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CROSSING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION IN HISTORY AND LITERATURE

The basis of inductive reasoning lies in our use of ordinary language. When a prediction is taken as valid it is because it is in agreement with the facts of what has been observed. What is the prediction but an elaborate fiction? It ceases to be fiction when it is no longer a prediction, but rather constitutes, by general agreement, an event. The problem has always been in devising a prediction, i.e., a fiction, that accounts for all the facts. This movement from facts to fiction to event is, of course, a description of historiography, and the obverse movement begins with fictional ideas, plots and moves deliberately to fill in these fictional events with as many facts as can be economically used to move the reader into a mimetic concretization. This obverse process is, of course, the historical novel.

In this paper I shall argue that the movements from fact into fiction and fiction into fact are not isolated processes but rather are fundamentally interrelated. The common name I shall give to these processes is world-making. The development of this line of thought will take us through the work of a number of phenomenological philosophers who have contributed to its development. I shall briefly examine the contributions of Edmund Husserl, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger and augment this line of reasoning with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Nelson Goodman. The conclusion will be based on the work of Paul Ricoeur who has mastered both philosophical traditions, and much more, in presenting the most complete theory of fact, fiction and event or, in other words, the ontology of historicity in history and literature.

The phenomenologists converged on a common inquiry into the structure of human experience as it is lived. The analytical philosophers were concerned with how ordinary language is used to construct meaning. It was owing to the genius of Ricoeur that we have been able to recognize the common ground of human language and the structure of human experience as the same phenomena viewed from different perspectives.

Husserl's investigation of human consciousness (Bewusstsein) inevitably led him away from a descriptive psychology and into a fundamental inquiry into the human capacity to know and learn. In *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Con-*

sciousness he opens asking how we are conscious of the passing of time such as in hearing a song sung or a story told. His observation was that in order to understand the song or the story, at any given moment, we must remember what has come before. We no longer hear those parts of the composition but we remember them and this remembrance is important to our understanding of what is being enunciated in the present. The interesting feature for Husserl was the epistemological relationship between what we have heard in our making sense of what we are hearing. Husserl insists that this form of retention must be considered separately from general memory of the past, because in this case our understanding of what we are experiencing in the present is dependent on our retention of what has just passed. He expands on this observation to conclude that there is no consciousness of the present as present without a consciousness of the immediate past. Thus, consciousness of time is a steady stream of awareness predicated on what came immediately previous to the present and so on.

With Dilthey the arena of inquiry is not the individual consciousness but rather the individual sense of living one's life. Thus his focus is much larger than Husserl's, but he deals with life in terms similar to Husserl's consciousness.

In Dilthey's philosophy to live is always to be located in the present with the past as the context that gives meaning and the future as the necessary projection that also gives the present the meaning of purpose. The full stream of life cannot be apprehended as a whole, but only in a fragmentary series of lived experiences (Erlebnisse). Although each lived experience is only meaningful in the context of life the individual must strive to achieve a sense of the whole which Dilthey calls the coherence of life (Zusammenhang des Lebens). Particular examples of this search for the coherence of life is to be found in autobiography where the writer reflects on the lived experiences as parts of a whole. This search for coherence is a highly significant addition to our inquiry, for the concept of narrativity is thus introduced.

I would now like to turn from Husserl and Dilthey to Heidegger whose concept of *Dasein* carries with it the full significance of narrativity. Dasein is the temporal structure of being always ahead of itself since living is living in a projection toward the future, yet Dasein is also already in the world for the human has been born into a world that was in process long before the individual arrived on the scene. Human existence through language is in the past as it encounters things and others in the present.

All three philosophers have sought to depict the structure of individual human experience as it is lived. In summary, we have found that we always make sense of the present by holding on to the past and projecting before us the future which together with the past makes sense of the present. This awareness of the structure of human experience is not a mere fleeting insight. It is what Dilthey called the search for coherence. It is the continuous re-construction of a temporally extended story, our autobiography, which in the present of action gives us a part to play, a part which must join the past to the future. Our ordinary daily life is full of such stories that are

constantly merging into one another. As professor David Carr of the University of Ottawa states: «We are always living our life, no matter what we do, but we are not always trying to make sense of it as a whole»(10). We are now ready to move from the quasi-autobiography to history and literature.

If we conceive of written history as the distillation of countless stories of the life of a social group, we have moved up a level in the search for coherence to a major inquiry which is linked to group identity in a constant re-making of the past as new issues arise which must be accounted for by the writer. The life of a social group involves the identification of the members of that group with events, programs of action and beliefs that belong to the group itself, but for this to be effective it must have had a coherent articulation in narrative terms that accounts for the past, present and future. Narratives that interpret the significant events of the life of a social group are, therefore, the principal coherency building forces of any community whether they are novels or historical accounts.

