

WILEY

Wesleyan University

Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity

Author(s): David Carr

Source: *History and Theory*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (May, 1986), pp. 117-131

Published by: Wiley for Wesleyan University

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505301>

Accessed: 06-11-2017 20:54 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505301?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Wesleyan University, Wiley are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *History and Theory*

NARRATIVE AND THE REAL WORLD: AN ARGUMENT FOR CONTINUITY

DAVID CARR

What is the relation between a narrative and the events it depicts? This is one of the questions that have been debated by many contributors to the lively interdisciplinary discussion of narrative in recent years.

The debate concerns the truthfulness, in a very broad sense of that term, of narrative accounts. Traditional narrative histories claim to tell us what really happened. Fictional narratives portray events that of course by definition never happened, but they are often said to be true-to-life; that is, to tell us how certain events might have occurred if they had really happened. Some histories may be inaccurate and some stories *invraisemblable*, but nothing in principle prevents such narratives from succeeding at their aim. Indeed, we take certain exemplary cases to have succeeded brilliantly.

But against this common-sense view a strong coalition of philosophers, literary theorists, and historians has risen up of late, declaring it mistaken and naive. Real events simply do not hang together in a narrative way, and if we treat them as if they did we are being *untrue* to life. Thus not merely for lack of evidence or of verisimilitude, but in virtue of its very form, any narrative account will present us with a distorted picture of the events it relates. One result for literary theory is a view of narrative fiction which stresses its autonomy and separateness from the real world. One result for the theory of history is skepticism about narrative historical accounts.

I want to argue against this coalition, not so much for the common-sense view as for the deeper and more interesting truth which I think underlies it. Narrative is not merely a possibly successful way of describing events; its structure inheres in the events themselves. Far from being a formal distortion of the events it relates, a narrative account is an extension of one of their primary features. While others argue for the radical discontinuity between narrative and reality, I shall maintain not only their continuity but also their community of form.

Let us look briefly at the discontinuity view before going on to argue against it.

I

In the theory of history one might expect such a view from those, from the positivists to the *Annales* historians, who believe narrative history has always

contained elements of fiction that must now be exorcised by a new scientific history. The irony is that skepticism about narrative history should have grown up among those who lavish on it the kind of attention reserved for an object of admiration and affection. Consider the work of Louis Mink. Though he speaks of narrative as a “mode of comprehension” and a “cognitive instrument,” and seems at first to defend narrative history against reductionists like Hempel, in the end he comes to a similar conclusion, namely that traditional history is prevented by its very form from realizing its epistemic pretensions. Narrative structure, particularly the closure and configuration given to the sequence of events by a story’s beginning, middle, and end, is a structure derived from the act of telling the story, not from the events themselves. In the end the term “narrative history” is an oxymoron: “As historical it claims to represent, through its form, part of the real complexity of the past, but as narrative it is a product of imaginative construction which cannot defend its claim to truth by any accepted procedure of argument or authentication.”¹ “Stories are not lived but told,” he says. “Life has no beginnings, middles and ends. . . . Narrative qualities are transferred from art to life.”²

If Mink arrives only reluctantly at such skeptical conclusions, Hayden White embraces them boldly. Like Mink he raises the question of narrative’s capacity to *represent*. Inquiring after “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” he seems clearly to conclude that in this respect its value is nil. “What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified,” he asks, “by the fantasy that *real* events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherence of a story?”³ “Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories. . . ? Or does it present itself more in the way that the annals and chronicles suggest, either as a mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude?” For White the answer is clear: “The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries.” It is precisely annals and chronicles that offer us the “paradigms of ways that reality offers itself to perception.”⁴

Mink and White are led in this skeptical direction in part by their shared belief in the close relation between historical and fictional narratives; and if we look at some of the most influential studies of literary narrative in recent years, we find a similar view of the relation between narrative and the real. It is shared by structuralists and non-structuralists alike. Frank Kermode, in his influential study *The Sense of An Ending*, puts it this way: “In ‘making sense’ of the world we . . . feel a need . . . to experience that concordance of beginning, middle

1. Louis O. Mink, “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument” in *The Writing of History*, ed. R. H. Canary and H. Kozicki (Madison, 1978), 145.

2. Mink, “History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension,” *New Literary History* 1 (1970), 557f.

3. Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago, 1981), 4.

