

Narrative Configuration: Notes on the Ambiguous Workings of Hindsight

Abstract: In this paper I analyze the role of hindsight in narrative configuration. Configuration means the grasping together of disparate elements into a coherent whole. I argue that hindsight brings the temporal constraints on what we can know to the fore, but it is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, hindsight is an indispensable tool both to historical research and everyday narrative reflection. On the other hand it biases our judgments, conceals the contingency of the world and makes us view the result as inevitable. The fictive elements stemming from the narrative form blurs the border between research and fiction.

Keywords: bias, configuration, hindsight, narrative sentences, re-description, wholeness, temporality, truth value

Storytelling is a ubiquitous human activity. We listen to stories from a very young age, we tell stories easily and effortlessly and we usually have no problems in understanding the stories of others. The practice of storytelling is found in all cultures and has a history as long as the history of humankind – narration is one of the basic ways in which we represent the world. The term *narrative* itself, however, remains somewhat elusive. It is a broad term used in a variety of ways. Narrative has also become increasingly popular in scientific research, both as an object of study and as a methodology and this proliferation arguably adds to the elusiveness of the term. It can refer to ideologies, an over-arching research paradigm, entire life stories, folk tales, lies, interview excerpts and historical analyses. Riessman and Speedy (2007) argue that the term has come to mean anything and everything and that conceptual specificity has been lost with popularization. We may believe we talk about the same thing, namely narrative, but in fact we may talk at cross purposes because we attribute different meanings to the term.

In this article I shall analyze narratives mainly as a form of representation. That is to say, I shall treat narratives as told stories, and my interest lies in inquiring into how they come into being. The process of putting together a story has certain characteristics that matter significantly to the validity or truthfulness of the story, and should therefore be of interest to researchers who write up their findings in story form – assuming that researchers honour the distinction between research and fiction. My take on the notion of narrative is thus classical. I

shall treat them as stories told about some event or incident after the fact. It is important that stories are told after the fact; it means that retrospection is crucially involved in the configuration of the story. First I shall look into the process of putting together a story after the fact; a process variously called configuration or *emplotment*. Second, I shall discuss the role and place of retrospection in this process. Configuring a story after the fact requires hindsight, and hindsight is a double-edged sword. I shall argue that on the one hand hindsight is a necessary condition for configuration; and on the other hand it brings with it a certain bias that complicates our understanding of the truth value of stories.

The Process of Configuration

There is a distinction in the field of narrative between those who hold that stories are told and those who hold that they can also be lived. For example, Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (1991, 2000) hold that stories are both lived and told. Human experience is storied in nature, an expression of an unfolding story. Those who hold this view also speak of experience and life as full of untold stories, stories waiting to be told. Mark Freeman (2010) seems committed to much the same view when he writes of stories-in-the-making; the story is there, it is unfolding but cannot be told yet because it has no ending, the ending being contingent on the future. The other view says that stories are told, and this is the view I am adopting. Stories are constructed of an event, of some experience, after the fact.

To work out the implications of this view, let me begin by stipulating what narrative configuration is. According to Paul Ricoeur (1984), configuration means the “grasping together” of such diverse elements as plots, characters, actions, events and causal sequences into a meaningful, coherent whole; this whole being the narrative. The story begins at a nonrandom beginning, proceeds through a middle and comes to a nonrandom closure or ending. The beginning-middle-ending structure is distinctive of narrative as representational form. It expresses the temporal quality of narrative and circumscribes the wholeness of the story. The grasping is performed by a narrator, who sometimes is a researcher, after the fact – there can be no ending unless the story is told after the fact, and without ending there is no story (yet). The same grasping process is also covered by the term *emplotment* (a translation of the French *mis en intrigue*). This term serves to highlight the role of the plot. One might wonder what a plot is; it sounds like something that belongs in a murder mystery rather than in everyday stories, let alone in research reports. But plot, I think, is most fruitfully understood as the point of the story, as the organizing principle that allows all the other

elements to find their place in the whole. Donald Polkinghorne (1995) makes the plot part and parcel of the configuration of a narrative; it is the plot that determines beginning and end and provides criteria for selecting events and actions. Ricoeur tends to agree; he describes the plot as the work of synthesis, as that which grasps together. The plot, Ricoeur underscores, is an *invention*; it serves to configure and reconfigure confused experiences, bringing contour, wholeness, magnitude and significance.

