

## Scholar's Symposium: The Work of David Carr

### Parsing narrative – story, history, life

Richard Kearney

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The question of narrative reference has given rise to a number of critical debates in contemporary philosophy. If hermeneutics is right in supposing that every narrative involves “someone saying something to someone about something,” the main question I want to pursue here is: what exactly is this something *about* which narrative speaks? Is it real or possible? Is it true or hypothetical? Is it actual or imaginary? Is it existent or non-existent? And how does the response to these queries depend on whether we are dealing with historical narratives, fictional narratives or the narratives of one's everyday lived experience, as when we talk of one's life-history or one's life-story? These questions have been touched on in different ways by historians like Hayden White, literary critics like Frank Kermode and social scientists like Karl Hempel. What I wish to examine here, however, is a particular debate in contemporary continental philosophy conducted between David Carr and Paul Ricoeur where decisive issues of narrative reference and identity come into unique critical focus.

I will begin with what I consider to be some crucial arguments by David Carr in his book, *Time, Narrative and History* (1986) and then try to evaluate these in light of an intriguing exchange between Carr and Paul Ricoeur at Ottawa University in 1983. (1983 was also the year which saw the publication of the first book of Ricoeur's three-volume *Time and Narrative*, a key source

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R. Kearney (✉)  
Department of Philosophy, Boston College, 21 Campanella Way,  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467-380, USA  
e-mail: richard.kearney@bc.edu

for Carr's own work on the subject). Though I find myself in broad agreement with Carr, there are a few areas of puzzlement and tension that I would like to tease out below—in a spirit of genuine *Auseinandersetzung*. My ultimate wager is that the respective arguments of Ricoeur and Carr might be seen as critically supplementing each other to give a fuller picture of what we mean by narrative reference as it relates to both fiction and history.

### Carr's continuity thesis

Carr's thesis on narrative goes something like this. Narrative is not just superadded to life—by way of writing histories or stories—it is already present in our temporal lived action. This he calls the “continuity” thesis, which he contrasts with the “standard” dis-continuity thesis, according to which narrative a) comes *after* our lived experience and b) is either a distortion of said experience or a redemption of it.

Several critical issues come to a head in Carr's Ottawa “Discussion” with his former teacher and mentor, Paul Ricoeur. Carr opens this exchange with the observation that there seems to be a “curious consensus” in contemporary philosophy and historiography about the relationship between narrative and the real world. Simply put, this is the view that “real events do not have the character of those we find in stories, and if we treat them as if they did have such a character, we are not being true to them” (Carr, “Discussion”, 1983/1991:160). This consensus ranges, he says, from cultural theorists like Frank Kermode (who speaks of the human need to impose a sense of beginning-middle-end on life) to structuralists like Lévi-Strauss and post-structuralists like Roland Barthes. (Barthes claims, for instance, that literature imposes a narrative order on a life which is otherwise condemned to “scrambled messages,” “des communications brouillées”).

But the discontinuity thesis is also promoted by historians and historiographers. Those defending a narrative history, like Louis Mink, argue that “stories are not lived but told.” Why? Because “life has no beginnings, middles and ends”; and so, he maintains, these “narrative qualities” “have to be transferred from art to life” (1983/1991: 161)<sup>1</sup>. Arguably, the most celebrated defender of the narrative features of historiography, Hayden White, goes so far as to suggest that narrative offers no cognitive or scientific value whatever (1983/1991: 161). For White, “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” (1983/1991: 161). The discontinuity thesis even includes positivist historians on the opposite spectrum to White and Mink; I am thinking especially of someone like Karl Hempel who insists on a radical dis-connect between narrative

<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur also rehearses the arguments of Mink, White and others in the second part of his *Time and Narrative*, vol 1, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984 (from the French 1983). The section is entitled ‘History and Narrative’, pp. 91f

constructions, on the one hand, and the neutral, empirical “facts” of history, on the other. Narrative must be kept out of history, Hempel insists, out of respect for the facts themselves, that is, the scientific objectivity of history.

