

*Paul Ricoeur's Poetics
of History*

WILLIAM C. DOWLING

PAUL RICOEUR's treatment of historical writing in *Time and Narrative* involves a paradox. His ostensible subject is the problem of representing a past that is no longer there. Yet it will turn out that his aim has been, all along, to show that in a certain sense we already inhabit that past. Ricoeur's ultimate point will be that the temporality we inhabit as social beings—what he will call “narrated time” (*le temps raconté*) or the “third time” of narrativity—is a time of volition and preoccupation intelligible only in narrative terms. This will be, for him, both the time of ordinary existence and the ground of truth in historical narrative. It is a “third time” because it stands apart both from Aristotle's cosmic time or “time of the world” and Augustine's phenomenological “time of the soul,” the only two concepts to have emerged from centuries of philosophical speculation. It is “narrated time” because, fundamentally continuous with the time of earlier generations who also understood themselves and their cultures in terms of stories, it is the temporality that underlies both the written and unwritten narratives of human existence.

In the immediate background of Ricoeur's discussion lies Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which for him, as for other French thinkers of his generation, marked an epoch in modern philosophy. For Ricoeur, the key Heideggerian concept will be *Sorge*, or Care, which is the primordial condition of what Heidegger called *Dasein*, or consciousness “thrown” into a world it did not make. In *Being and Time*, *Dasein* is always “ahead of itself” in the sense that it understands itself in terms of its possibilities. The difference between you or me and a rock or a tree or a groundhog is that we may choose among various possibilities, either deciding, say, to study piano at a conservatory rather than going to medical school or, less momentarily, to go fishing this afternoon rather than to clean out the garage. This is

why, says Heidegger, Dasein's mode of being in the world already implies the notions of a "future" and "having a project." The idea of Sorge, which includes the more ordinary ideas of investment or concern or preoccupation, then arises from Dasein's sense of its own limits, or what Heidegger calls its "being toward death."

Limitation means significance: the value of what one chooses emerges from comparison with other, excluded choices. For Ricoeur, the single most important truth set forth in *Being and Time* is that we are born into a world made up of meaning or significance. This is the world of Sorge. Only if Dasein is Care, says Heidegger, can it inhabit a significant world, and only if it inhabits a significant world can Dasein be Care. This is the sort of pronouncement that has made European philosophy, to some Anglo-American ears, seem little more than a traffic in dubious profundities. But in fact there is a serious challenge here. What Heidegger is demanding at such moments is nothing less than a total inversion of the empiricist perspective often taken for granted in Anglo-American philosophy, for which the world starts out as a domain independent of human significance—the *res extensa* of Cartesian rationalism, say, or the whirl of subatomic particles that is the material reality of modern physics—in which one picks out X or Y from a neutral field of meaningless objects and only then "adds" significance, as when the botanical entity I carry in my hand is somehow changed, in transit, into the rose I give my love.

Ricoeur, as we shall see, is going to disagree with Heidegger about the nature of historical time. The one point that will survive this disagreement, and that will then count as the major Heideggerian contribution to Ricoeur's own argument, is that the world is significant for us before it becomes objective. The baby picks out its mother or the ball dancing on a string above its crib as being more "meaningful" than the distant wall. The rose I carry to my love is first of all a flower and a token of my feeling, and only then, if at all, the object described by botanists in terms of genus and species. For Heidegger, it is through relentless abstraction away from a world full of meaning that an "objective" world of things-in-themselves—and, subsequently, of atoms and molecules, muons and pions—comes to

be constituted. For Ricoeur, what matters is the reality that exists before such abstraction gets under way. Only when we have seen that the world in which consciousness moves and has its being is *already* meaningful or significant, he thinks, are we in a position to think clearly about time and history.