Others, e.g. Hayden White (1978) and Arthur Danto (1985), point to the pivotal role of the ending in configuring a story. It is the ending, often understood as an effect or as an event to be explained, which determines what the beginning of the story is, and thereby serves as the main criterion for selecting which actions, events and sequences that are to become part of the story. But where does an ending come from? No phenomenon, event or experience come readily marked with the label “ending”. Philosopher of history Hayden White puts it like this:

But both the beginning state of affairs and the ending one are inevitably poetic constructions, and as such are dependent upon the modality of the figurative language used to give them the appearance of coherence (1978, p.60).

We do not live stories, White declares, but we give our lives meaning by retrospectively configuring them into stories. This view is shared by a good many influential narrative theorists, such as Arthur Danto (1985), Louis Mink (1978) and Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1988), but not, for example, by David Carr (1991), who sees stories as both lived and told. Ricoeur, as we have seen, states that the narrative form is not itself found in the material, but is imposed. Experience and life do not have narrative form but are given this form in the telling. This applies to all stories, whether told about everyday occurrences, crucial incidents in our lives; or whether they are biographies told by researchers or historical developments described by historians.

The Role of Hindsight

If all stories are told after the fact, they all require retrospection. Even a story about an incident that happened today requires looking backward to review the events that led up to the incident in question. Retrospection and hindsight imply a temporal distance, however small, between narrator and events narrated, and are central vehicles for both reflection and narrative configuration. In historical research this is even more evident; history concerns the past and

retrospection is necessary. It is thus no coincidence that historians employ narrative form, and that philosophers of history have discussed the topic intensely. I will begin my inquiry into the role of hindsight by looking at the idea of narrative sentences.

Narrative Sentences

The concept of narrative sentences was coined by philosopher of history Arthur Danto (1985). Narrative sentences point directly to the most distinctive feature of narratives as well as to the centrality of hindsight in narrative configuration. As Danto puts it,

Their most general characteristic is that they refer to at least two time-separated events though they only *describe* (are only *about*) the earliest event to which they refer (1985, p.143).

For example, “the murder of Grand Duke Franz Ferdinand and Grand Duchess Sophie in June 1914 was the beginning of World War I”. This is a narrative sentence referring to and connecting two separate events (E1 and E2, as Danto calls them), describing the first of them (E1). Such sentences are an integral part of all narrative writing, Danto insists, and intimately connected to our concept of history and historical understanding. The use of narrative sentences sets narrative off from chronicles, which also are possible representations of temporal sequences of events. David Carr (1991) provides a vivid illustration of the difference. A radio announcer giving a live description of a baseball game is like a chronicler; he describes what happens in the order in which it happens. However, the *story* of the game is another matter altogether; it “... is told afterwards and in full knowledge of who won. It will mention only the most important events, especially those that contributed to scoring points and thus to the outcome” (1991, p. 59). Danto’s point is that not even an omniscient chronicler, which he dubs the Ideal Chronicler, one who could record every detail of every event the way a witness could describe it, can provide a full-blown historical account. That is because chronicles miss the class of descriptions of events under which the event cannot be witnessed. The truth of an event can only be known after the event, Danto suggests, sometimes even long after. Chronicles, as moment-by-moment descriptions, cannot logically incorporate narrative sentences; historical statements that describe events by referring to subsequent events. At the moment of the murder of Franz Ferdinand and his wife, nobody could have described it as the start of WW1 that because it only became clear later that a war

followed the incident. The description is only possible in hindsight. To use Ricoeur's words, the incident only acquires contour, significance and magnitude when set in a narrative.