4. *Ibid.*, 23.

and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions. . . .”⁵ But such fictions “degenerate,” he says, into “myths” whenever we actually believe them or ascribe their narrative properties to the real, that is, “whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive.”⁶ In his useful recent presentation of structuralist theories of narrative, Seymour Chatman, also speaking of the beginning-middle-end structure, insists that it applies “to the narrative, to story-events as narrated, rather than to . . . actions themselves, simply because such terms are meaningless in the real world.”⁷ In this he echoes his mentor Roland Barthes. In his famous introduction to the structural analysis of narrative, Barthes says that “art knows no static.” In other words, in a story everything has its place in a structure while the extraneous has been eliminated; and that in this it differs from “life,” in which everything is “scrambled messages” (communications brouillées).⁸ Thus, like Mink, Barthes raises the old question about the relation between “art” and “life,” and arrives at the same conclusion: the one is constitutionally incapable of *representing* the other.

Paul Ricoeur draws together the theory of history and of literature in his recent *Time and Narrative* to form a complex account of narrative which is supposed to be neutral with respect to the distinction between history and fiction. For Ricoeur, as for White, the problem of representation is of central importance: the key concept in his account is that of *mimesis*, derived from Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

By retaining rather than rejecting this concept Ricoeur’s theory seems at first to run counter to the emphasis we have found in others on the *discontinuity* between narrative and the “real world.” But in elaborating his complete theory of the mimetic relation he reveals himself to be much closer to Mink, White, and the structuralists than he at first appears. He does not go so far as to say with them that the real world is merely sequential, maintaining instead that it has a “pre-narrative structure” of elements that lend themselves to narrative configuration.⁹

But this prefiguration is not itself narrative structure, and it does not save us from what Ricoeur seems to regard as a sort of constitutional disarray attached to the experience of time, which in itself is “confused, unformed and, at the limit, mute.”¹⁰ From a study of Augustine’s *Confessions* he concludes that the experience of time is characterized essentially by “discordance.” Literature, in narrative form, brings concord to this “aporia” by means of the invention of a plot. Narrative is a “synthesis of the heterogenous” in which disparate elements of the human world — “agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results,

5. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of An Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London, 1966), 35f.

6. *Ibid.*, 39.

7. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, 1978), 47.

8. Roland Barthes, “Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits,” *Communication* 8 (1966), 7.

9. Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit* (Paris, 1983), I, 113.

10. *Ibid.*, 14.

etc.”¹¹ — are brought together and harmonized. Like metaphor, to which Ricoeur has also devoted an important study, narrative is a “semantic innovation” in which something new is brought into the world by means of language.¹² Instead of describing the world it *re*describes it. Metaphor, he says, is the capacity of “seeing-as.”¹³ Narrative opens us to “the realm of the ‘as if’.”¹⁴

So in the end for Ricoeur narrative structure is as separate from the “real world” as it is for the other authors we quoted. Ricoeur echoes Mink, White, *et al.* when he says, “The ideas of beginning, middle, and end are not taken from experience: they are not traits of real action but effects of poetic ordering.”¹⁵ If the role of narrative is to introduce something new into the world, and what it introduces is the synthesis of the heterogeneous, then presumably it attaches to the events of the world a form they do not otherwise have. A story *re*describes the world; in other words, it describes it *as if* it were what presumably, in fact, it is not.¹⁶

This brief survey of important recent views of narrative shows not only that narrative structure is being considered strictly as a feature of literary and historical *texts*, but also that that structure is regarded as belonging *only* to such texts. The various approaches to the problem of representation place stories or histories on a radically different plane from the real world they profess to depict. Ricoeur’s is a fairly benign and approving view. He believes that fictional and historical narratives enlarge reality, expanding our notion of ourselves and of what is possible. Their mimesis is not imitative but creative of reality. Hayden White seems by contrast to hold a darker, more suspicious view — one which he shares with Barthes and post-structuralists such as Foucault and Deleuze. Narrative not only constitutes an escape, consolation, or diversion from reality; at worst it is an opiate — a distortion imposed from without as an instrument of power and manipulation. In either case narrative is a cultural, literary artifact at odds with the real.¹⁷

There have been some dissenters, such as the literary critic Barbara Hardy, the historian Peter Munz, and the philosopher Frederick Olafson.¹⁸ Alasdair

11. *Ibid.*, 102.

12. *Ibid.*, 11.

13. *Ibid.*, 13. See Ricoeur’s *La Métaphore vive* (Paris, 1975), 305 ff.

14. *Temps et récit*, 101.

15. *Ibid.*, 67.

16. For a more detailed critical account of Ricoeur’s book see my review-essay in *History and Theory* 23 (1984), 357-370.

