

Ricoeur, Imagination, and Historiography

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The vocabulary of narrative, imagination, and social imaginaries has made the rounds in recent decades in various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. In philosophy it was brought about by the linguistic turn and by a variety of phenomenological, hermeneutical, and postmodern writers, the most noted of whom within historiography has perhaps been Hayden White. The constructivist turn of which White became the principal representative in this field was a reaction against empiricist and realist notions of history, which hermeneutical thinkers have also sought to get past without initiating the kind of pendulum swing that often finds a course being overcorrected. Swinging pendulums are often a recipe for error when the better move is to reject what Friedrich Nietzsche called “the faith in opposite values” for a neither-nor position.¹ Neither historical objectivism nor idealism (constructivism, subjectivism) is the better route provided such a viewpoint can be articulated, and this is always a tall order when a dichotomy is as old and deeply rooted as this one. One philosopher known for renouncing this faith is Paul Ricoeur, and it is his legacy, or an aspect of it, that I wish to take up in outlining a historiography that is centered around the concepts of imagination and imaginative schemas.

As John W. M. Krummel has aptly stated, “We are imagining beings. We imagine the past as well as the future to make sense of the present,” and our doing so

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 10.

is one with the art of storytelling.² “There is,” as Richard Kearney puts it, “a whole set of collective stories and histories which need not bear the signature of any individual author, and which exercise a formative influence on our modes of action and behavior in society.”³ What Kearney elsewhere calls “the narrative imperative” comes in many forms: “myth, epic, sacred history, legend, saga, folktale, romance, allegory, confession, chronicle, satire, novel. And within each genre there are multiple sub-genres: oral and written, poetic and prosaic, historical and fictional. But no matter how distinct in style, voice or plot, every story shares the common function of *someone telling something to someone about something*.”⁴ Indeed, “about something”; historical narratives are not about themselves but what happened, and we are not altogether free in the telling. Central to a conception of the historical imagination is the role played by narrative, as philosophers of history have pointed out for a few decades now. Historians, among the various other things that they do, are storytellers, as a great many scholars (e.g., Collingwood, Danto, Mink, Gallie, Ricoeur, White, Ankersmit) have brought to our attention. The basic hypothesis is that when reporting upon the past historians configure what they see in a way roughly analogous with the novelist, and that it is in narrative form that the history of any period or event is understood and communicated.

In the art of what Ricoeur called “emplotment,” the historian “integrates into a meaningful unity components as heterogeneous as circumstances, calculations, actions, aids and obstacles, and, lastly, results”⁵ of human action both intended and unintended. Ricoeur’s analysis in *Time and Narrative* employs a vocabulary of representation and Aristotelian mimesis, and of particular importance for us is where he parts company with White in maintaining that the human past is not chronicle-like but has a “prenarrative quality” that readily lends itself to narrative form. Whether we are speaking of history or fiction, the storytelling art is intermediate between imposition and discovery; the order or structure that every narrative contains is neither wholly invented and projected onto experience nor strictly found within it. Instead, we must speak of narrative as a reinterpretation of what has already been understood or preunderstood, a creative redescription that can modify and enrich an understanding that was inchoate. In analyzing mimesis, Ricoeur introduces a triad of

² John W. M. Krummel, “Rethinking the History of the Productive Imagination in Relation to Common Sense,” in *Social Imaginaries: Critical Interventions*, ed. Suzi Adams and Jeremy C. A. Smith (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 45.

³ Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: From Husserl to Lyotard* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), 157.

⁴ Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2001), 5.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 178–79.

prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration, and it is a triad that carries a good deal of importance for historiography. Human action and experience are temporally structured and symbolically mediated from the outset. The historian's task is not to create these out of nothing but to raise them to a higher order of interpretive clarity. In speaking of the "prenarrative quality of experience," Ricoeur held that "there is no human experience that is not already mediated by symbolic systems and, among them, by narratives."⁶ Historians, like other storytellers, configure material that is not raw data but a bearer of meaning to which the configurative act strives to remain faithful and which the reader will later refigure in the act of reading.

Ricoeur builds upon Clifford Geertz's anthropological insights according to which, as the former put it, "we might speak of an implicit or immanent symbolism, in opposition to an explicit or autonomous one," a symbolism that is public and "not in the mind, not a psychological operation destined to guide action, but a meaning incorporated into action and decipherable from it by other actors in the social interplay."⁷ This order of meaning is culturally operative, prereflective, and symbolically mediated: "Geertz speaks in this sense of 'systems of interacting symbols,' of 'patterns of interworking meanings.' Before being a text, symbolic mediation has a texture. To understand a ritual act is to situate it within a ritual, set within a cultic system, and by degrees within the whole set of conventions, beliefs, and institutions that make up the symbolic framework of a culture."⁸ The imagination works on material that is preunderstood by virtue of the culture in which the storyteller stands, and if it can be said "plot is an imitation of action," it must be kept in mind that actions themselves are always already both temporal and intelligible, albeit in a preliminary way. The poetic act of "emplotment" is no pure invention but "is grounded in a preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character. These features are described rather than deduced."⁹ Imaginative descriptions of the past are not pure constructions but reconstructions that supplement or transform meaning, thus neither creating nor representing in the traditional empiricist sense of copying it. The "semantic innovation" that imaginative activity introduces

lies in the inventing of another work of synthesis—a plot. By means of the plot, goals, causes, and chance are brought together within the temporal unity

⁶ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 74.

⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 57.

⁸ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 58.

⁹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 54.

of a whole and complete action. It is this synthesis of the heterogeneous that brings together narrative close to metaphor. . . . In both cases the semantic innovation can be carried back to the productive imagination and, more precisely, to the schematism that is its signifying matrix. In new metaphors the birth of a new semantic pertinence marvellously demonstrates what an imagination can be that produces things according to rules: 'being good at making metaphors,' said Aristotle, 'is equivalent to being perceptive of resemblances.' But what is it to be perceptive of resemblance if not to inaugurate the similarity by bringing together terms that at first seem 'distant,' then suddenly 'close'?¹⁰

Any such "change of distance in logical space," as Ricoeur put it, "is the work of the productive imagination."¹¹

The imagination "sees as," "grasps together," and reinterprets what it sees, by means of metaphor and narrative in particular but also within a larger schema that is at once conceptual and preconceptual, cultural and linguistic. While mindful that "[h]istorians do argue in a formal, explicit, discursive way," Ricoeur held "that their field of argumentation is considerably vaster than that of general laws" while "their own modes of arguing. . . belong to the narrative domain."¹² Kearney has provided further elucidation of this theme, arguing that no chasm separates the imaginary from the real and that, echoing Ricoeur, "Every society participates in a socio-political *imaginaire*. This represents the ensemble of mythic or symbolic discourses which serve to motivate and guide its citizens. The 'social imaginary' can function as an *ideology* to the extent that it reaffirms a society in its identity by recollecting its 'foundational symbols.'"¹³ Cultural self-understanding is largely a function of the stories that the members of a historical community tell themselves about a shared past. Thus, in the ancient world, "[m]yths were stories people told themselves in order to explain themselves to themselves and to others. But it was Aristotle who first developed this insight into a philosophical position when he argued, in his *Poetics*, that the art of storytelling—defined as the dramatic imitating and plotting of human action—is what gives us a *shareable world*."¹⁴ History and life itself are "always *on the way* to narrative," neither existing at any moment in a pre-storied condition nor culminating in an unrevizable account, while all storytelling is "a kind of creative retelling" of an

¹⁰ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, ix–x.

¹¹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, x.

¹² Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 164–65.

¹³ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 158.

¹⁴ Kearney, *On Stories*, 3.

existence that is inherently storied, “a nascent plot in search of a midwife,” as Kearney puts it.¹⁵

I shall speak of historical imagination as comprehending at once what historians bring to given lines of inquiry as well as everything that falls on the object side of the division between subjectivity and objectivity. Let us begin with what we might call the subject side of historical imagination, or what the historian brings to bear upon evidentiary material in fashioning accounts that are at once well-grounded in the sources and richly imaginative. A central theme in the debate between empiricist and postmodern accounts are the conditions in which historians wittingly or unwittingly arrange material into narrative form within an interpretive and imaginative schema of one kind or another. A conception of historical imagination that is hermeneutical and somewhat more encompassing than what we find in the current literature may help us to avoid the pitfalls of idealism and to advance a few steps beyond an empiricism/postmodernism opposition which may be getting old.

By imagination I intend an activity of mind that far transcends the production of quasi-visual images to one that is verbal, as Ricoeur has shown, but that is also more than this. Historical imagination is nothing separate and apart from historical reality but a capacity and activity that brings us into working touch with the past, that opens onto lifeworlds that are distant in time and place but not wholly other to our times or fully beyond reach, and that strives for comprehensiveness and what Wilhelm Dilthey called “a sense of the whole.”¹⁶ That thinker, as one scholar notes, “saw that our lived experience of the human world gives us a sense of being a part of it,” a sense that is unquestionably vague but fundamental to our experience of history: “Given this pre-given relatedness to the world, the task of the imagination is not to produce connections where none were visible, but to specify an indeterminately felt connectedness and deepen it to bring it into focus.”¹⁷ Let us think of imagination as a term encompassing at once the “images” with which it has been associated since Plato along with stories and story fragments, various kinds of metaphors and ciphers, rhetorical tropes, and affectively charged interpretations, none of which clashes either necessarily or in the usual course of inquiry with truth, argument, or evidence. Imagination incorporates them all and aims for a synoptic view of the past that is less

¹⁵ Kearney, *On Stories*, 133, 130.