I began this paper with the observation that our use of ordinary language contains the seeds of inductive reasoning since we normally go about our business observing factual information and acting upon it. Our plans of action are calculated fictions that we hope take all the facts into consideration. Now, then, I have subsequently argued that this search for coherence is also part of our process of self-awareness as we engage in quasi autobiography as a matter of course. But I have also pointed out that there is a larger arena of the search for coherence which is that of the sense of the community in which the individual lives. At that point we reached the largest coherence builders which are the multiple narratives of history and novel which give an articulation of the sense of community. But it is precisely at this juncture in our inquiry into facts and fiction that we must ask if we can merely assume ordinary language usage as a given or must we not probe deeper into this phenomena we usually take for granted. I now turn to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Early in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduces two key terms: «language-game» and «form of life». A language-game is all willed activity. For the purposefulness of human activity is a language activity. Activities by human subjects are differentiated not only by the singularity of the person but by the context in which he or she finds himself or herself. The term «form of life» designates the common areas of social context in which persons operate. At a central part in the *Philosophical Investigations* he writes: «Thought, language, now appear to us as a unique correlate, picture, of the world. These concepts: proposition, language, thought, world, stand in line one behind the other, each equivalent to each». (But what are these words to be used for now? The language-game in which they are to be applied is missing.) (section 96).

The use of language in context is the basis of meaning and the context goes by the name world. We could not entertain meanings and much less communicate them if we were not players in the language-games of life. The basics of playing the language-game are to infer from the facts that such and such a proposition or state of affairs accurately describes the situation at hand. This inference is a fiction, a product

of the imagination until we ceremoniously call it history. On the contrary, if we begin with forms of life, such as the relationship of two lovers, we have a fiction in search of facts to validate it in the reader's mind.

We have yet to hear from Nelson Goodman on these issues before beginning with Ricoeur's summation. In the 1979 third edition of *Fact, Fiction and Forecast,* Goodman makes the following observations: «If I am correct, then, the roots of inductive validity are to be found in our use of language. A valid prediction is, admittedly, one that is in agreement with past regularities in what has been observed; but the difficulty has always been to say what constitutes such agreement. The suggestion I have been developing here is that such agreement with regularities in what has been observed is a function of our linguistic practices. Thus the line between valid and invalid predictions (or inductions or projections) is drawn upon the basis of how the world is and has been described and anticipated in words» (120-21). There are, of course, countless descriptions of the world, most of which are short-lived, yet there is a discernable body of such descriptions that persist and are accepted by linguistic communities. History and literature are two principal ways of world-making, both directly and indirectly, as they become the narrativity of a community and as such the basis of social identity.

Paul Ricoeur's *Temps et récit* stands as the most complete and thorough examination of the narrativity in history and literature. In volume III, *Le temps raconté,* he draws together the key features of what we know as *phenomenological hermeneutics.* I shall draw upon this work to propose four rules of operation for the flow of facts and fiction in a linguistic community's narrativity.

The first point has to do with the ways in which stories become part of the narrativity of linguistic communities. There is an illusion that texts constitute a structure unto themselves and for themselves and therefore are mere reflections on the genius of the language group from which they originate. Yet careful analysis of the reading of texts, be they history or literature, points in a very different direction. The text makes demands and proposes, but there must be a reader to respond, to characterize and, finally, to appropriate the world which results from the interaction of text and reader, i.e., from the active collaboration of the two. Once the text has been appropriated by readers certain possible worlds become part of the narrativity of these readers and, therefore, part of the way they explain the world to themselves and others.

The second point is that this activity not only is constant in the linguistic community but it has a history which is deeply entwined with the concept of identity of such communities. Ricoeur identifies this fundamental feature as collective narrativity in *Temps raconté*: «The act of reading thus becomes one link in the chain of the history of the reception of a work by the public. Literary history, renovated by the aesthetic of reception, may thus claim to include the phenomenology of the act of reading» (399).

The third point is to establish the dialectic nature of the text-reader relationship in both the reading of history and the reading of literature. Ricoeur describes this

dialectic as a three dimensional encounter. First, he writes: «Reading then becomes a picnic where the author brings the words and the readers the meaning». But there is a second dimension to the dialectic; he writes: «What the work of reading reveals is not only a lack of determinacy but also an excess of meaning. Every text even a systematically fragmentary one, is revealed to be inexhaustible in terms of reading, as though, through its unavoidable selective character, reading revealed an unwritten aspect in the text. It is the prerogative of reading to strive to provide a figure for this unwritten side of the text» (401). The reader therefore is the active agent who must provide coherence and seek consistency.