One even finds certain postmodern theorists, like Deleuze and Foucault, making the polemical claim that most narrative constructions are imposed in the name of some “authoritative voice” which inflicts itself violently on life. Narrative, they argue, is a form of ideological manipulation and power. Thus we find, ironically, both positivists and (certain) postmodernists coming together to protect life from the contaminations and intrusions of narrativity.

Faced with these various formulations of the “standard view,” Carr riposts that narration is not a distortion of “reality” but rather an amplification of it. Narrative, he affirms, is something which confirms rather than falsifies life's “primary features.” Drawing on the phenomenology of time-consciousness in Husserl (and in later disciples such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty), Carr demonstrates how already in our individual and communal lives, narration serves to unite many of our actions into some kind of plot. In action, in the life-world, we are always *in media res*, in the midst of something, caught up (*verstrickt*) in a series of structured purposes, projects and resolutions. These can range from the smallest of plans to larger-scale, more enduring actions such as coming of age, conducting a love affair, carrying out a job or mission etc. Carr formulates his continuity thesis succinctly: “the structure of action, small-scale and large, is common to art *and* to life.”

Now, since every narrative worth its name requires not only a *story* and *storyteller* but also an *audience* (a reader/spectator/hearer), we might ask whether our ordinary life experiences fulfill these three requirements? Carr responds defiantly:

Narratives do select and life is what they select from. But it hardly follows that in life no selection takes place. Our very capacity for attention, and for following through more or less long-term and complex endeavors, is our capacity for selection. Extraneous details are not left out, but they are pushed into the background, saved for later, ranked in importance. And whose narrative voice is accomplishing all this? None but our own, of course. In planning our days and our lives we are composing the stories or the dramas we will act out and which will determine the focus of our attention and our endeavors, which will provide the principles for distinguishing foreground from background (1983/1991: 165).

While most of us would have to admit that all this entails *some* kind of story-planning or plotting, we might still want to ask if it is “story-telling” as such? Is this narration as we commonly understand the term? Carr is undeterred. “Most assuredly it is,” he pluckily retorts, “quite literally, since we are constantly explaining ourselves to others. And finally, each of us must count himself among his own audience since in explaining ourselves to others we are often trying to convince ourselves as well” (1983/1991: 165).

Lest we think that Carr is claiming that fictional narratives and life-narratives are exactly the same thing, Carr admits they are not. Though he does seem to maintain that they both share the “form” of narrative, he concedes—at certain critical junctures—that he is not denying that there are differences between story-telling and life. (In life, for example, we do not control our circumstances, plans or even the self who plans in the same way as in a structured narrative). Carr’s continuity thesis is, in other words, far from naïve. Life does fall short of art in all kinds of ways and can rarely if ever live up to the structured coherence or clear authorship of certain stories. But in Carr’s view life remains, nonetheless, a constant demand to *approach* that kind of coherence.

We want things to come out right in the end, with all the threads of the plot neatly tied up, as at the hands of an author which, at the limit, we ourselves become. Narrative coherence does not impose itself upon an incoherent, merely sequential existence, but is drawn from life. (1983/1991: 166).

We might object, at this point, that this begs the question somewhat; for while it is certainly true that many in our Western culture look to narrativity to solve the puzzles and incoherences of life, there would appear to be many cultures where this is not a priority, or even a virtue. Could one imagine the Buddha or the Vedic sages, for example, counseling the need for narrative coherence and clear plotting? I think not. But we shall return to this point below—when we ask about the precise status of Carr’s narrative “we.”

Suffice it for now to cite Carr’s withering critique of the great expectations of the discontinuity theorists, which he maintains, is the source of their fundamental disappointment that life does not measure up to narrative (and is therefore radically distinct from it):

The standard view errs by the kind of exaggeration that results from frustrated expectations. In bitterness that we cannot control every aspect of our lives as if they were fictions, in the sentiment that things are getting out of hand and out of control, it concludes the worst: that our lives are meaningless sequences, one thing after another. Perhaps the proponents of the standard view just read too many stories and lead very dull or cluttered lives. But this is not to say that their lives are not like stories. It may be that they are just dull stories. (1983/1991: 166).

So speaks David Carr in his apologia for the continuity thesis. As elegant and cogent an apologia as one could find.