Some observations should be made at this point. First, retrospection requires knowledge of, or minimally a preliminary identification of, an ending – what I in the next section shall call outcome knowledge. It is only with knowledge of the ending that we can look backward and postulate connections between E1 and E2; that is, describe E1 in terms of the later event E2. Again, what we select as beginning is determined or at least strongly influenced by the ending. Narratives may describe the beginning with reference to the end; thus organizing the sequence of events into a temporal whole. As Danto rightly suggests, this kind of retrospective reasoning appears in narratives of all sorts, and even enters naturally into common speech. Second, as we see clearly in Carr's example of the radio announcer, selection of events is necessary to the configuration of narratives. Such selection is done according to more or less explicit criteria. Polkinghorne, as we have seen, suggests that the plot, as the point of the story, provides the criteria. All narrative accounts by their nature must leave things out; if they make no distinction between relevant and irrelevant things they turn into chronicles and become useless for purposes of understanding. For example, events that have no consequences we judge significant should be left out of the account. Judgments of significance are essential to the very structure of narratives, Danto argues (p.134). If E1 is not significant with regards to later Es, it does not belong in the story. Third, to underscore the deep connection between hindsight and narrative sentences: hindsight permits description of E1 under which E1 could not have been witnessed; nobody could have described the murder of Franz Ferdinand and his wife as the onset of WW1 when it happened. This view has several ramifications, one of which concerns vocabulary, and another that concerns the possibility of knowledge. As regards vocabulary; for it to be true that Euclid *anticipated* Fermat (completely fictitious example), it is logically necessary that Fermat came around later. In fact, past tense verbs such as anticipated, instigated, began, preceded, gave rise to, etc., all require the occurrences of certain later events for the description to be true. Sentences using such terms are narrative sentences. Their usage abounds in daily conversations, which attests to Danto's view that narrative sentences enter quite naturally into common speech. As regards the possibility of knowledge, a retrospective narrator can know things about an event that a witness to the same event could not have known because the witness stands in the wrong temporal relationship to the event. This is the knowledge of the event as *re-described* in terms of later events; events that at the time were in the witness's future but are now in the narrator's past.

Hindsight, a Troublemaker

As we have seen, a narrator, who has knowledge of the ending, can re-describe earlier events in terms of later events. Earlier events can be given a new status, most notably as *causes* of later events, but also because we simply change our judgment of their meaning and significance in the light of later events. This kind of retrospective re-description is essential to the configuration of narratives. The primary vehicle for such re-description is narrative sentences, and such sentences, as we have seen, circumscribe a temporal whole by connecting (at least) two events separated by time. This kind of wholeness is viewed by White, Mink and Ricoeur alike to be the result of poetic composition, whereas for Danto it seems to be a natural thing. There may even be normative genre demands involved here, dating back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, which force narrativists to look for wholeness, unity and coherence:

Now a thing is whole if it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not come necessarily after something else, but after which it is natural for another thing to exist or come to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which naturally comes after something else, either as its necessary sequel or as its usual sequel, but itself has nothing after it. A middle is that which both comes after something else and has another thing following it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, will neither begin at some chance point nor end at some chance point, but will observe the principles here stated (Aristotle 1982, Ch. 7, 1450b).

Aristotle speaks here of fiction, but it does seem that these “principles” for plot construction have spilled over into empirical narratives along with the term “plot” itself. Louis Mink (1978), for example, says that chronicles have no form other than that of chronology – events simply following after one another. Narratives on the other hand must have a unity that shows up in the beginning-middle-ending sequence, where events follow *from* one another or are in some other way connected. This form, he states, is imposed on the events.

This imposition has a lot to do with hindsight, with the kind of retrospective re-description that is at the heart of narrative configuration. Without hindsight things do not hang together. To repeat; hindsight is a necessary condition of narrative configuration, for the identification of temporal wholes, endings and beginnings and their coherent connections. But hindsight also has its dangers, as discussed by Georges Florovsky (1969). Historians, Florovsky argues, should never attempt to know the past as the eye-witnesses knew it – they

cannot be an eye-witness and should not want it. Historians, and other narrators, want to know about past events in the context of later happenings; historians know more about a past period than the people who lived then were ever able to know, just as narrators know more about the plot than the characters in the story (Carr 1991). But looking backward, we run the risk of discovering “too much” in the past, Florovsky says, we may for example see “more order in the flux of things than probably there ever was” (p.362). The cohesion of aspects may be exaggerated for the sake of intelligibility; a tendency that is strengthened if narrative researchers feel obliged to satisfy normative genre demands of coherence and unity. All the major generalizations, types and categories of historiography have been created by exaggerating some features and minimizing others; the Hellenic mind, medieval man, bourgeois man. “The main danger of all these generalizations is that they overstress the inner “necessity” of a particular course of behavior”, Florovsky says (pp.363-364). History itself is fluid, flexible, and unpredictable. Inherent in typical and categorical images is a kind of determinism, he argues, and his analysis continues as follows:

The tendency toward determinism is somehow implied in the method of retrospection itself. In retrospection we seem to perceive the *logic* of events, which unfold themselves in a regular order, according to a recognizable pattern, with an alleged inner necessity, so that we get the impression that it really could not have happened otherwise. The ultimate *contingency* of the process is concealed in the rational schemes, and sometimes it is deliberately eliminated (p.364).