Heidegger's position is that ordinary time is false or inauthentic because it attempts to deny the finitude or being-toward-death in which *Sorge* originates. Ricoeur thinks this notion of inauthenticity misplaced. Even here, however, he wants to retain certain insights drawn from Heidegger's analysis. This is the case, for instance, with the original linking of Care to cosmological time. For Heidegger, Care as personal investment becomes intelligible in the moment we think about an earlier epoch when daylight would have been purely a "time of preoccupation" for tasks impossible in darkness. But then begins, he says, a fall into the impersonality of ordinary time, with instruments—sundials, hourglasses, clocks—meant to provide a more "exact" way of dividing up the day into units with less and less relation to the sun as a bringer of light. It is complete when an "ordinary time" of hours, minutes, and seconds has become the dominant social reality. By the end, the sun itself will seem to move to the hands of the clock, as when we are told that sunrise tomorrow will occur at precisely 5:32 a.m.

Ricoeur's disagreement is about the implications of this notion of loss or estrangement. We pass to ordinary time, Heidegger argued, only through a series of "forgettings" that gradually loses touch with a world organized entirely in terms of concern—my total absorption in my task, say, when I am making something at my workbench, or trying to learn a difficult piece of music on the piano—and leads us, instead, to dwell in a separate or autonomous time. From this, the time of clocks and committees and appointments, follows a loss of authenticity and resoluteness in the face of being-toward-death. But these supposed consequences, in Ricoeur's view, amount to nothing more than an ungrounded neostoicism that has no essential relation to Heidegger's account of *Sorge*. Nor can they support the scaffolding of progressively false temporalities Heidegger bases on them. So

it is that we arrive at a truer perspective on historical time, says Ricoeur, only when we have detached the idea of a time of *Sorge* from what Adorno unkindly called Heidegger's "jargon of authenticity."

In particular, Ricoeur wants to link *Sorge* to what he calls the logic of the trace. Given a time of *Sorge*, what sense are we to make of a past inhabited by beings we feel to have been like ourselves? To what extent does a difference in culture or period make them beings different, perhaps unimaginably different, from us? Our time of dates and calendars assures us that their existence had a determinate relation to our own. The world history timeline on the schoolroom wall does demonstrate, after all, that the neolithic hunter-gatherers came before the Babylonians and Assyrians, or that European explorers set out for the New World some centuries after the collapse of the Roman empire. But if our question is whether their experience of the world was in some fundamental sense like our own, the schoolroom timeline does not seem to tell us anything very significant. Here Heidegger's impatience with public or universal time can seem reasonable enough. The time of *Sorge*, however it might have been experienced by the neolithic hunter-gatherer or the ancient Roman, can hardly be measured in such terms.

How, then, are we to recover a past inhabited by beings who dwelt in a world of preoccupation or concern? This brings us to the problem of the trace, which for Ricoeur includes everything normally counted as historical evidence: a fossil footprint, a stone axe, the ruins of a temple, clay tablets covered with cuneiform writing, Greek manuscripts from a Renaissance library. Historical evidence always presupposes that the past has left a trace. But what, exactly, are we to mean by "trace"? As a first approximation, Ricoeur takes Emmanuel Levinas's idea of the trace—it is, as he says, both a thing and a sign—as "the disarrangement of some order" that invites explanation in terms of an absent cause. So, for instance, the tracks of a wolf in the snow are a sign that "an animal has passed this way." A fossil trilobite survives as a sign of a teeming world of prehistoric life forms, a fossil footprint from the Olduvai Gorge as a sign of our earliest human ancestors. In the same way, the ruins of a Greek temple tell

us, just as the tracks in the snow told us about the wolf, that “a people was once here.”

To speak of the trace as a sign of the past, however, is to put something of a strain on our usual meaning of “sign,” at least so far as that normally implies a desire to communicate. The problem is obvious. The wolf who left tracks in the snow had no intention of leaving a sign of his passing. The human ancestor who left a fossil footprint had no thought of leaving a trace for future generations, and probably no idea that he was doing so. The ruins of the Greek temple, it is true, may be taken as a sign in the more usual sense—the temple was meant, its builders might have explained, as an outward sign or symbol of their reverence for the gods—but not in the sense one has in mind when trying to date its inscriptions. The priestesses of Apollo could scarcely have been trying, after all, to communicate with twenty-first century archaeologists. Yet as soon as we do ask about the intentions of the Greeks who built the temple—their beliefs, their rituals, their sense of the divine in everyday life—there is a break or rupture with the linear time of clocks and calendars and carbon-14 dating. We have entered, obviously, a time of Care or preoccupation.