### Between Carr and Ricoeur

I would now like to look briefly at how Carr’s thesis relates to Ricoeur’s arguments in *Time and Narrative*. Carr both agrees and disagrees with Ric-

oeur. He appears to basically concur with Ricoeur’s remarks on the temporality of narrative; and more specifically with Ricoeur’s suggestion that narratives have their source in everyday experience, namely in three main aspects of human life: (1) the semantics of action, (2) the socially symbolic character of human events (conventions, customs, rituals, ideologies etc) and (3) the essentially temporal character of ordinary life (demonstrated in Ricoeur’s readings of Augustine, Husserl and Heidegger). In sum, Carr seems to confirm Ricoeur’s basic conclusion that life is not alien to narrative structure; that life is not mere discordance but harbors its own kind of “inchoate narrativity.” This latent narrativity is what Ricoeur calls “prenarrative structure” or “prefiguration,” both of which he links to Mimesis 1 (in contradistinction to Mimesis 2 – the formal “configuration” of a fictional or historical narrative – and Mimesis 3 – how such textual configuration impacts back again on our life of action, in a process of “refiguration”). Hence Carr has no difficulty with Ricoeur’s claim, for example, that literary narratives “configure what was already a figure in human action”; or with the claim that “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated in a narrative mode” (1983/1991: 169); or again that “life is in quest of narrative” (Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative”, 1991: 21f). So far so good.

But for Carr this is only *half* the story. The disagreement between Carr and Ricoeur centers on what Carr calls the “gap” which Ricoeur leaves open between narrative and life. In the heel of the hunt, Carr believes that no matter how much Ricoeur strives to moderate and temper the discontinuity thesis, he ultimately succumbs to it. As Carr puts it: “To the extent that (for Ricoeur) everyday life already has structure—it is not .... narrative structure that it has .... Narrative seems, in Ricoeur’s view, to portray a thing which could never be, because its very form is incompatible with the real world” (Carr, 1983/1991: 172). And this, concludes Carr, signals a regrettable return to the standard view.

But is Carr being fair to Ricoeur here? I suspect not entirely. Though he can certainly cite certain passages where Ricoeur seems to be endorsing the discontinuity thesis (as when Ricoeur claims that the field of human action is “confused, unformed and at the limit mute”, 1983/1991: 171), I think he misses Ricoeur’s *ultimate intent* – that is, to find a middle position *between* the discontinuity and continuity thesis. So if it is true that Ricoeur seems to be at one moment supporting the *links* between narrative and life and at others the *differences*, it is because that is actually what he *is* doing – and intentionally so. For what Ricoeur seeks here (and it is a typical strategy in most of his works) is a dialectic of opposition which he will then try to mediate. Hence Ricoeur’s division of narrative into three kinds—prefigurative, configurative and refigurative. So doing, Ricoeur is determined to challenge the monolithic and univocal view of narrative which compels one to make an either/or choice between narrative and life, as if they were opposed alternatives.

Admittedly there are differences between certain “kinds” of narrative – for example fictional ones—which differ quite radically from the ordinary world of human action in that they operate in the mode of “as if” (i.e. they recount

what is not real). But they do not *differ completely*; for even the recounting of something “as if” it happened retains an element of credibility and verisimilitude regarding the “real world” of time and action. Fictional stories are told in the past tense, for example, and would make no sense to us if they departed *totally* from the world of lived reality. (Even science fiction must obey basic rules of analogy and reference if it is not to become incomprehensible, that is, “unfollowable” by a reader).

In historical narratives, clearly, we see the gap between narration and action narrowing to the degree that the telling now unfolds in the realm of the “as”: historians try to tell the past “as” it happened, not “as if” it happened. In other words, even though in history the “as” (*wie*) always retains a certain “figurability”—we never have a completely literal account—it is much closer to the real world in that it must observe certain “truth claims” which the “as if” mode suspends. Were this not the case, says Ricoeur, we would have no way of honoring the dead, or of negating the negationists who claim (like David Irving and Robert Faurisson) that the holocaust never actually happened. That is why Ricoeur, in his reply to Carr, stresses the importance of retaining a certain reality thesis in the face of any univocal (or inordinately continuist) view of narrative which seeks to close the gap completely (1983/1991: 179–182).