Florovsky’s writings do not seem to have had much of an impact on narrative theory and methodology, but has been taken up by social psychologists. For example, Baruch Fischhoff (1975, 1988) takes up on Florovsky’s conception of determinism and inevitability of outcomes. In a highly interesting series of empirical studies, using a control group design, he demonstrates the thoroughgoing effects of hindsight on perception and judgment. One of his most significant findings is that outcome knowledge dramatically increases the perceived likelihood of the outcome in question. In fact, with hindsight the outcome frequently comes to be viewed as inevitable; for example expressed as “it really could not have happened otherwise” or “I do not see what I could have done differently”. Fischhoff terms this way of thinking “creeping determinism”. The surprises the past held become systematically underestimated, he argues – the space left for chance, randomness and uncertainty becomes very restricted. Let us look again at Carr’s example of the baseball match. The story of the

match is narrated with outcome knowledge; a position that permits the narrator to select the most important events. It is not difficult to imagine that those selected events may make the outcome seem pretty inevitable. Nor is it difficult to imagine that this hindsight effect can be found in research-based narratives about teachers, classrooms and teaching practice, or in everyday reflection on various happenings in our lives.

One possible explanation of creeping determinism, Fischhoff suggests, is that outcome knowledge changes the judged relevance of data describing the situation that precedes the event in question. Naturally, it is easier after the event to sort relevant from irrelevant data. In summing up the results of this experiment, Fischhoff says: “Inspection reveals that the relevance attributed to any datum is highly dependent on which outcome, if any, subjects believe to be true” (1975, p.291). Relevance judgments differed markedly between the experimental group who knew the outcome (of a certain battle) and the control group, who did not know. Evidently, knowing what happened facilitates knowing what to look for and where to look for it.

However, people are largely unaware of hindsight effects, Fischhoff asserts. Not only that, but we also tend to believe that the postulated inevitability of the outcome was apparent also in foresight, when we did not have the benefit of outcome knowledge. We generally fail to reconstruct our own foresightful judgments, and we generally fail to reconstruct the epistemic situation of other people who are ignorant of the outcome. We are poor judges of what both we and others knew at a certain time, in a certain situation, and especially of what we could have known. Thus, hindsight biases our judgment of what both we and others would have known without outcome knowledge, and it biases our judgments of what both we and others as a matter of fact did know in foresight. This finding resonates well with normative views stemming from Aristotle that beginnings and endings should be *nonrandom*; and with Florovsky, who claims that chance events get cleared away as the contingency of historical processes is concealed in what we take to be the logic of events. It also points to another feature of stories: we look backward and reason retrospectively when we configure our stories, but when we tell them, we tell them forward – from beginning, through the middle and to the ending. We often attribute causation to this sequence of events; that seems to come natural to us since we often explain outcomes by showing how one thing led to another. Causation is temporal, it moves forward from cause to effect, and it may be easy for us to retrospectively attribute predictive power to the initial cause and think we should have known its effect in advance. However that may be, we move very quickly from judgments of “did know” to “could have known” and on to “should have known” and may thus come to blame both

ourselves and others unjustifiably, for example for not understanding what “must” be the result of such and such actions. If second-guessed by a hindsightful observer, mishaps and chance results may seem like incompetence.

Retrospective judges effortlessly make sense of what they know about past events by constructing coherent temporal wholes. Such acts of configuration are so natural to us, Fischhoff suggests, that we are oblivious to the dangers and effects of hindsight. When a narrator receives outcome knowledge (or decides that a certain event is an effect or an outcome), a re-description of events may take place because we change our judgments of the relative relevance of available data. This pushes our judgments of the outcome in the direction of inevitability. As Fischhoff puts it, “Having made this reinterpretation, the reported outcome now seems a more or less inevitable outgrowth of the reinterpreted situation” (1988, p.343). Narrative configuration is thus susceptible to various hindsight biases. The result may be a coherent, unitary story beginning at a nonrandom point, proceeding through (causally) connected sequences of events and ending with an inevitable closure of the plot. But this, as we have seen, may be a distortion of the phenomenon and amount to a serious misrepresentation.