17. In a recent article, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” *History and Theory* 23 (1984), 1-33, White himself gives a much more thorough account of these developments than I have given here. Concerning his presentation, which is otherwise a model of scholarship and synthesis, I have three reservations: modesty apparently prevents the author from documenting his own important role in the developments he describes; he generally approves of the trends I shall be criticizing; and he has not, I believe, properly assessed the position of Ricoeur, perhaps because *Temps et récit* was not available to him.

18. Barbara Hardy, “Towards a Poetics of Fiction: An Approach Through Narrative” in *Novel* (1968), 5f; and *Tellers and Listeners: The Narrative Imagination* (London, 1975); Peter Munz, *The Shapes of Time* (Middletown, 1977); Frederick Olafson, *The Dialectic of Action* (Chicago, 1979). Several German theorists have stressed the continuity of experience and narrative. See Wilhelm Schapp, *In Geschichten Verstrickt* (Wiesbaden, 2nd. ed., 1979); Hermann Lübbe, *Bewusstsein in Geschichten*

MacIntyre presents a very different view in *After Virtue*, and I shall have more to say about him later. It is clear, however, that what I have called the discontinuity theory is held by some of the most important people writing about narrative in history and fiction. I would now like to show why I think this view mistaken.

II

My first criticism is that it rests on a serious equivocation. What is it that narrative, on the discontinuity view, is supposed to distort? “Reality” is one of the terms used. But what reality is meant? Sometimes it seems that the “real” world must be the physical world, which is supposed to be random and haphazard, or, alternatively and contradictorily, to be rigorously ordered along causal lines; but in any case it is supposed to be totally indifferent to human concerns. Things just happen in meaningless sequence, like the ticking clock mentioned by Frank Kermode. When asked what it says “we agree that it says *tick-tock*. By this fiction we humanize it. . . . Of course, it is we who provide the fictional difference between the two sounds; *tick* is our word for a physical beginning, *tock* our word for an end.”¹⁹

This ingenious example merely confused the issue, nonetheless, since it is not primarily physical reality but human reality, including the very activity of “humanizing” physical events, which is portrayed in stories and histories and against which narrative must be measured if we are to judge the validity of the discontinuity view. Can we say of human reality that it is mere sequence, one thing after the other, as White seems to suggest? Here we would do well to recall what some philosophers have shown about our experience of the passage of time. According to Husserl even the most passive experience involves not only the retention of the just past but also the tacit anticipation, or what he calls protention, of the future. His point is not simply that we have the psychological capacity to project and to remember. His claim is the conceptual one that we cannot even experience anything as happening, as present, except against the background of what it succeeds and what we anticipate will succeed it.²⁰ Our very capacity to experience, to be aware of what *is*—“reality as it presents itself to experience,” in Hayden White’s words—spans future and past.

Husserl’s analysis of time-experience is in this respect the counterpart of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of the notion of sensation in classical empiricism and his claim that the figure-background scheme is basic in spatial perception.²¹ He draws on the Gestalt psychologists, who were in turn indebted to Husserl. The supposedly punctual and distinct units of sensation must be grasped as a configu-

(Freiburg, 1972); Karlheinz Stierle, “Erfahrung und narrative Form” in *Theorie und Erzählung in der Geschichte*, ed. J. Kocka and T. Nipperdey (Munich, 1979), 85ff.

19. Kermode, 44f.

20. Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, transl. J. S. Churchill (Bloomington, 1964), 40ff.

21. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. C. Smith (New York, 1962), 3ff.

ration to be experienced at all. Merleau-Ponty concludes that, far from being basic units of experience, sensations are highly abstract products of analysis. On the basis of Husserl's analysis of time-experience, one would have to say the same of the idea of a "mere" or "pure" sequence of isolated events. It is this that proves to be a fiction, in this case a theoretical fiction: perhaps we can conceive of it, but it is not real for our experience. As we encounter them, even at our most passive, events are charged with the significance they derive from our retentions and protentions.

If this is true of our most passive experience, it is all the more true of our active lives, in which we quite explicitly consult past experience, envisage the future, and view the present as a passage between the two. Whatever we encounter within our experience functions as instrument or obstacle to our plans, expectations, and hopes. Whatever else "life" may be, it is hardly a structureless sequence of isolated events.