The third dimension of the reader-text dialectic follows from the search for coherence, for if it is too successful the unfamiliar becomes familiar and the reader's concretization becomes a mere extension of the reader's reality thereby losing the creative tension of encountering the other. On the other hand, if the search for coherence fails, the reader remains shut out. The reader does not achieve a balance even in the best of cases. What will happen in a critical reading is an oscillation between the irresistible and the untenable. Ricoeur concludes: «Taken together, these three dialectics make reading a truly vital experience [expérience vive]».

The final point Ricoeur makes which will enable us to take up the related issues of the passage from fact to fiction and from fiction to fact is the place of reading in the making of the world we live in. He writes: [the two functions of reading] «are confrontation and connection between the imaginary world of the text and the actual world of readers to the extent that readers subordinate their expectations to those developed by the text, they themselves become unreal to a degree comparable to the unreality of the fictive world towards which they emigrate. Reading then becomes a place, itself unreal, where reflection takes a pause. On the other hand, inasmuch as readers incorporate — little matter whether consciously or unconsciously — into their vision of the world the lessons of their readings, in order to increase the prior readability of this vision, then reading is for them something other than a place where they come to rest; it is a medium they cross through» (414).

This philosophical commentary on reading places the individual reader at the center as the primary agent involved in collective making of the narrativity of the linguistic community. Further, it develops a hermeneutics of culture on the widest scale.

It remains for me to take up my opening observation of the process which unites and separates readings of literature and readings of history. I shall argue that the same process prevails in both, but in different directions because the truth-claims of history and literature are different.

The historian assembles all the facts that are relevant to a particular event such as the signing of a peace treaty or the beginning of hostilities between nations. The information about what happened is well known. What the historian is seeking to present is why it happened and how it happened. Thus the research begins with the gathering of facts and projecting them into a general pattern of what happened. This

schema of what happened is an imaginative construct which will serve as a guide until such time as the historian judges that the research has been completed and the interpretation of why and how the event happened can be put forward as a reasonable account at least until someone else does it again.

The pattern, therefore, is clear in the historical search, for coherence of life begins with the gathering of facts that will be brought together in construct, a projection of what happened, and when the historian is satisfied that this account explains why things happened and how they happened, the fiction becomes history. But it is undeniable that as a construct it was and remains an imaginative account since it strives for not only comprehensiveness but also causality. It does however present the historical truth-claim that this account is as close as the historian can get to what actually happened in the light of the known facts. My point is a central one: deep within the historical truth-claim there is a fiction that this account explains the patterns of causality that prevailed in the past.

Although there are as many ways of writing fiction as there are writers, we can make some generalizations about the specific genre we call the historical novel. The historical record serves as the background against which the narrative will develop. The genesis of this genre, however, is the process we know as emplotment which means working out situation or situations demanded by a plot. The working out means assembling the necessary facts to construct the situations and eventually the plot. Thus, in converse order to history, the writer begins with a plot and works it out in emplotment by filling in as many facts as are necessary. The facts, that is, the singular incidents of human interaction within an historical context are usually indeed historically factual. The fictional part in this case is the dramatization of the plot: the enactment of human interaction and the language of this interaction. Contrary to history, there is no historical truth-claim, because there is a far greater truth-claim. This is the truth-claim of plausibility of an «as if» world. The novelist is not saying this is the way it happened and these are the reasons for these actions to have taken place. The novelist is saying, this is a way in which it could have happened if this was the case and these were the circumstances that prevailed. The fiction is therefore far more general in application than history, for although they both use facts, they use them very differently. The historian tries to narrow the explanation to one. The novelist opens explanation to the multiple variables that make up the complexity of human interaction.

To conclude, facts are determinant features that are used both by the historian and the novelist. The imaginative projection of what happened in the past is part of both the historian's research and the novelist's emplotment. There is as much fiction in history as there are facts in fiction. The one clear separation that remains is the difference in truth-claims and, consequently, how the reader responds to the different truth-claims. The historical truth-claim that attempts to reduce the event from the past to a specific historical argument asks that the reader weigh the present explanation against rival explanations and to do so in terms of cohesion, consistency and

exhaustive research of the facts. The truth-claim of fiction is radically different. Fictional texts do not insist that this explanation is better or more complete than others. But fiction does make a truth-claim of simulation by purporting that under certain conditions and specific participants under particular circumstances it could happen in this way. In this sense the universal truth-claim is the «as if» world that can depict not the way things happened which in itself is a fictional account but the way they could have happened and can happen again.

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