Hindsight, an Indispensable Tool

The picture that emerges of the role of hindsight thus far is that it is something of a double-edged sword: necessary to historical and narrative configuration but at the same time a source of both false representations and unfair judgments of others. In psychology, hindsight seems to be mainly associated with bias; hindsightful stories distort “what really happened”. In this section I will take a broader perspective and look at what hindsight can do for us that no other mode of reasoning can do.

Hindsight implies temporal distance. The concept of temporal distance plays an important role in different ways. Epistemically, this distance is an advantage for the narrator, David Carr (1991) insists. The hindsight position not only means possession of outcome knowledge, if we follow Louis Mink (1987) it also frees the narrator from the constraints of the present by allowing him or her to occupy a position after, above or outside the events narrated, making possible both flashbacks and flashforwards in the telling of the story. As Carr points out, in retrospect factors may come to light that the agent was not aware of at the time the actions and events in question took place. This may well include factors that the agent for various reasons *could* not have been aware of at the time. Some descriptions can only be done in hindsight, after the occurrence of other events. This is the insight captured in

narrative sentences: the murder of Franz Ferdinand could only be truthfully described as the event instigating WW1 after WW1 was a fact; a handkerchief dropped and picked up could only be truthfully described as the beginning of a romantic affair after the affair had in fact materialized.

Narrative sentences contain temporal information; they connect earlier events with later events, generally in the form of a re-description of the earlier event. Such re-description is an act of emplotment precisely in that it ties two (or more) separate events together, often but not necessarily by relating them causally. Earlier events become causes retrospectively; thus they gain a status they did not have when they occurred. In hindsight, the meaning and status of events and actions become re-configured in the light of present experience or newly acquired data. An historical narrative, Danto argues, is always in principle revisable. The past itself does not change when new things happen, but our judgments of the meaning and significance of past events may change. The innocuous fact that Nancy Hanks Lincoln gave birth to a son in 1809 takes on a new significance in 1860, when this son became President of the United States. In 1809 we could not have described the birth of Abraham Lincoln as the birth of the American President in the period 1860-1865; that description can only be done in hindsight. This is not really a causal connection; Lincoln's birth is not the cause of his becoming President (but a necessary condition, we might say). The re-description of the 1809 event rather gives it a new meaning, a new significance.

It is evident that hindsight is of the essence in historical research; if we think that historical understanding (mainly) concerns changes over time, hindsight is indispensable. Without hindsight, things hardly hang together, Mink (1978) observes. But the same mechanism is found in everyday life. We see our experiences of the past in relation what has happened since, as (re)understood from the present. Let us explore this everyday function of hindsight a little.

Our immediate experience is characterized by flux and indeterminacy, Mark Freeman thinks (Freeman 2010). Hindsight, by providing temporal distance, also provides the necessary distance of self from self. Hindsight is thus a key player in moral life, he argues, but a key player that holds both promises and perils. Looking backward we may become aware of the error of our ways; hindsight can be a source of guilt and shame if it reveals painful truths we did not, could not or would not see earlier. This means that we are often (too) late in this kind of moral seeing, in realizing or in understanding – a fact that bespeaks the limits of moral life, Freeman says. Our feelings, confused as they may be, reflect our moral commitments: “But it is a virtue *deferred*, one that oftentimes must await the awful wisdom of hindsight to

become manifest” (2010, p. 84). Self-probing thus may be painful – the evaluative stakes can be high indeed when we look backward and review our lives. But at the same time hindsight can also work the opposite way; there is much that can be appreciated anew from a temporal distance. Experiences may acquire new meanings and emotional force by the distance conferred over time. Endings that reverberate backward from the present to configure a story may also serve to re-configure an old story and bring a measure of closure to a story that was previously open or unresolved. Whichever function is at play – it is the distance that allows us to see, Freeman points out. Hindsight allows us to take up what could not be seen in the immediacy of the moment and bind disparate episodes into a story. Hindsight and narrative reflection are privileged vehicles for exploring and understanding human life, Freeman argues, and I believe he has a good case here.