Heidegger’s way of putting this was to say that the ruined temple is a trace of “a Dasein which has been there.” But only a trace: since the world as it existed for that Dasein—or, say, for the remote human ancestor who left the fossil footprint—was not a mere physical setting but a way-of-being-in-the-world, it is in a certain important sense irrecoverable. It is, above all, not something that can be understood in terms of a uniform historical time. But Ricoeur thinks that this is not the point of historical dating, and his reasons are profoundly Heideggerian. Consider: I find a stone axe. I see immediately that it belongs to a world different from my own Dasein, but also that it is not, like the stars or the mountains, part of the purely physical environment into which I was “thrown,” the earth as it would have existed had no human beings appeared. So what, exactly, is the axe? It was, I see, a tool—part of Heidegger’s world of human projects, the “ready to hand”—in a world that has now vanished. This

alone is enough to tell me that its people were, like me, “thrown,” had projects, and lived in a world of Care.

The stone axe in itself tells us something about that world of projects that Heidegger called the *Umwelt* of Dasein. For a tool is never single, as Heidegger once remarked, but belongs to an entire web of significance. The pen with which I’m writing this sentence assumes the existence of the paper on which I write, the table underneath, the book open on its stand before me, and, taken all together, the project on which I am now intent. In the same way, the stone axe implies the flint spear- and arrowheads, the scrapers, the awls, the striking flints, the bone needles, and other tools archaeologists have recovered from neolithic sites. Ricoeur’s point about these would be that they tell a story, to those who have ears to hear, about a people who hunted, cooked their food over fires, scraped and cured the skins of animals, sewed these for use as clothing, lived together in a world of cooperative labor, had means of protecting themselves against predators, and possessed not only tools but, crucially for their connection to the world inhabited by us as their descendants, tools for making tools.

Heidegger was right to think that none of this is made comprehensible by a grand scheme of uniform historical time. What he failed to see, in Ricoeur’s view, is that such abstract time plays very little part in how we ordinarily make sense of the human past. We do not look at traces of a “Dasein that has been there” as inert evidence. We try, instead, to imagine the world of the maker of the stone axe as it existed for its inhabitants. At an intuitive level—a level so deep that it does not strike us as a conscious choice or “method”—we imagine it as a world of volition and action, of choices, motives, resentments, attachments, and the like. The people of the stone axe, we infer, hunted, stored food against the dearth of winter, had rituals for burying their dead. Ricoeur’s point is that we tell ourselves “little stories” about this or that portion of the past—about *this* stone axe, *this* clay tablet—while at the same time understanding them as episodes in a human story that began with the emergence of Dasein and continues to the present moment.

Human time, in short, is always narrated time. We cannot connect ourselves to traces of the past without filling in the intervening time with the outlines of a story about humanity. The timeline that hangs on the schoolroom wall thus has less to do with Heidegger's universal time, Ricoeur would claim, than with a preliminary ordering of events that can only be understood in terms of narrative causality. To understand why Caesar's legions felt a personal loyalty to him, it will be necessary to establish that his campaign in Gaul took place before, and not after, his crossing of the Rubicon. To understand why Cro-Magnon man came gradually to displace the Neanderthals who had previously been successful in the same physical environment, it will be necessary to undertake exact dating of burial sites, tools, fossil remains, and other traces of both populations. But this is to put such techniques as carbon-14 dating at the service not of some uniform historical time but of a collective narrative, the recovery of the human past, one might say, as a Heideggerian project itself carried out in a time of preoccupation and concern.

Heidegger described the falsity of ordinary time as an endless succession of uniform "nows," none distinguishable from any other. His term for this mode of temporality was, in fact, *Jetzt-Zeit*, or "now-time." But for Ricoeur, *now* will always be instead a positive term referring to a time of mind or consciousness as it is linked to a repetition or regularity occurring independent of itself. We could imagine, for instance, an eternal pendulum that had been in motion since the beginning of the universe. Ricoeur's point is that this would not in itself measure time. Only the connection of a "now" of lived time to one of its movements could make it serve as a clock. Such connections do mark, as Heidegger saw, the origin of calendrical time, but Ricoeur's concern is only incidentally with origins. The more important point will be that the regularities associated with Aristotle's "time of the world"—the changing intervals of daylight and darkness, the phases of the moon, the wheeling of the constellations through the sky—can help determine, but cannot enumerate, the periods of calendrical time.