It might be objected that structure is not necessarily narrative structure. But is there not a kinship between the means-end structure of action and the beginning-middle-end structure of narrative? In action we are always in the midst of something, caught in the suspense of contingency which is supposed to find its resolution in the completion of our project. To be sure, a narrative unites many actions to form a plot. The resulting whole is often still designated, however, to be an action of larger scale: coming of age, conducting a love affair, or solving a murder. The structure of action, small-scale and large, is common to art and to life.

What can the proponents of the discontinuity view possibly mean, then, when they say that life has no beginnings, middles, and ends? It is not merely that they are forgetting death, as MacIntyre points out,²² and birth for that matter. They are forgetting all the other less definitive but still important forms of closure and structure to be found along the path from the one to the other. Are they saying that a moment in which, say, an action is inaugurated is no real beginning simply because it has other moments before it, and that after the action is accomplished time (or life) goes on and other things happen? Perhaps they are contrasting this with the absoluteness of the beginning and end of a novel, which begins on page one and ends on the last page with "the end." But surely it is the interrelation of the events portrayed, not the story as a sequence of sentences or utterances, that is relevant here. What I am saying is that the means-end structure of action displays some of the features of the beginning-middle-end structure which the discontinuity view says is absent in real life.

Thus the events of life are anything but a mere sequence; they constitute rather a complex structure of temporal configurations that interlock and receive their definition and their meaning from within action itself. To be sure, the structure of action may not be tidy. Things do not always work out as planned, but this only adds an element of the same contingency and suspense to life that we find in stories. It hardly justifies claiming that ordinary action is a chaos of unrelated items.

22. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1981), 197.

There may, however, be a different way of stating the discontinuity view which does not involve the implausible claim that human events have no temporal structure. A story is not just a temporally-organized sequence of events—even one whose structure is that of beginning, middle, and end. To our concept of story belongs not only a progression of events but also a story-teller and an audience to whom the story is told. Perhaps it may be thought that this imparts to the events related in a story a kind of organization that is in principle denied to the events of ordinary action.

Three features of narrative might seem to justify this claim. First, in a good story, to use Barthes' image, all the extraneous noise or static is cut out. That is, we the audience are told by the story-teller just what is necessary to "further the plot." A selection is made of all the events and actions the characters may engage in, and only a small minority finds its way into the story. In life, by contrast, everything is left in; all the static is there.

This first point leads to a second. The selection is possible because the story-teller knows the plot in a way both audience and characters do not (or may not). This knowledge provides the principle for excluding the extraneous. The narrative voice, as Hayden White says,²³ is the voice of authority, especially in relation to the reader or listener. The latter is in a position of voluntary servitude regarding what will be revealed and when. Equally importantly, the narrative voice is an *ironic* voice, at least potentially, since the story-teller knows the real as well as the intended consequences of the characters' actions. This irony is thus embodied primarily in the relation between story-teller and character; but it is related to the audience as well, since their expectations, like the characters', can be rudely disappointed.

The ironic stance of the story-teller can be seen as a function (and this is the third point) of his or her temporal position in relation to the events of the story. Conventionally this is the *ex post* position, the advantage of hindsight shared by the historian and (usually) the teller of fictional stories. As Danto points out, this position permits descriptions of events derived from their relation to later events and thus often closed to participants in the events themselves.²⁴ This standpoint after the story-events can just as well be seen, in Mink's preferred fashion, as a standpoint *outside* or *above* the events which takes them all in at a glance and sees their interrelation.²⁵ This apparent freedom from the constraints of time, or at least of following the events, sometimes expresses itself in the disparity between the order of events and the order of their telling. Flashbacks and flashforwards exhibit in no uncertain terms the authority of the narrative voice over both characters and audience.

In sum, the concept of story, as Scholes and Kellogg said, involves not just a sequence of unfolding events but the existence of three distinguishable points

23. Hayden White, "The Structure of Historical Narrative," *Clio* 1 (1972), 12ff.

24. Arthur Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, 1965), 143ff.

25. Mink, "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension." 557ff.

of view on those events: those of story-teller, audience, and characters.²⁶ To be sure, these may seem to coincide in some cases: a story may be told from the viewpoint of a character, or in a character's voice. Here even the audience knows no more or less than the character and all points of view seem identical; but even a first-person account is usually narrated after the fact, and the selection process still depends on the difference in point of view between participant and teller. In any case the very possibility of the disparity between the three points of view is enough to establish this point—that the events, experiences, and actions of a story may have a sense, and thus a principle of organization, which is excluded from the purview of the characters in the story.