In sum, for Ricoeur there are both differences and similarities between narrative and life; there are continuities *and* discontinuities, and everything depends on how we conjugate and negotiate them. In the second part of the third volume of *Time and Narrative*—and especially in the chapter entitled “The Interweaving of Fiction and History”—Ricoeur goes to considerable lengths to articulate the complex criss-crossings and mediations between the various modes of narrative—fictional, historical, lived. And this becomes a central concern in his discussion of the holocaust denial controversy in his “Conclusions” to the third volume (and again in his more recent and monumental volume, *Memory History and Forgetting*, which I cannot, alas, go into here).

But already in texts like “Narrative Identity” and “Life in Quest of Narrative,” written in the 1980s as companion pieces to *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur was recognizing that our ordinary lives are always informed by certain narrative figurations and prefigurations. So as we move back from a) the “as if” perspective of fictional narratives and b) the “as” perspective of historical narratives, we discover that what we are wont to call the literal world of action is already *pre-understanding* itself in terms of certain narrative figures and structures. Which is why, while recognizing the distinction between different sorts of narrativity (Mimesis 1, 2, 3 etc), Ricoeur is equally determined to demonstrate how they interrelate in all kinds of subtle ways.

Ricoeur knows this seems like an insurmountable paradox; but he resolves to transform it into a *productive* paradox rather than a stand-off aporia. Hence the following statement in “Life in Quest of Narrative” (published in English in the same volume as Carr’s Ottawa exchange with Ricoeur):

We can now attack the paradox we are considering here: stories are recounted, lives are lived. An unbridgeable gap *seems* to separate fiction and life. To *cross this gap*, the terms of the paradox must, to my mind, be thoroughly *revised*.

(Ricoeur, 1991: 25).

Ricoeur then proceeds to do just this, showing in particular how notions of human identity are based on narrative structures which mediate between the extremes of either pure chance or pure stability. Not only are our ordinary lives always “tangled up in stories,” they are also replete with “possible stories” (1991: 31): quasi-stories, implicit stories, mute stories that want to be told—and that call out for the more explicit and formal narratives of history, autobiography, confession, fiction and so on.

Such “possible stories” already take place, for Ricoeur, at the level of what Augustine calls our temporalising acts of memory and apprehension (the famous “triple present” and the mixing of “distention” and “intention.” I think Carr may have slightly misread Ricoeur’s analysis of Augustine in *Time and Narrative* vol 1: Ricoeur, “The Aporias of the Experience of Time: Book 11 of Augustine’s *Confessions*”, 1983/1984: 5–30). Of course, Ricoeur identifies this function of narrative temporality even more explicitly with Husserl’s notion of protention-attention-retention in *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness* and with Heidegger’s analytic of the three temporal ecstasies in *Being and Time* (Ricoeur, 1991: 23). Ricoeur also locates evidence for such narrative prefiguration in Aristotle’s notions of *muthos-mimesis* and everyday practical wisdom, *phronesis*, which he translates, tellingly, as “narrative” understanding (1991: 23). Finally, Ricoeur looks to Kant’s schematism of the productive imagination for hints of the everyday function of narrative emplotment and synthesis in our life-actions (1991: 24).

In all these instances—and one could cite more—Ricoeur seems to be acknowledging the existence of forms of narrativity at the primordial level of our lived experience, that is, before any imposition of more formal narratives from “above” (e.g. from fictional or historical texts). In fact, Ricoeur explicitly insists that we “grant to experience as such a virtual narrativity which stems, *not from the projection of literature onto life*, but which constitutes a genuine demand for (formal) narrative” (1991: 29).