¹⁶ Eric S. Nelson, “Wilhelm Dilthey and the Formative-Generative Imagination,” in *Stretching the Limits of Productive Imagination: Studies in Kantianism, Phenomenology, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Saulius Genusas (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 30.

¹⁷ Rudolf A. Makkreel, “Dilthey’s Typifying Imagination,” in *Productive Imagination: Its History, Meaning, and Significance*, ed. Saulius Genusas and Dmitri Nikulin (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 87.

a construction than an elucidation, an allowing something that was hidden to be seen with some relative clarity and verisimilitude. I shall suggest we conceive of imagination not narrowly as a subjective inventing of something that stands at some remove from reality but as a mental activity that underlies a good many specific cognitive acts from questioning to remembering, selecting, abbreviating, evaluating, hypothesizing, doubting, and some others. When historians imagine particular episodes from the past, they are doing nothing that is less cognitively sophisticated than what empiricists will speak of—“fictionalizing” or otherwise dressing up into aesthetically pleasing form a truth that has already been grasped. They are grasping it for the first time, not cooking raw data for the data as they always already are for us are already cooked, preunderstood, or prefigured as phenomenologists, hermeneuticists, pragmatists, and postmodernists have variously brought to our attention for some time now. It is not only the artistic imagination that gives rise to meaning, transforms, glimpses possibilities, configures and reconfigures, notices connections and tendencies, sees-as and synthesizes, and subsumes particulars under universals. Historians work in the space between objective discovery and subjective creation, neither unearthing then representing wholly determinate happenings from the past nor conjuring them out of thin air but engaging in an activity akin to conversing or participating in a dialectic in which subjectivity and objectivity are mutually constituted and past and present are understood together. They bring a system of prejudices, an imaginative schema, and a disciplinary perspective to bear on the past, not to speak for it but to make it possible for it to speak at all. Imagination is there from the beginning, taking in what is there to be seen and going to work on it in a single gesture.

If what we might call historical objectivism or realism no longer seems like a tenable option, we need not regard postmodern constructivism or idealism as the only alternative, as many are currently quick to do. White concisely expressed the constructivist conception of history this way: “The historical past is a theoretically motivated construction, existing only in the books and articles published by professional histories.”¹⁸ Willie Thompson makes the same point still more succinctly: “the past *is* essentially nothing other than what historians write.”¹⁹ The past is constituted, not found, and an ontological Rubicon separates the two. This is of course an extension to historiography of the same constructivist thesis that postmodernists and many others apply generally to the world of human experience, and the issues it

¹⁸ Hayden White, qtd. in Robert Doran, ed., “Editor’s Introduction: Choosing the Past: Hayden White and the Philosophy of History,” in *Philosophy of History after Hayden White* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 15.

¹⁹ Willie Thompson, *Postmodernism and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 1.

raises echo those in cognate fields. Postmodernists typically prefer the strong version of this thesis, that “historical interpretations,” as White put it, “are little more than projections,” although his choice of “little” rather than “nothing” in this passage is curious.²⁰ What is this little? It would appear to be events as recorded in a chronicle: now this, now that, leading nowhere, coming from nowhere, bearing no relation to other events, and more or less empty of significance. All of that comes later and is created by the pen of the historian in no way that admits of what one might call grounds. Talk of grounds or justification embroils us in pointless epistemological and metaphysical debates, although White qualifies this by asserting that “the best [only?] grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic and moral rather than epistemological.”²¹ Historians, on this view, are poet-moralists if not complete relativists.

Let us turn more directly to the notions of imagination and imaginative schemas (*imaginaires*), both of which have received a good deal of attention in the recent literature. Both concepts have received varying interpretations and at the heart of all of them is a basic hypothesis which applied to the philosophy of history might be formulated this way: any knowledge of the human past is conditioned by a finite and historically specific point of view that can be understood as a broad framework of language, beliefs, values, practical knowledge, stories, symbols, and other cultural artifacts, all of which afford a perspective from which the past becomes accessible for us and in such a way that any distinction between real and imagined is difficult and perhaps impossible to sustain. Thus formulated, I am prepared to endorse this hypothesis as well, but the details will be important. A little more specifically, I shall speak of an imaginative schema as a framework of interpretation that is historically emergent, largely presupposed and prereflective, encompassing and sometimes totalizing, highly variable, cerebral but also embodied, self-justifying and self-serving, and that includes a conception of the good along with stories, metaphors, and characters that illustrate this conception. Like Hegel’s *Sittlichkeit*, a schema of this kind emerges from the soil of a given culture or it is the soil, and it is highly valued by those who see and navigate their way through the world from within it. Examples include the different forms of monotheism, polytheism, modern science-technology, nationalism, democracy, capitalism, individualism, Marxism, socialism, feminism, progressivism, and romanticism. Every society has one and often more than one.

²⁰ Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Brian Fay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 28.

²¹ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), xii.

Indeed, it is little exaggeration to say that social reality itself is constituted by a social imaginary and that reasoning itself is conditioned by it.