As participants and agents in our own lives, according to this view, we are forced to swim with events and take things as they come. We are constrained by the present and denied the authoritative, retrospective point of view of the story-teller. Thus the real difference between “art” and “life” is not organization vs. chaos, but rather the absence in life of that point of view which transforms events into a story by *telling* them. Telling is not just a verbal activity and not just a recounting of events but one informed by a certain kind of superior knowledge.

There is, no doubt, much truth in this analysis, and as an argument for the discontinuity view it is certainly superior to the claim that human events form a meaningless sequence. Nonetheless this argument, like its predecessor, neglects some important features of “real life.”

The key to this neglect is a mistaken sense of our being “confined to the present.” The present is precisely a point of view or vantage point which opens onto or gives access to future and past. This I take to be the sense of the Husserlian analysis. Even in the relatively passive experience of hearing a melody, to use his example, we do not simply sit and wait for stimuli to hit us. We grasp a configuration extending into the future which gives to each of the sounding notes their sense. Thus present and past figure in our experience as a function of what will be.

The teleological nature of action, of course, lends it the same future-oriented character. Not only do our acts and our movements, present and past, derive their sense from the projected end they serve; our surroundings function as sphere of operations and the objects we encounter figure in our experience in furtherance of (or hindrance to) our purposes. Indeed, in our active lives it could be said that the focus of our attention is not the present but the future—as Heidegger says, not on the tools but on the work to be done.²⁷ It has been noted by Alfred Schutz that action has, temporally speaking, the quasi-retrospective character which corresponds to the future perfect tense: the elements and phases of an action, though they unfold in time, are viewed from the perspective of their having been completed.²⁸

26. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York, 1966), 240ff.

27. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. J. Marcquarrie and E. Robinson (New York, 1962), 99.

28. Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, transl. G. Walsh and F. Lehnert (Evanston, 1967), 61.

If this is true when we are absorbed in action, it is all the more true of the reflective or deliberative detachment involved—not only in the formulating of projects and plans but also in the constant revision and reassessment required as we go along and are forced to deal with changing circumstances. The essence of deliberative activity is to anticipate the future and lay out the whole action as a unified sequence of steps and stages, interlocking means and ends. In all this it can hardly be said that our concern is limited to the present. Nor can it be said that no selection takes place. To be sure, the noise or static is not eliminated, but it is recognized as static and pushed into the background.

The obvious rejoinder here, of course, is that the future involved in all these cases is only the envisaged or projected future, and that the agent has only a quasi-hindsight, an as-if retrospection at his or her disposal. What is essential to the story-teller's position is the advantage of real hindsight, a real freedom from the constraint of the present assured by occupying a position after, above or outside the events narrated. The story-teller is situated in that enviable position beyond all the unforeseen circumstances that intrude, all the unintended consequences of our action that plague our days and plans.

Of course this is true; the agent does not occupy a real future with respect to current action. My point is simply that action seems to involve, indeed quite essentially, the adoption of an anticipated future-retrospective point of view on the present. We know we are in the present and that the unforeseen can happen; but the very essence of action is to strive to overcome that limitation by foreseeing as much as possible. It is not only novelists and historians who view events in terms of their relation to later events, to use Danto's formulation of the narrative point of view; we all do it all the time, in everyday life. Action is thus a kind of oscillation between two points of view on the events we are living through and the things we are doing. Not only do we not simply sit back and let things happen to us; for the most part, or at least in large measure, our negotiation with the future is successful. We are, after all, able to act.

What I am saying, then, is that we are constantly striving, with more or less success, to occupy the story-tellers' position with respect to our own lives. Lest this be thought merely a far-fetched metaphor, consider how important, in the reflective and deliberative process, is the activity of literally telling, to others and to ourselves, what we are doing. When asked, "What are you doing?" we may be expected to come up with a story, complete with beginning, middle, and end, an accounting or recounting which is description and justification all at once.

The fact that we often need to tell such a story even to ourselves in order to become clear on what we are about brings to light two important things. The first is that such narrative activity, even apart from its social role, is a constitutive part of action, and not just an embellishment, commentary, or other incidental accompaniment. The second is that we sometimes assume, in a sense, the point of view of audience to whom the story is told, even with regard to our own action, as well as the two points of view already mentioned—those of agent or character and of story-teller.