Hindsight thus allows us to configure stories, reflect upon our lives and understand ourselves and our past in a manner we could not otherwise do. But has it always been like this? It seems not – hindsight has a fairly short history. It has not always been indispensable. It has not even always been the natural dimension of human memory, life and history that it has come to be now. The development of hindsight is intimately connected to development of the concept of historical time – a subject that holds endless fascination for many narrative theorists (e.g. Carr 1991, Danto 1985, Mink 1987, Ricoeur 1984, 1985, 1988). Hindsight became interesting and important when people came to think of the present as something that differs from the past and will not be repeated in the future. In mythical times the pattern for understanding time was the circle, where things repeat themselves in regular patterns (Eliade 2005). You know the present, you know the past and you know what the future will bring because it is a repetition of the past. This conception of time, Mircea Eliade argues, brings with it a kind of socio-centric conception of personhood; it is impossible to disassociate the individual from the social nexus it belongs to. To make a long story short, the emergence of hindsight took a long time coming because it requires a different understanding of time, a different kind of relationship to the personal past, and the possibility of an individual that stands out from its social context. The understanding of time we hold today is historical: time is linear and irreversible, things do not repeat themselves, and the past no longer exists except as traces and in memories. The mythical circle of time is replaced by the historical arrow of time. It is precisely this differentiation between past, present and future that allows the emergence of hindsight and its capacity for constructing and reconstructing meaning. Meaning becomes shifting and mobile, a function of both *now* and *then*, and our stories of the past in principle become infinitely revisable, as Danto points out.

But the history of hindsight is not limited to the present and the past. Narrative understanding looks backward to configure a story, and then tells the story forward. This forward telling implies the future. Our thought moves both backward and forward, while time moves forward and lived time is irreversible. When we retrospectively re-configure our past by endowing past experience with new meaning, we re-configure our future as well, Freeman claims (2010, p.190). By such back-and-forth reflection we provide the contours of what our story-to-be might possibly be. But with historical time and its associated conception of individual agency came the realization that things could always have been otherwise, that they might have turned out differently, and that we might have acted otherwise. This means that while the events and experiences of the past cannot be changed, the present is open and in principle indeterminate. It must await the future to have its meaning discerned. We find the same view in Danto, who argues that to understand the significance of event E as it happens; we have to know to which later events it will be connected. And this we do not know, because the future is indeterminate. Freeman's point, however, is to problematize the weight we tend to accord to the present and he states, "my immersion in the moment, perhaps in virtue of its radiance and brightness, can blind me to "the big picture" [the back-and-forth of past-present-future]" (p.207). Hindsight thus is a corrective to the limits of the present.

Arthur Danto (1985) has developed a rather sophisticated view of the role of the future for narrative and history, but from a different perspective. While Freeman's context is what we might describe as philosophy of human life, Danto's context is analytical philosophy of history. Narrative sentences make claims about past events while referring to later events. Still new events make possible the historians' continuing job and future historians may give a past event a significance that past historians could not have done. There are thus temporal constraints on *what* we can claim to know *when*. The past is always open for re-configuration; future events will change the contemporary narratives of the past. But there is more to it than that, Danto argues. A good many descriptions of people's actions exhibit a temporal structure similar to that of narrative sentences, with the exception that they connect present and *future*. Most descriptions of actions are extremely flexible, Danto asserts, in that they cover infinitely many sorts of behavior. And often we describe them in terms of a (possible) *result*, because we see some connection between the behavior and some future result (1985, pp. 159-165). Danto calls such verbs "project verbs" and one of their features is that they have duration. For example, "I am writing an article". The Ideal Chronicler, the I.C. for short, who records things as they happen, is denied recourse to project verbs, Danto argues:

Not to have the use of project verbs is to lack the linguistic wherewithal for *organizing* the various statements of the I.C., but more importantly, for the I.C. to lack the use of project words is to render it incapable of describing what men are *doing* – and so disqualifies it from setting down whatever happens, as it happens, the way it happens (1985, p.162).

Thus even commonsensical descriptions of actions have a temporal nature. They differ from narrative sentences in that the occurrence of later events is not required for the description to be true. I could be described as writing an article even if the article was never finished. The upshot of all this is that our linguistic practices are deeply suffused with temporality, both backward and forward pointing.