Let us say broadly that from the side of the subject the historian imports into any inquiry not only a personal point of view but an imaginative schema that fundamentally orients interpretation, and that the schema itself is nothing apart from or prior to the activity of narrative interpretation itself. To craft and to tell a story, historical and fictional as well, is not to make it up—or not exactly, and not in any way one likes. Something pushes back, as historians themselves are well aware. One does not jump into a river from the dry land of a standpoint, language, or social imaginary but finds oneself always already in the midst of it, and the swimming one does is not the deploying of a strategy worked out in advance but a participating in the same schema. The rational persuasiveness of an interpretation is bound up with the historian's hermeneutic skill in building narratives as well as in setting out context and establishing a fit between universals and particulars. A particular battle is “seen-as” a turning point in a war, a decisive episode in a relationship between states, the end of this or a prelude to that, or otherwise in relational terms and in light of a larger universality in terms of which that battle can be understood. It is not a bare particular; indeed, the bare particular, in being unspoken, remains unknown, existing in no relation to a knower. Approaching it involves placing it in relation to a concept, viewing it as a possible instance of X or Y, seeing-as, discerning, and emplotting.

Kearney articulates the point this way: “History-telling is never literal. . . . It is always at least in part *figurative* to the extent that it involves telling according to a certain selection, sequencing, emplotment and perspective.” He immediately adds, “But it does try to be *truthful*.”²² There are several points here to unpack. First, no matter how long a book becomes, no historian could or would attempt to include everything that is in any way germane to their subject. There is simply too much to encompass, even when the topic one is investigating is relatively specific. One must be selective, and the criteria governing the selection are a matter for the historian's judgment. One selects what is relevant to the topic, but the judgment of relevance itself is not self-evident. Something is relevant if it bears a nontrivial relation to a significant theme or episode in the narrative, but relations themselves are far too numerous to incorporate indiscriminately. One opts for what matters, what carries a level of importance to the account one is offering, and judges which aspects warrant emphasis, which carry secondary importance, and which may be alluded to or left out entirely, and no rule governs how this is done. This is true of interpretation in general and goes some way

²² Kearney, *On Stories*, 136.

toward explaining the inevitable diversity of historical accounts. Judgments of importance, relevance, and significance are not subjective in the sense of arbitrary or a reflection of a scholar's idiosyncrasies alone, but they are underdetermined by the evidence and are part of the art of historical narration. So is what Kearney calls "sequencing"—arranging or weaving together events to form episodes in a larger temporal configuration. Events lead toward, foreshadow, motivate, and respond to other events, and this is a large part of their historical significance. The sequence is not always linear, but there is an organic quality in the organization of events that the historian attempts to track and exhibit. An action is regarded not in isolation but as part of a larger configuration, as an organ of the body is known in terms of its relation to other organs and its larger functioning within the body. How it contributes to a sequence and fits into the whole must come into view, where again we are grasping the particular by relating it to a larger universality.

We understand a historical event in seeing how it came to pass, what led to it, who did what and for what reasons, what followed from it and what it meant—in short, by knowing the story. A good part of the labor and the artistry lies in "emplotting" a great many particulars—persons, actions, conflicts, motivations, consequences, circumstances, difficulties, chance—or showing how each of these relates to the others and leads in a certain direction. A narrative contains a plot which is capable of being followed by the reader and which exhibits a kind of progression that is more akin to musical progression than linear progress. We are not marching in a straight line but seeing how one thing led to another in the way that human actions typically unfold. Complexity abounds, but the historian's task is to follow along and compose a narrative that does justice to the details without getting lost in them. No little creativity goes into the synthesizing or weaving together of story elements, and it is in this respect that the historian's art most resembles the novelist's. Both involve weighing relative importance, a value that is contingent simultaneously on an element's contribution in advancing the narrative, its significance to the people and time period of which we are speaking and to a contemporary audience no less, and on the historian's own perspective and values, none of which can be encapsulated in a rule. All such factors comprise what Ricoeur called "the configurational dimension" of narrative composition, in which "the plot transforms the events into a story. This configurational act consists of 'grasping together' the detailed actions or what I have called the story's incidents. It draws from this manifold of events the unity of one temporal whole" in a manner that he likened to Kant's notion of reflective judgment: "The act of emplotment has a similar function inasmuch as it extracts a configuration

from a succession.”²³ The “manifold” to be configured includes the who, what, why, and when of the story, everything that is capable of being taken into account and none of which arranges itself.