Louis Mink was thus operating with a totally false distinction when he said

that stories are not lived but told. They are told in being lived and lived in being told. The actions and sufferings of life can be viewed as a process of telling ourselves stories, listening to those stories, acting them out, or living them through. I am thinking here only of living one's own life, quite apart from both the cooperative and antagonistical social dimension of our action which is even more obviously intertwined with narrative. Sometimes we must change the story to accommodate the events; sometimes we change the events, by acting, to accommodate the story. It is not the case, as Mink seems to suggest, that we first live and act and then afterward, seated around the fire as it were, tell about what we have done, thereby creating something entirely new thanks to a new perspective. The retrospective view of the narrator, with its capacity for seeing the whole in all its irony, is not in irreconcilable opposition to the agent's view but is an extension and refinement of a viewpoint inherent in action itself. Mink and the others are right, of course, to believe that narration constitutes something, creates meaning rather than just reflecting or imitating something that exists independently of it. Narration, nevertheless intertwined as it is with action, does this in the course of life itself—not merely after the fact, at the hands of authors, in the pages of books.

In this sense the narrative activity I am referring to is practical before it becomes cognitive or aesthetic in history and fiction. We can also call it ethical or moral in the broad sense used by Alasdair MacIntyre and derived ultimately from Aristotle. This is to say that narration in our sense is constitutive not only of action and experience but also of the self which acts and experiences. Rather than a merely temporally persisting substance which underlies and supports the changing effects of time, like a thing in relation to its properties, I am the subject of a life-story which is constantly being told and retold in the process of being lived. I am also the principal teller of this tale, and belong as well to the audience to which it is told. The ethical-practical problem of self-identity and self-coherence may be seen as the problem of unifying these three roles. MacIntyre is probably right to attack the ideal of self-*authorship* or authenticity as an idol of modern individualism and self-centeredness.²⁹ But the problem of coherence cannot always be settled, as he seems to think, by the security of a story laid out in advance by society and its roles. My identity as a self may depend on which story I choose and whether I can make it hang together in the manner of its narrator, if not its author. The idea of life as a meaningless sequence, which we denounced earlier as an inaccurate description, may have significance if regarded as the constant possibility of fragmentation, disintegration, and dissolution which haunts and threatens the self.

III

But what has all this to do with history? We have reproached the discontinuity theory for misunderstanding "human reality," but our sense of this latter term

29. MacIntyre, 191.

seems tailored, as the conclusion of the previous section indicates, to *individual* experience, action, and existence. Indeed, our recourse to certain phenomenological themes may suggest that what we have said is methodologically tied to a first-person point of view. History, by contrast, deals primarily with social units, and with individuals only to the extent that their lives and actions are important for the society to which they belong. Is the narrative conception of experience, action, and existence developed in the previous section at all relevant to “human reality” in its specifically social forms?

I think it is, and in this section I shall present a brief sketch of how this is so. There is an obvious sense, of course, in which our conception of narrative is social right from the start. The story-telling function, whether metaphorical or literal, is a social activity, and though we spoke of the self as audience to its own narration, the story of one’s life and activity is told as much to others as to oneself. On our view the self is itself an interplay of roles, but clearly the individual is constituted in interpersonal transaction as well as intrapersonal reflection. It is one thing to speak of the social construction of the self, however, and another to inquire into the make-up of social entities as such.

To consider this question it is not necessary to take up the attitude of the social scientist or historian observing something from the outside. We are also participants in groups, and our best understanding of their nature may come from a reflection on what it means to participate. What strikes me about social life is the extent to which an individual takes part in experiences and engages in actions whose proper subject is not the individual himself or herself but that of the group. To inhabit a territory, to organize politically and economically for its cultivation and civilization, to experience a natural or human threat and rise to meet it—these are experiences and actions usually not properly attributable to me alone, or to me, you, and the others individually. They belong rather to us: it is not my experience but *ours*, not *I* who act but *we* who act in concert. To say that *we* build a house is not equivalent to saying that I build a house, and you build a house, and he builds a house, and so on. To be sure, not all linguistic uses of *we* carry this sense of concerted action, division of labor, distributed tasks, and a shared end. In some cases the *we* is just short-hand for a collection of individual actions. But social life does involve certain very important cases in which individuals, by participation, attribute their experiences and acts to a larger subject or agent of which they are a part.

If this is so, it may not be necessary to give up the first-person approach, but only to explore its plural rather than its singular form in order to move from the individual to the social. If we make this move, we find many parallels to our analysis of the individual’s experience and action. *We* have an experience in common when *we* grasp a sequence of events as a temporal configuration such that its present phase derives its significance from its relation to a common past and future. To engage in a common action is likewise to constitute a succession of phases articulated as steps and stages, subprojects, means and ends. Social human time, like individual human time, is constructed into configured sequences which make up the events and projects of our common action and experience.