### Cashing out narrative: pounds, shillings and pence

So where exactly does the difference between Ricoeur and Carr lie? Perhaps one of the main grounds for disagreement stems from the fact that Carr’s critiques of Ricoeur as a dis-continuist (in both the Ottawa exchange in 1983 and *Time, Narrative and History* published in 1986) are based almost solely on the first volume of *Time and Narrative* (the only one available when Carr tallied the debit sheet and settled the account)? Or perhaps the disagreement stems from Carr’s somewhat “univocal” view of narrative which insists that if

narrative is not the *full* shilling it is nothing at all. The fact that Ricoeur counts in narrative sixpences, pennies, half-pennies, even farthings, seems to disqualify him from accredited currency exchange. It's as though he didn't quite take the Queen's shilling, as we say in Ireland, and so deprives himself of royal legal tender. This is, I suspect, a central reason for Carr's claim that Ricoeur either (a) contradicts himself (by presenting himself as both a continuist and a discontinuist) or (b) simply succumbs, in the final analysis, to the standard discontinuist thesis. While Carr certainly credits Ricoeur with much, he ultimately comes down on the debit side. Ricoeur ends up in the red.

Another area where I think Carr underestimates Ricoeur's contribution to the narrative thesis is when he declares, after a pretty thorough critical review of Ricoeur and others, that "none succeeds...in doing justice to the social dimension of narrative which is necessary for the full comprehension of literature" (Carr, *Time, Narrative and History*, 1986: 17). How are we to square this with Ricoeur's copious writings on narrativity as a function of the social imaginary, epitomized in the avowal that his whole "research on narrative places (him) precisely at the heart of social and cultural creativity, since telling a story...is the most permanent act of societies. In telling their own stories, cultures create themselves" (Ricoeur, "L'histoire comme récit et comme pratique", 1981: 165). Ricoeur does not hold, as Carr contends in his conclusion to *Time, Narrative and History*, that there is an "opposition between non-narrative life and narrative form which is entirely poetic in nature and origin" (Carr, 1986: 184). Ricoeur does not say that "if action, life, history have narrative form, they acquire it from the literary products of our culture"; he says they acquire it from literature *also* but as *already* narratively shaped by their everyday temporal and social existence. Ricoeur does not claim that human action depends for its narrativity solely on some "poetic act" that would be "autonomous and self-moving" (1986: 184–185). In other words, Ricoeur acknowledges that the role of narrative in poetry and art is only one form of narrative – the configuring textual narrative of Mimesis 2. Nay, he goes further in arguing that these individual works of textual composition are themselves drawn from the prefigurative structures of both a) one's individual existence (as a temporalizing-schematizing-symbolizing-narrating being) and of b) one's social existence (as a participant in the social imaginaries of ideological and utopian narratives)–both of which operate at the level of Mimesis 1.

Indeed, Ricoeur goes even further still in declaring that the poetic narratives of Mimesis 2 find their ultimate fulfillment in the *refigurative* narratives of Mimesis 3. This is when we, as individual or communal readers, ultimately return again from "text to action." So that we may say that the configuring act of textual/literary narrative is both preceded by former narrative acts (prefiguration) and outstripped and completed by subsequent narrative acts (refiguration). And, it must be noted, refiguration itself is not the end of the story. Narrative life does not end there. There is no full stop. In each case, refiguring is but a starting point for new beginnings, i.e. for further rounds of prefiguring and configuring in turn. And so on.

On this point, Ricoeur's reponse to Carr is very suggestive:

...in the stage of prefiguration that I have called Mimesis 1, action is *already symbolically mediated*: literature, in the largest sense of the word, including history as well as fiction, tends to *reinforce a process of symbolization already at work* ... [and] I am bound to include in the notion of prefiguration the result of a previous refiguration – because effectively, for each of us, what is prefigured in our life results from refigurations operated by all the other lives of those who taught us. (1983/1991: 183)<sup>2</sup>

So we find ourselves in a circle? To be sure. But, insists Ricoeur, this circle is not a vicious one, because there is an "extension of meaning, progressive meaning, from the inchoate to the fully determined" (1983/1991: 183).

This notion of inchoate or virtual narrativity is, I believe, a crucial point of possible reconciliation between him and David Carr. As is Ricoeur's insistence on a positive hermeneutic circle between narrative and life. It is, perhaps, after all, a question of declension and degree.