Kearney’s point that historical interpretation “does try to be *truthful*” is surely accurate, although introducing the little word “truth”—even the less epistemological “truthful”—into this discussion is fraught with issues. Truth as correspondence does need to go; no historical account corresponds to a fully objective state of affairs in the human past, or demonstrating that it does would be an impossible task. Not correspondence but truth in a different connotation—truthful, faithful to the phenomena, evidentially rigorous, coherent, illuminating—does have a place here, and it is a concept that we should not understand in categorical opposition with falsehood. Here I am inclined toward Nietzsche’s view that knowing invariably requires a certain act of “falsifying,” in a sense of both a simplifying of our object and an appropriation which grasps not the thing in itself but the aspect that serves us. Knowledge is an arrangement that is artificial, interested, and rigorous at the same time that it involves a sizeable element of “forcing, adjusting, abbreviating, omitting, padding, investing, falsifying, and whatever else is of the *essence* of interpreting.”²⁴ We are not simply taking in and representing what is there but compressing the manifold into an expedient classification. Nietzsche’s general account of interpretation emphasized a distortion and falsification that is not a failure to correspond but a perspectival and aspectual revealing of our object.

Let us think of historical knowledge as an imaginative engagement with the past which from the side of the subject involves the following cognitive acts (among others no doubt), many of which overlap and all of which involve the move from chronology to history. The historian, first of all, must judge what is worth preserving in our shared memory of the human past. One selects a topic of inquiry and a beginning and end point, and goes to work sifting among the myriad events, persons, and details that may factor into one’s account. The storytelling art involves arranging particulars into a sequence, finding the story that fits the evidence, following a trail, questioning and interpreting, evaluating sources, looking beneath surfaces, and identifying meanings in light of a narrative configuration, whether it be heroic, tragic, comedic, romantic, or something else. These acts, which are distinct in principle and overlapping in practice, contribute to the more comprehensive account that historical texts typically provide and which make possible an authentic encounter with the past.

²³ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 66.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1969), 151.

When it is successful, a Gadamerian “fusion of horizons” occurs between the inquirer, the reader, and the time period of which we are speaking. We are not transported into the past but placed on speaking terms with it, not “in” but “with” it in a deep sense of this word. The past is known in relation to the present—also the reverse—as the process of inquiry strives for a larger universality that comprehends not only what happened but what significance it held at the time and for our time no less. The historical imagination looks up from the particulars for larger patterns and tendencies, themes and lessons from the past that are capable of speaking to the present. It makes possible what we may call a sense of history—some more comprehensive understanding, a familiarity with the larger landscape and a sensibility, a sense of how things stood and what was possible for them, who they were and how they lived and thought, what they achieved and what they were up against, and who we are by the reflected light that all of this sheds.

Historical narratives are artful but not fictional, but exactly how so? Any distinction between fictional and historical narrative will crucially bear upon notions of evidence, sources, and empirical or quasi-empirical justification for the kinds of descriptive and analytical claims that scholars in this field routinely make— notions that postmodernists are quick to trace back to epistemological theories that have fallen on hard times and to replace with some formulation of constructivism. Kearney has suggested that “we can acknowledge that history is invariably mediated through narrative and *at the same time* affirm that there is something irreducible which, willy-nilly, we ‘still call reality.’ Without some referential claim to ‘reality,’ however indirect, it would seem that we would have no justification at all for distinguishing between history and fiction.”²⁵ I would second Kearney’s suggestion here, but the difficult part will be to demonstrate how we can maintain these two claims simultaneously. Otherwise stated, how might the classical divide between *mythos* and *logos* be bridged in the specific case of historiography, for it is difficult to deny that this branch of humanistic investigation partakes in some manner of both and that while different schools of thought have accentuated one side or the other any satisfactory account will need to do justice to both.

Let us now approach the historical imagination from the object side: something pushes back when historians proffer descriptions or analyses that fail, as rather often they do, but what is this “something” which historians themselves are so well acquainted with yet find so difficult to describe? “Evidence” is the one-word answer we often hear, although I suspect there is more to it than this and that the word

²⁵ Kearney, *On Stories*, 149.

itself is far more ambiguous than many believe. The historian is on a trail, and is like a detective in this way, but what trail is this? Is it a construction? It does not appear that way, for if it were then it should be subject to the will, and clearly it is not. There are things that historians not only do not say but cannot. There is a trail there that they need to discern and follow, and that trail has every appearance of being real, to have being in one sense or another.

What is this object side of historical imagination? Historical consciousness does not stand at a radical remove from its object of investigation, including when the latter is distant in time and place, but bears a relation that has often gone by the name of constitution: such awareness, as with consciousness in general, is always already situated within a network of historical and cultural relations and indeed has been constituted by them, largely behind our back, or so many maintain. An imaginative schema makes possible, forms, and also limits the art of historical configuration in general, although the schema itself is nothing frozen in time but is the sedimented product of countless activities of illuminating and mystifying our world. To speak of these activities as imaginative is not to say that they are private acts of subjectivity occurring at some distance from reality, for these activities and we ourselves are already out there in the midst of historical reality. What has long been called rationality here is nothing as theoretically elaborate as an epistemology but more like a general way of thinking that we might loosely call common-sense empiricism. We are speaking of a set of presuppositions, conventions, and disciplinary standards that is used in adjudicating disagreements among professional historians. Words like truth and justification, facts and data, sources and evidence, reality and objectivity feature prominently here, even if their meanings typically remain opaque. Rationality encompasses all of this and is sharply distinguished from a few things: relativism, subjectivism, myth-making, propaganda, ideological activism, and a few others. The fundamental idea is that historical inquiry is research; it is methodologically rigorous, painstaking, and beholden to sources which exercise a kind of authority over everything that historians write.