As before, I think the structure of social time can be called a narrative structure, not only because it has the same sort of closure and configuration we found at the individual level, but also because this very structure is again made possible by a kind of reflexivity which is comparable to that of a narrative voice. The temporal sequence must be brought under a prospective-retrospective grasp which gives it its configuration, and lends to its phases their sense of presenting a commonly experienced event or of realizing a common goal. In the case of groups, however, the division of labor, necessary for carrying out common projects, may be characteristic of the narrative structure itself. That is, the interplay of roles — narrator, audience, and character — may here be literally divided among participants in the group. Certain individuals may speak on behalf of, or in the name of, the group, and articulate for the others what “we” are experiencing or doing. The resulting “story” must of course be believed or accepted by the audience to whom it is addressed if its members are to act out or live through as “characters” the story that is told.

In the last section I spoke of the temporal-narrative organization not only of experiences and actions but also of the self who experiences and acts. As the unity of many experiences and actions, the self is constituted as the subject of a life-story. So too with the constitution of certain kinds of groups which outlive particular common experiences and actions to acquire a stable existence over time. Not all groups are of this sort: collections of individuals make up groups simply by sharing objective traits such as location, race, sex, or economic class. But groups of a very special and socially and historically important sort are constituted when individuals regard each other in just such a way that they use the *we* in describing what is happening to them, what they are doing, and who they are. This is, of course, the sort of group for which the word “community” is reserved. In some of the most interesting cases, merely objective traits like sex, race, or class become the basis for the transformation of the one sort of group into the other: individuals recognize that it is *as* a race, sex, or class that they are oppressed or disadvantaged. What is grasped as common experience can be met by common action.

A community in this sense exists by virtue of a story which is articulated and accepted, which typically concerns the group’s origins and its destiny, and which interprets what is happening now in the light of these two temporal poles. Nor is the prospect of death irrelevant in such cases, since the group must deal not only with possible external threats of destruction but also with its own centrifugal tendency to fragment. Again we can say that the narrative function is practical before it is cognitive or aesthetic; it renders concerted action possible and also works toward the self-preservation of the subject which acts. Indeed, we must go even further and say that it is literally *constitutive* of the group. As before, narrative is not a description or account of something that already exists independently of it and which it merely helps along. Rather, narration, as the unity of story, story-teller, audience, and protagonist, is what constitutes the community, its activities, and its coherence in the first place.

In this paper I have begun with a discussion of the individual’s action, ex-

perience, and identity and have proceeded from there to the community, treating the latter as an analogue of the former. Since the story-telling and story-hearing metaphor, as already remarked, is more directly appropriate to the group than to the individual, it could be said that our order might better have been reversed. We might have presented the individual self as a kind of community of tellers, listeners, and characters, fused in their comprehension and execution of a common story. I find this interesting, but it could prove misleading; it is a special kind of story that is relevant here—the autobiographical one in which the issue is the unity and coherence of a subject who is identical with both the teller and the hearer of the story. The unity and coherence of one's own self, with all its attendant problems, is a matter closest to all of us. For this reason it serves as the best point of departure for a comparison designed to cast light on social existence.

Some may feel uncomfortable with this revival of the notion of the collective subject. While the idea that the community is a person “writ large” has strong historical precedents, notably in Plato and Hegel, it is regarded with great suspicion today. Everyone recognizes that in ordinary speech we often attribute personal qualities and activities to groups, but few are willing to grant this more than the status of a *façon de parler*. Even those who favor holism over individualism in debates about the methodology of the social sciences generally give a wide berth to any notion of social subjectivity.³⁰ It is the individualists who insist on the purposeful, rational, and conscious subject as the key to what goes on in society, but they reserve this conception strictly for the individual person; holists stress the degree to which the individual's behavior is imbedded in non-intentional contexts of a structural and causal sort.

There are no doubt many and very interesting sorts of reasons why the idea of social subjectivity is not taken seriously, especially by the Anglo-Saxon mind, but one reason is doubtless the way this idea has been presented, or is thought to have been presented, by some of its advocates. The well-known caricature of Hegel's philosophy of history has the world spirit single-mindedly pursuing its own career by cunningly exploiting individuals for purposes unknown to them and usually opposed to the ones they themselves pursue. More recently, Sartre envisages the transcendence of the “seriality” of individual existence in the “group-in-fusion,” for which the storming of the Bastille serves as the paradigm.³¹ Confronted with these cases, Anglo-Saxon individualists cry alarm, since individuals are either unwitting and manipulated dupes or they are swept up in an unruly mob which obliterates their individuality altogether. Viewed with a combination of disapproval and disbelief, these notions are denied any importance or usefulness for the understanding of society and history.

