficulty of

conceptualizing the difference between a manner of speaking and the mode of representation produced by its enactment.

The fact that narrative is the mode of discourse common to both "historical" and "non-historical" cultures and that it predominates in both mythic and fictional discourse makes it suspect as a manner of speaking about "real" events. The non-narrative manner of speaking common to the physical sciences seems more appropriate for the representation of "real" events. But here the notion of what constitutes a "real" event turns, not on the distinction between "true" and "false" (which is a distinction that belongs to the order of discourses, not to the order of events), but rather on the distinction between "real" and "imaginary" (which belongs both to the order of events and to the order of discourses). One can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less "true" for being "imaginary." It all depends upon how one construes the function of the faculty of imagination in human nature.

So, too, with respect to narrative representations of reality, especially when, as in historical discourses, these representations are of "the human past." How else can any "past," which is by definition comprised of events, processes, structures, and so forth that are considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an "imaginary" way? Is it not possible that the question of narrative in any discussion of historical theory is always finally about the function of imagination in the production of a specifically human truth?

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