For Ricoeur, one important sign that calendrical systems

involve an irreducible narrativity is that all societies have some version of what Émile Benveniste calls chronicle time, in which an originary event—the birth of Jesus or the Buddha, the Hegira, the *ab urbe condita* of the Romans—marks a point from which everything else can be measured. This is, for him, the counterpart at the collective or communal level of imposing a *now* of lived experience on the merely mechanical movements of the pendulum. Part of Ricoeur's point will thus be that in a world of purely physical time the notion of an event that breaks with past events or inaugurates a new era—in *this* year Christ was crucified in Jerusalem, in *this* year Luther posted the Wittenberg Theses, in *this* year Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation—would not be intelligible. But Ricoeur also wants us to see that the very notion of an originary event defines historical time as a “third time,” the cultural medium within which individuals and societies live out their temporal existence.

How, then, do cultures sustain the narratives set in motion by an originary event? The answer, for Ricoeur, lies in a human generation conceived as what Alfred Schutz called a community in time, or what might equally be called a community formed *by* time. Ricoeur's own account is based on what Karl Mannheim called the “we relation” of contemporaries within a culture. The sense of one's own generation, Mannheim said, derives from experiences that leave the impress of a shared destiny—going through the Great Depression, remembering the Normandy landings, recalling the March on Washington—far stronger than the more contingent bonds that make one, say, a weekend golfer or a midwestern American. This in turn makes possible a connectedness between generations. The story told by a grandfather to his grandson is filled with people unknown to the child, but the we-relation with the grandfather then implies a we-relation between the old man and *his* grandfather. If I tell my grandchild a tale my grandfather told me, Ricoeur remarks, I am not only handing down a community in time but creating the time in which such a community exists.

A world crowded with meanings, Heidegger said, gives rise to linguistic distinctions: “to significations, words accrue.” Ricoeur's

point about narrativity as a human universal might be put in similar terms: to significant human actions, stories accrue. Within any human society, even at the most ordinary level of daily life, stories already serve to make intelligible a heterogeneous mix of motives, actions, and circumstances ungraspable in any other terms. At the collective level, narrative serves the same purpose in relation to a sense of shared destiny, placing nations or civilizations within what Ricoeur calls the "third time" of narrativity. This is why, in his view, any meaningful account of the human past must itself operate in terms of narrative causality. As a contemporary historian, I may not think about my new history of Rome as a story, but it must nonetheless try to understand how and why the Romans understood their own origins through a story about twins suckled by a wolf.

How does narrative causality come to serve as historical explanation? For some philosophers of history, the answer has seemed to lie in the relation between an event and its consequences. Ricoeur considers, for instance, Arthur Danto's notion of the "narrative sentence" as the basic unit of historical writing. Through it, Danto means to challenge the naive idea of history as a true account of events in the past just as they happened. Imagine, says Danto, an Ideal Chronicler, a superhuman intelligence or, as we might now be more disposed to say, a computer-satellite-video array, able to record all events in a given time period at the moment they occurred. The point, when we pause to think about it, is obvious. The Chronicler would not be operating as a historian. The meaning of an event lies in its consequences, and this by definition is something the Chronicler cannot know. The Chronicler's record would in this case be something like the jagged scrawl of an electrocardiogram before it has been interpreted by a physician. For the historian, Danto argues, interpretation will always take the form of a story about the past.

To bring out what he takes to be the narrative structure of historical explanation, Danto analyzes such sentences as "In 1717, the author of *Rameau's Nephew* was born." If we adopt a simple notation, this brings to light a structure of $E_1 \rightarrow E_2 \leftarrow T$, where the point is to put one event (E_1)—a baby is born—in relation to another (E_2)—

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