But what I am talking about is really very different from either of those notions, which I agree must be rejected as paradigms. In abandoning and subverting

30. See Ernst Gellner, “Explanation in History,” in *Modes of Individualism and Collectivism*, ed. J. O'Neill (London, 1973), 251; and Anthony Quinton, “Social Objects” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 76 (1975-76), 17.

31. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, (Paris, 1960), I, 391ff.

individual subjectivity, these views do not take us from the I to a *we* but merely to a larger-scale I. What I have in mind here fits not the caricature but the genuine insight behind Hegel's notion of *Geist*, which he describes, when he first introduces it in the *Phenomenology*, as "an I that is We, a We that is I."³² In describing the community of mutual recognition, Hegel insists as much on the plurality as on the subjectivity and agency of the social unit, and the community is not opposed to the individuals who make it up but exists precisely by virtue of their conscious acknowledgment of each other and consequently of it. Hegel also has a very healthy sense of the fragility and riskiness of this sort of community: it is born as a resolution of the conflict among its independent-minded members, and it never really overcomes the internal threat to its cohesion which is posed by their sense of independence. The *Phenomenology* is the account of the resulting drama in many of its possible social and historical variations. This account has a *narrative* structure: a community exists not only as a development, but also through the reflexive grasp of that development, when its members assume the common *we* of mutual recognition.

For all the objections that may be raised against the idea of a plural subject, the fact is that in the sorts of cases I have described, we do say *we* to each other, and we mean something real by it. Moreover, much of our lives and much of what we do is predicated on its reality for us. By stressing our use of language and our sense of participation I hope to make it clear that I am advancing not a straightforward ontological claim about the real existence of such social entities, but rather a reflexive account based on the individuals that compose and constitute them. Furthermore the term "community" as I am using it has a variable application, from the nation-states of modern history to the many economic, linguistic, and ethnic groups that often stand in conflict with them. I do not maintain, as Hegel may have thought or hoped, that such communities fit inside each other in some hierarchical order. Conflict may be inevitable, there may be no *us* without a *them*. As for individuals, obviously many of their personal conflicts may arise from conflicting loyalties to the different communities they may belong to.

To sum up: a community exists where a narrative account exists of a *we* which persists through its experiences and actions. Such an account exists when it gets articulated or formulated—perhaps by only one or a few of the group's members—by reference to the *we* and is accepted or subscribed to by others.

It may be thought that in saying this I have so watered down the idea of a plural subject that it loses its interest. It seems now to exist only as a projection in the minds of individuals, who are the real entities after all in my account. If I have said that the *we* is constituted as the subject of a story in and through the telling of that story, remember that I have said exactly the same thing about the I. If the narrative that constitutes the individual self is at least partly social in origin, then the I owes its narrative existence as much to the We as the We

32. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. A. V. Miller (Oxford, 1977), 110.

does to the I. Neither the We nor the I is a *physical* reality; but they are not *fictions* either. In their own peculiar senses they are as real as anything we know.

IV

To return to narrative texts as literary artifacts, whether fictional or historical, I have tried to make good on my claim that such narratives must be regarded not as a departure from the structure of the events they depict, much less a distortion or radical transformation of them, but as an extension of their primary features. The *practical* first-order narrative process that constitutes a person or a community can become a second-order narrative whose subject is unchanged but whose interest is primarily cognitive or aesthetic. This change in interest may also bring about a change in content — for example, an historian may tell a story about a community which is very different from the story the community (through its leaders, journalists, and others) tells about itself. The form, nonetheless, remains the same.

Thus I am not claiming that second-order narratives, particularly in history, simply mirror or reproduce the first-order narratives that constitute their subject-matter. Not only can they change and improve on the story; they can also affect the reality they depict — and here I agree with Ricoeur — by enlarging its view of its possibilities. While histories can do this for communities, fictions can do it for individuals. But I disagree that the narrative *form* is what is produced in these literary genres in order to be imposed on a non-narrative reality — it is in envisaging new content, new ways of telling and living stories, and new kinds of stories, that history and fiction can be both truthful and creative in the best sense.³³

University of Ottawa

33. The themes in this essay are developed at greater length in my *Time, Narrative, and History* forthcoming in 1986 from Indiana University Press.