Hindsight, Truth, and Fictionalized Accounts

It emerges from the above that stories may have a troublesome relationship to that which they are about, their “object”. Just how troublesome one thinks it is, of course depends several factors. It depends on the audience, the context of the storytelling and how strong the genre demands are, and it depends on what you take truth to be and what you take the nature of the “object” to be. Researchers, I insist, should worry about this relationship precisely because they are researchers and therefore operate on some commitment to truth. I am well aware that many narrative researchers skirt the notion of truth. The criteria generally offered for judging narratives – e.g. plausibility, evocativeness, engaging plot, coherence, familiarity, moral persuasiveness, and so forth – do not distinguish between empirical narratives and fiction; this has been the topic of much discussion (see e.g. O’Dea 1994, Phillips 1997, Author 2007). But I do not wish here to discuss criteria, not do I wish to discuss the truth value of individual stories by seeing how stories fare in the light of different truth theories; I rather wish to pursue a different set of problems.

As we have seen, the troublesome relationship between stories and their object has several sources. First, there is hindsight, which affects our perceptions, our judgments of likelihood and relevance and distorts what we think we could have known in foresight (Fischhoff 1975, 1988). Seeing the past through the present, as we necessarily do, thus makes it impossible for us to describe it as it “really was”. Second, there is the narrative form. The act of configuration, Ricoeur (1988) says, imposes a narrative structure on a formless flow of events or stream of experience. Hence, he argues, narratives do not really describe the world;

rather they re-describe it. For Ricoeur hindsightful re-description amounts to a kind of metaphorization which gives the story an “as if” quality. Emplotment brings something new into the world, renders the world as something it in fact is not (pp.155-158). That is to say, the very form of narrative practically assures that they misrepresent their object. Third, as Danto (1985) points out, narrative configuration is something *we* do. And “Not merely that, but the imposition of a narrative organization logically involves us with an inexpugable subjective factor” (p. 142). In fact, Danto thinks, there is an element of sheer arbitrariness in emplotment. Yet he also thinks that narratives are capable of rendering true historical accounts.

To begin with, let me repeat that a narrative is more than a collection of facts. Narrative is a way of organizing disparate elements in a temporal whole, and therefore goes beyond what is given, offering an interpretation. A mere collection of facts would not be a narrative but a chronicle. Both Freeman and Danto argue that the question of “what really happened” cannot be a matter of facts alone; it requires not only description but judgments of connections, meaning and significance. Louis Mink (1978) joins in: if you ascertain the truth of all the events in the narrative it will not give us the truth of the whole narrative, because such a procedure presupposes a chronicle rather than a narrative. Judgments of meaning and significance can of course be criticized; not on the grounds that they are false, but perhaps on the ground that they are exaggerations, underestimations, wrongheaded or unwarranted.

In a similar vein; a maximally detailed account would not be a narrative, rather it too would resemble a chronicle. Chronicles, describing things that happen as they happen, have no criteria for including or excluding events. Narratives by their nature leave things out, select and simplify. Do they thereby necessarily misrepresent their “object”? It seems to me that simplification is a problem for the truth value of a narrative only if you adopt two related assumptions. First, that truth requires a description of all details. As far as I know, no truth theory makes such demands. If it did, it would render all representations (most notably scientific theories) false because no representations encompass all details. Second, selection of elements indeed yields a simplified representation, but as Freeman argues, this is a problem only if you assume that there can be a representation of the world that relies on no selection at all, and that this representation is the standard, the ideal that all representations should aspire to. Simplification is legitimate in all representational practices and is in itself not a threat to truth, but of course – the line between legitimate simplification and illegitimate oversimplification may be very thin.

Since Ranke, historians have lived with the dictum that history, as an academic discipline, should render events as they “really happened”, “how it really was”. This job is

made impossible if we accept the idea that narrative form necessarily distorts the object. But how do we know this? How do we know that reality is a formless flow of events, so that narrative imposes a form on it that it does not have? Are all narratives inevitably fiction? The concept of reality implied by such questions is generally left un-analyzed, Mark Freeman (2010) argues. His views are interesting. Accusations of distortion and falsity, he argues, are too often parasitic on an overly narrow notion of what reality is. And when the notion of reality is narrow, the notion of fiction accordingly gets more space – if you require that a narrative must describe all details to be true, then all representation becomes fiction. This underlying conception of reality is problematic for several reasons:

[Because] it is equated with the allegedly raw and pristine, the uninterpreted and unconstructed, and because it is tied to a conception of time [...] that is better applied to the world of *things* than to the world of *people*. Thus, the conception of reality that usually surfaces when memoirs and autobiographies are relegated to the status of fiction [...] is one that is imagined to somehow be free of our own designs, a string of “stuff” that just happens, in time, and that we will inevitably falsify when we later look backward and try to impose some order (Freeman 2010, pp.174-175).