Let me return now to perhaps the most vexed issue touched on above. If we go too far in the direction of a univocal and continuist theory of narrative do we not ignore crucial moral—as well as epistemological and ontological—differences between distinct *functions* of narrative, namely narrative as it operates in *life*, *history* and *fiction*. This has serious implications, as noted earlier, for the whole revisionist debate: a debate which covers not only the holocaust controversy (the famous *Historiestreit* in Germany for example) but also recent controversies surrounding Truth and Reconciliation Tribunals (in South Africa, Northern Ireland, Bosnia) and various War Crime rulings. As Ricoeur puts it: "If we do not resolutely maintain the difference between history and fiction, how do we answer people like Faurisson, in France, who declares: 'In Auschwitz, however, nothing *real* has happened; there is only what is said about it'." This, Ricoeur trenchantly riposts, "is an insult to the dead: they are killed twice" (1983/1991: 186). Ricoeur is not, of course, leveling this critique against David Carr but against those like Roland Barthes who deny any access to a reality beyond narrative (thereby reducing the truth of history to a mere "effect of the real"). But is Carr's univocal-continuist view of narrative as outlined in *Time, Narrative and History*, really able to answer those negationists who claim the holocaust is just one narrative amongst others, just one story against another story, without any independent purchase in reality, with no way of claiming to represent "the way things actually happened" (*wie est eigentlich gewesen ist*)? If *life*, *history* and *story* are placed on the same narrative continuum, how do we answer the revisionists that our narrative is not just *any* narrative but one which makes a claim to truth, which tells it as it

<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur elaborates on this notion of refiguration and the three forms of mimesis in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* (especially vol 3) and again in various chapters of *From Text to Action*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.

really was? (These vexed issues of narrative and historical truth also arise in famous cases in psychotherapy running from Freud's mis-reading of Dora's trauma—whose story was it anyway?—to various recent controversies regarding long term repressed memories: who to believe?)<sup>3</sup>

I would add that this hard question of narrative reference—regarding historical “truth” and “reality”—is further compounded by the equally hard question of the narrative voice who is telling the story. In his answer to the question “Who Are We?” in chapter 6 of *Time, Narrative and History*, Carr seems to come down on the side of a certain relativism or perspectivism. By arguing for a direct, formal continuity between narrative history and pre-thematic lived history, Carr seems to be saying that the “we” who constantly retells and revises history is really a multiplicity of “we’s” constituted by the various communal language-games we play. (This seems like a version of the Aristotelian-MacIntyrean model of narrative life-habits or of Wittgensteinian life-forms as language-games). “To tell the story of a community,” writes Carr, “is simply to continue, at a somewhat more reflective and usually more retrospective level, the story-telling process through which the community constitutes itself and its actions” (Carr, 1986: 177). But how, then, can Carr avoid the conclusion that “the Community” mentioned here is one of a multiplicity of different living communities, each with its own particular sense of history? In counseling caution about asserting the universality of the “we,” Carr admits that “our way of being in and dealing with time” may not be the only way. We are, he candidly concedes,

asserting all this about *ourselves*, not necessarily about everyone. Who then are we? Perhaps just that community that recognizes itself as sharing a certain conception of and a certain way of living in time, and recognizes that in this it differs or may differ from other communities past, present, or future. (1986: 183).

But here's the rub. For if, I repeat, when it comes to stories and histories, one community's account is as good as another's, how can we still claim—as we want to do in cases of genocide, torture and our debt to the dead—that one historical version is *true* and another version (e.g. negationism) false. Given Carr's account, can we ever say—mixing Jane Austen and Primo Levi—that it is a truth universally acknowledged that the holocaust existed? I do not think it necessary to invoke positivist historiography or some meta-historical transcendental subject to defend such a claim. We do not need to resort to an abstract or absolute universalism. But I would submit that some notion of a *quasi-universal* perspective (à la Ricoeur and Gadamer), emerging from a genuine plurality of narrative interpretations and merging towards some kind of trans-narrative truth claim, might usefully be considered here. Perhaps Carr would agree?

<sup>3</sup> See my own discussion of these themes in *On Stories*, especially part 2, pp. 14–65.