Empiricists and representationalists work with some dubiously tidy distinctions: discovery versus construction; interpretation versus representation; meaningful versus meaningless; real versus imaginary; subject versus object. It is better to conceive of these as rough and ready distinctions which in some circumstances accomplish some intellectual labor without opening up a chasm. Some dialectical nuance is needed here, and it is largely phenomenological and hermeneutical thinkers who have taken us beyond the tired old dichotomies that still beset a great deal of contemporary philosophy of history. Is the business of historical inquiry to unearth an

objective and fully constituted meaning or does the historian construct meaning in the activity of representation? This is a badly formulated question. Constructivism and realism are about equally prone to excess, and from opposite directions. The former readily becomes a kind of subjective idealism in which any serious talk of sources and evidence is thought tainted by association with some kind of objectivism or foundationalism. This move is often made hastily and without due appreciation of the role that evidence clearly plays in historical research. Sources and evidence are in every case relational: a document is a source of information about X, evidence for Y, as interpreted by Z, from the point of view of A, and so on. Sources may be primary or secondary, reliable or suspect, but they do need to be reckoned with in one way or another, and in a way that is not true of fictional narratives. They have an authority about them of which historians are well aware, even while some creative artistry is necessary in making them speak to us.

The two sets of positions that we might broadly call empiricist and postmodern both have a point that once suitably qualified enjoys considerable validity. The empiricist's emphasis on the centrality and authority of evidence must surely be retained, but without inflating this into an untenable epistemology. Historical investigation is as fully rational as any other field of knowledge, and its claim to rationality comes down to the traceability of its interpretations to sources and evidence of a kind that fictional narratives might employ but typically do not. On the face of it this view does not conflict with the narrative hypothesis at the heart of postmodern historiography. The validity in the latter position centers around the idea that historical knowledge crucially involves interpretation in the specific form of narrative and that such narratives involve some imaginative work on the part of the historian. The postmodern and empiricist positions both become dubiously one-sided when they commit the common error of becoming so enamored with their own insights that they lose sight of the truth on the other side and fall into an oppositional stance that is needless.

Let us return to what Ricoeur called the pre-narrative quality of experience. It seems clear that life as it plays does not transpire in anything like the manner of a novel; the latter exhibits a plot, it has a coherence that has been artfully fashioned even if it is complex, and is without extraneous elements while our experience of life is shot through with incoherence, the extraneous, dead ends, and many an unrelated episode which may at some later time be retrospectively configured as a story while lacking at the time we are undergoing it the aesthetic elegance of a novel. This much is true, however, our lived experience is commonly not of random or range of the moment happenings but of sequences, relations, directionality, partial continuity,

purposiveness, and habitual actions, all of which hang together, however loosely, in an organic way. Actions form sequences; they arise from somewhere, lead toward a goal or purpose, and hold significance for the agent and likely others as well. These sequences are pre- or nascent narratives, and our experience is replete with them. As Kearney expresses it, “existence is inherently storied. Life is pregnant with stories. It is a nascent plot in search of a midwife. For inside every human being there are lots of little narratives trying to get out.”²⁶ The midwifery metaphor is apt, for the stories of which we are speaking are characterized by potentiality. They become actual narratives in being configured or transformed in a way that Ricoeur likened to imitation or mimesis. A narrative, on his view, is an imitation of an action or sequence of actions, an actualization of what already belongs to it, where what belongs to it is a “symbolism” and “an initial *readability*”²⁷ which is capable of, one may say calls for, a certain form of rendering. The storyteller’s art renders explicit—actualizes, makes intelligible, or otherwise brings to life (which is not to say constructs)—a configuration that is nascent within a sequence of actions and experiences. The latter are symbolically mediated from the beginning, as Geertz has shown, and their symbolic value amounts to what Ricoeur called a prefiguration that makes the imaginative activity of storytelling or configuration possible and necessary. As with metaphor construction, narrating involves a seeing-as and a “grasping together” of various matters which become understood as story elements. As he expressed it, “every narrative presupposes a familiarity with terms such as agent, goal, means, circumstance, help, hostility, cooperation, conflict, success, failure, etc., on the part of its narrator and any listener. In this sense, the minimal narrative sentence is an action of the form ‘X did A in such and such circumstances, taking into account the fact that Y does B in identical or different circumstances.’ In the final analysis, narratives have acting and suffering as their theme.”²⁸ A story is comprised of what characters do and what happens to them, as can be said of the self itself. One lives a story which is told retrospectively but which is also enacted in the present, and indeed one is that story. Lived experience does not have the structure of a chronicle. Indeed, the latter is an abstraction, a selective and ordered configuration of events according to the chronicler’s estimation of importance and relevance. Now this, now that, and so on is not our experience of life. Experiences and actions lend themselves to the storyteller’s art because they are already in motion, directional, fluid, purposive, meaningful, understood or preunderstood, and

²⁶ Kearney, *On Stories*, 130.

²⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 58.

²⁸ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 55–56.

interrelated with a myriad of elements in a larger configuration that itself is always on the way.

As Ricoeur wrote, “between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity. To put it another way, *time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.*”²⁹ The bare present does not exist, nor do absolute beginnings or endings. A moment that bears no relation to a before and after, like any bare particular, is unintelligible and foreign to our experience. This moment is dynamic; it is going somewhere and it is from somewhere, it is on the move, fluid, constantly changing into another, and is understood precisely in its dynamism or its tending this way or that. Maurice Merleau-Ponty made the point this way:

Instant C and instant D—as close together as one wishes to make them—are never indiscernible, for then there would be no time at all; rather, they pass into each other, and C becomes D because it was never anything but the anticipation of D as present, and of its own passage into the past. This amounts to saying that each present reaffirms the presence of the entire past that it drives away, and anticipates the presence of the entire future or the ‘to-come’ [*l’à-venir*], and that, by definition, the present is not locked within itself but transcends itself toward a future and toward a past.³⁰

Human time is “a network of intentionalities,” not a linear “series of nows”³¹ strung together like photographs in an album but a network within which we are located and within which the three dimensions of past, present, and future lead into one another and are not discrete. The present is constantly before us even as the future “‘is there,’ just like the back of the house whose front I am looking at,” and the past no less. Neither the future nor the past is a representation; again they “are there” in the sense that they “[weigh] upon me.”³² The future weighs upon the present as a promise or a threat, while the past is a prelude and a source of pride or guilt. The here and now is a myriad of preparations, means, responses, leadings, foreshadowings, consequences, repetitions, continuities, departures, and transactions with a before and after.

²⁹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 52.

³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2013), 444.

³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 440.

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 439.

The constructivist's view of narrative as an imaginative imposition on a past that is chronicle-like and devoid of meaning is phenomenologically inadequate because of the way human time is experienced. The past is capable of being narrated because it is already a nascent story of which the historian is a midwife rather than a Yahweh-like creator. The art of midwifery involves a large amount of gathering, sifting, selecting, sorting, judging, analyzing, and synthesizing bits of evidence into a larger configuration that relates a version of what transpired and how we may understand it. Historians do not conjure something from nothing but tell a story that is based upon evidence, even as the evidence does not speak for itself, or not exactly. Exactly what, then? Here matters become more than a little ambiguous, for historians—like detectives, lawyers, scientists, or anyone else who works with evidence—commonly say that the sources and evidence “indicate,” “suggest,” or “prove” that this or that was the case, but what is the meaning of this? A document, coin, or other artifact, duly vetted for historical authenticity, “indicates” that event X occasioned, prompted, or afforded a reason for Y. In a court of law, evidence does not dictate a verdict but must be interpreted, weighed, and judged, and the same happens among historians. There is a story there, or the makings of one; there is something there that the historian is less constructing than detecting, listening to, and following, or their constructing is itself a mode of following.

Novelists often report that a good story in a sense “tells itself.” The story is the novelist's creation, yet their freedom in creating it is not unlimited. What happens next in the story is again “indicated” by what happened before and the larger trajectory of the narrative. One follows the course of the narrative in the same gesture in which one composes it, or so many novelists and other artists often claim. What could this mean? The landscape does not cause the painting; this much is clear, but the artist's activity is guided by something that is authoritative, and where this is not a cause. Jeff Mitscherling has spoken in this connection of intentionality, and in a connotation of the term that is neither idealist nor materialist. By this term Mitscherling is speaking not of a mental state or anything that is controlled by a sovereign consciousness but of a relating and a “tending towards”: “all *intentionality*,” as he puts it, “consists in such a ‘tending towards,’ or a *directed movement* that one undergoes prior to the activity of conscious deliberation. . . . Our ‘tending towards’ or ‘directed movement’ occurs not as the result of our consciously creating and fully controlling the goal or target of our consciousness, but rather as the result of allowing ourselves to be moved or *guided* in

a certain direction.”³³ We are still operating here within the world of the “pre-”: prior to conscious thinking, which includes configuring a narrative, something is already going on which is not a projection of consciousness but something that gives rise to consciousness itself. There is, as he describes it, a “compelling ‘internal logic’ of the story that’s dragging us all along, writers and readers alike. And this logos is more than merely conceptual (but it’s also that): if it were, we could anticipate it, get ahead of it, direct it—but we can’t. . . we’re at *its* mercy. It’s guiding us—author and reader alike, each of us necessarily remaining ‘passionate,’ because we’re not ‘mentally’ in charge.”³⁴ What, then, is?