There are two important facets to this view. The first is that since we tend to think of reality as the immediate, the momentary and the present, we as a consequence problematize the ability of memory to yield true stories. And there can indeed be false memories, memories that have been planted in your mind, memories that become blurred with time, and memories that we do not know where come from – memory is a stipulation, Freeman argues, an amalgam of first- and secondhand sources that we no longer manage to keep apart. The second is the status of the witness. If reality is equated with the immediate and the present, it is but a short leap to infer that only witnesses to an event can know how it really was. It stands to reason that many historians have wished they could go back in time and witness the event they investigate and see for themselves how it really happened. But the present is overrated, Freeman thinks. There are profound limits to it, because we tend to be unreflectively caught up in it and because witnesses who are enmeshed in an event do not have access to it all but only to a fraction of it. Besides, even witnesses must rely on their own memory, as Danto points out. We do well here to remember Florovsky, who states that historians should not wish they were witnesses; they should rather take advantage of their own temporal distance to the event in question. Hindsight is re-description from afar, and often understanding requires distance. Hindsight

may; Freeman suggests, be the very condition for the emergence of truth and thus yield an understanding that cannot occur in the immediacy and flux of the present moment. In fact, we may now make re-descriptions that are true of past events, but that may not have been true *in* the past, for example that of classicism that it anticipated romanticism. To discover romantic elements in classicism we needed the concept of romanticism and some criteria for recognition. We can *now* truthfully re-describe classicism as exhibiting certain romantic elements, but that description could not truthfully have been given at the time because the classicists, as “witnesses”, lacked the concept of romanticism (Danto 1985, p.169). The romantic elements are put there intentionally by us, but that does not make our re-description untrue. The truth of a matter is thus not given at any point in time. It should be noted here that our re-description does not necessarily falsify the witnesses’ own description; it places the event in a different temporal structure and can therefore describe a different truth about it.

Is there a sharp line to be drawn between empirical and fictional narratives? Granted that there might be a poetic element to determining a beginning, and that the resulting wholes are to some degree arbitrary, are all the stories we tell essentially fictitious? Aristotle, we do well to remember, applied the term narrative to fiction, which concerned the ordered, the coherent, the universal. Genre demands might lead us to employ fictive devices and poetic elements to increase the literary appeal, but it is not clear how big this problem is or how damaging it is for the truth value of (research) narratives. Certain fictive elements are always involved in re-figuring the past, Freeman thinks, for example spontaneous selection of events and actions, the smoothing out of hitches and wrinkles, and the shaping of the elements to fit the overall plot. The story thus not thereby become false, he argues, its big picture can still be true. With the qualification, of course, that there always are things we do not know and that future events may force us to re-describe the past. The border between history and fiction may be more blurry than we care to think.

Afterword

I have in this paper attempted to configure a story of sorts about the ambiguous workings of hindsight in narrative configuration and their possible consequences for the truth value of narratives. I am now at the ending of the story and am supposed to bring closure to the plot.

However, I fear that I have no closure to bring, in terms of a conclusion to the problem I set out to investigate. My conclusion is just as ambiguous as the topic. Hindsight is a double-edged sword. Some of its workings make it a necessary tool for research and reflection;

hindsight is inextricably connected to looking backward in time, which is what historians do but also what we all do when we provide everyday explanations of how things came to be as they are. Some of its workings we call *bias*; these lead to distortions and misrepresentations of the events we narrate. Yet, hindsight may reveal truths we previously would not or could not see. The nearest I come to a conclusion is that hindsight is indispensable but that there are good and bad uses of it. The good uses, I suggest, minimally hinge on our ability to understand the temporal constraints to what we can be said to know at what time. My conclusion about the truth value of narratives is equally ambiguous; that is because it seems to me that the border between research and fiction is blurred. Not everything in a narrative must be true for the entire narrative to be true; a narrative might exhibit fictive elements and still we might judge it to be true (or “largely” true). Where the tipping point is I do not know.

If narrative unity and coherence depend on a clear ending to a narrative, it is open where that leaves my narrative. However, I am quite happy to leave it open – there will be other words coming after these ones that offer new perspectives on them.

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