### The problem of narrative truth

But what might such a trans-narrative truth consist of? Here we return, once again, to the vexed question of reference and refiguration. In sum, what exactly does narrative refer to? In fiction, the matter is settled easily enough: we are concerned with a second-order reference to imaginary worlds which we are given poetic license to experience “as if” they were real. When it comes to historical narratives, the question is more problematic. For however much we might agree with White or Mink that all narratives have some figural aspect—whether “as” or “as if”—in the case of history we have a claim to tell things as they truly happened as truly as we can. The “can” here acknowledges, of course, that our human capacities for such historical reference or representation are always finite and limited (bound by time, place, circumstance and perspective). So any account, now matter how accurate, will always retain some degree of approximation and provisionality: it could always be *more* exact, precise, detailed, inclusive adequate. No historical account of the way things actually happened is ever exhaustive. We are always required to judge, discriminate and discern further between competing claims to truthfulness. Even Primo Levi, who lived through the Holocaust as a first hand witness, felt compelled to retell his historical testimony over and over again. He realized that there was no final account. No definitive last testament. But, to avoid relativism or perspectivism here, we need to have at least a minimal set of criteria in order to orient and moor our referential claims to historical truth. These criteria of what I call “trans-narrative truth” are, I suggest, threefold. (1) narratives referring back to prior narratives, (2) narrative referring back to facts, (3) narratives referring back to a “thing” that both resists and solicits narrativity—beyond silence. Let me say a word about each in turn.

- (a) The first criterion of narrative reference is provided by other narratives. Histories refer to previous histories, to former stories and life-stories. This amounts to saying that if an historian wishes to verify his or her claims to truth and accuracy, he/she will have recourse to the testimonial account of those who witnessed or experienced the events recounted; or, where such accounts are no longer available, to the second-hand accounts of those who witnessed the witnesses, in oral or written form. In other words, most historians base their narratives on anterior narrations and interpretations which claim to bring us closer to the events recounted. This suggests that all attempts to access an historical event (*res gestae*) are always mediated by some prior kind of narrative experience (*historia rerum gestarum*), since any claim to access the pure event itself, in pure immediacy and transparency, is ruled out for finite beings. (We are not omniscient minds with a God's eye view of history *sub specie aeternitatis*). Given Carr's continuist thesis I do not think he would have any great problem with this.
- (b) A second criterion of narrative reference is what we might call the “facts”: namely, empirical evidence made available to us by the

explanatory model of science. Thus, if we revisit the example of the holocaust, we would say that in addition to recording the testimonies and memories of survivor-witnesses, we also need to count the bodies. We need to find the graves and establish whatever forensic, statistical and verifiable evidence is available. This is precisely where revisionists like Faurisson and Irving challenge the truth of the holocaust, their argument being: "if you can't show us six million bodies, then it is just your version against ours..." In order to counter this challenge, one must not only have better stories and testimonies, but more solid "facts" as well. Here we might well heed Ricoeur's proposal that we avoid the ruinous dichotomy between narrative understanding (*verstehen*) and scientific explanation (*erklären*) (Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 1991: 125–143). As he put it in the much quoted maxim: "to explain more is to understand better." We need *both* stories *and* facts. When it comes to historical truth-claims narrative and empirical evidence are allies, not adversaries.

- (c) A third criterion is what I call the "thing." I have in mind here both the Kantian and Freudian connotations of this term as something resistant to understanding and explanation. Here we might be said to move from a first-order reference to "facts" and a second-order reference to "life stories" to a third-order reference to a reality deeper than words. The "thing" (*Das Ding*) signals a dimension of the "real" so deep and primordial that it cannot be narrated, uttered, translated, even imagined. In the case of the holocaust example, it refers to that irreducible trauma which cannot be resolved in any kind of narrative catharsis or poesis. It is the irremediable, inhuman horror which resists meaning and redemption. The *Nullpunkt* of human experience. The aphasia of pain. The impossibility of narrativity testified to by so many survivors of the holocaust, as recorded in volumes like Lawrence Langer's *Holocaust Testimony* or Sohanna Felman's and Dori Laub's *Testimony*.<sup>4</sup> The only appropriate response here would seem to be silence. The mute pathos of an impossible and incurable wound. Affect as a "passion" of pure passivity and suffering.

And yet the matter is more complex. For, as Emmanuel Levinas noted, if we remain silent about the holocaust the Nazis have won. So, in spite of our

scruples, we are obliged to speak even though it is impossible to speak. The very resistance to narrative calls for new, alternative, truncated, failed, self-negating narratives. A negative aesthetics in Adorno's sense. An insurgency of *petits récits* against official history, in Lyotard's sense. A flurry of micro-narratives or anti-stories as in Beckett's later work. This paralogistic circle of finding oneself called and compelled to tell stories that are impossible to tell—stories that would never be told if we did not try to tell them against all the odds—introduces an ethical imperative into the aesthetics of narrative. Struck dumb by a trauma that defies all words and names, we feel nonetheless obliged to transform the "impossible" into a "possible" story.

This is especially true of the holocaust; but it extends to other examples of traumatized or truncated experience. And I think Ricoeur hints at an interesting way out of this dilemma when he calls for a middle path between the alternatives of (a) falsifying or (b) fully representing the pain of the past by converting it into history. Relating this to the task of honoring our "debt to the dead," Ricoeur suggests that it may well be in *transforming* the untold past into narrative that we can, paradoxically, *disclose* it at the same time. How so? How does this curious circuit of transformation and discovery work? He explains:

In the historical past there is what is implicit, what is inchoate; in particular, there are those history has forgotten, the victims of history: it is to them that we are indebted, much more than to the conquerors, whose renown inundates triumphalist history; and there are also those impeded possibilities, all that in history was inhibited, massacred...what has taken place has also prevented something else from happening and existing. (Ricoeur, 1983/1991: 187).

This "reverse-face of history," as Ricoeur terms it, summons us to give a possible voice to what was rendered impossible by historical horror, violence, inhumanity. And in a curious way, we find that it is sometimes at the very moment when the traumatic "real" defies historical narrativity that history has recourse, at the limit, to the imaginative resources of fictional narrativity. Why? In order to fill in the gaps, silences and holes of inexperienced experience. The various testimonies which struggle to honor our debt to the holocaust dead, from the memoirs of Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel to Lanzmann's *Shoah* or Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, all show how the narrative resources of historical memory and imagination can combine to insure that the story be told so that it may never happen again. They demonstrate that it is not enough to be merely informed of empirical details and data (that too of course); we also need to be *struck, moved, affected* by the truth of the event. And this latter requirement is something which can only be realized by narratives. For if explanation helps us to know, narratives give us ears to hear and eyes to see and to weep (Kearney, *On Stories*, 2002: 47–76).

<sup>4</sup> See Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1991; and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992. See also here Ricoeur's insightful comments on the question of holocaust memories and testimonies in his "Conclusions" to volume three of *Time and Narrative*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988, pp. 241f; and again in his subsequent major work, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, University of Chicago Press, 2005, where Ricoeur discusses the notoriously difficult issues of blocked memory, truncated history and pardon. For a more explicitly political analysis of these same issues, see Mark Osiel, *Mass Atrocity, Collective Memory and the Law*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, USA; and Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, Penguin, 2005, especially the final chapter on modern European memories and memorials of the holocaust.

## Conclusion

Whether we choose to call such holocaust testimonies “possible” or “impossible” narratives is ultimately a matter of emphasis, of choice. The point is that they are narratives. They tell a story, they recount a history, in spite of all the odds, hoping against hope that the impossible may be made possible, that silence may be turned into some kind of speech. In each testimony, no matter how unique or truncated, it is always a matter of “someone saying something to someone *about* something.” Indeed the very failure to recount properly, is itself a testimony to the need, the demand, the struggle to recount. Or as the Beckettian narrator puts it: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”

These are complex matters and we cannot do justice to them in such a short treatment. But the basic point I am trying to consider here is the need for a variety of different criteria to help ground narrative reference in a “truth” prior to the historical account itself and to which the historical account would always remain answerable—inexhaustibly so. I have cited but three such criteria above—“life story,” “fact” and “thing”—drawing liberally from Ricoeur in order to supplement Carr. There are no doubt others that could be invoked to deepen and amplify this account. What seems clear is that the whole question of narrative reference is one of the most challenging issues in the philosophy of narrative so rigorously explored by both Ricoeur and Carr.

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