Mitscherling calls it an intention, where this is to be understood neither as an intended meaning nor any other mental state nor a construction of consciousness but as something that lies before us in our experience, something we encounter and that has being but in neither a material nor an ideal sense but rather intentionally, as a relation:

What a thing is, it is *in relation* to something else. Everything tends this way or that: it is proximal, changing, in motion, on the way, becoming, passing away, opposing, betwixt and between, in process, transacting, interacting, interrelating, in negotiation, intimating, symbolizing, leading somewhere or other. *A is A*, but it *points to B*. . . . Any *A* that we encounter. . . is dynamic, pushed around by forces, suspended in webs, or otherwise part of a larger phenomenon. It’s no bare particular, raw datum, or thing in itself. The world we live in is permeated with intentionality, not in the sense of an external imposition or projection of the mind but where the intention itself exists dialectically, *between* subject and object, and binds them together.³⁵

This is the human world—a lifeworld in which we are suspended and from which we are inseparable, and the historical world is no exception. This is a radical revision of Husserl’s hypothesis regarding the intentionality of consciousness in that intentions are not a projection of the mind but something real that consciousness becomes aware of and actively follows. Tracking intentionality is done in many forms and by all of us;

³³ Jeff Mitscherling, Tanya DiTommaso, and Aref Nayed, *The Author’s Intention* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2004), 106.

³⁴ Mitscherling, DiTommaso, and Nayed, *The Author’s Intention*, 114. The same theme is discussed further in Jeff Mitscherling, *Aesthetic Genesis: The Origin of Consciousness in the Intentional Being of Nature* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009); Jeff Mitscherling and Paul Fairfield, *Artistic Creation: A Phenomenological Account* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019). See also Jeff Mitscherling, *Roman Ingarden’s Ontology and Aesthetics* (Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa Press, 1997).

³⁵ Mitscherling and Fairfield, *Artistic Creation*, 139–40.

it happens when one gets swept up in a conversation or is grabbed by a story, when an athlete gets carried along in the momentum of a game, a musician improvises as the song itself seems to require, a detective follows the trail of evidence, a physician tracks the symptoms to a diagnosis, and a historian follows where the evidence leads, or in general in any experience in which, as we say, “one thing leads to another.” This mode of following is imaginative, not servile; it is active and receptive at the same time, rather as a judge formulates a verdict that is indicated while also underdetermined by the evidence. In all these cases, we do not make it up but allow ourselves to be guided by something in our experience that is beyond our command.

We find ourselves in the midst of a historical world and suspended in webs of intentionality—participating in a tradition, appropriating a culture, and belonging to a particular time and place. Each of these verbs—participating, appropriating, belonging—points to an experience that is simultaneously an activity and a passivity or that is, in a word, imaginative. It is a creative responding to what is already going on in the world, finding our way through strands of a web that is encompassing and more or less infinite, trying to see the relatedness of things, to grasp connections, and to understand what is happening, how we got here, and where things may be going. The active gathering, synthesizing, and narrating of historical elements which belong to the subject side of imagination is one pole of a dialectic, the other side of which is both the sources and evidence of which historians have long spoken and the intentionality that is implicit to them. The evidence indicates that X led to Y, not in a sense of cause and effect but X foreshadowed, set the stage, or afforded a rationale for Y. Whether a narrative be fictional or historical, one episode sets up the next and the whole is followable because of the organic relatedness of the various situations, characters, and actions that move things along and that the storyteller brings to light. What has happened when a story “tells itself,” as with anything in our experience that takes on a momentum and a life of its own, is that the teller has picked up on an intentionality that belongs to the phenomena from the outset as a potentiality and rendered it actual, in a way closer to midwifery than construction. The fundamental difference, then, between the fictional and the historical narrative is not that the latter is “constrained by the real” while the former is made up but that “the real” that guides novelist and historian alike does not in the former case include material evidence (although it might).³⁶ Both are beholden, not sovereign.

Anything that is a part of the human world is understood only in its dynamic relatedness, whether this be a temporal before and after, a location in a culture, place,

³⁶ Alun Munslow, *The New History* (London: Routledge, 2018), 18.

or time period, its being a means or an end, a continuation or departure, a purpose and a destining, or otherwise in its tending this way and that. The only “relativism” here would be better spoken of as “on-the-way-ism,” were the expression not so artless: “The president was on his way to being a one-term president”; “The emperor was a pale reflection of his predecessor”; “This artistic movement anticipated a later movement”; “This architectural style was an appropriation of a neighboring contemporary or predecessor”; “This philosophical text was a development in a long-standing tradition”—these are the kinds of claims historians make in their more “analytical” moments, when they are ostensibly no longer telling stories but engaged in the serious work of historical analysis. Analyzing, synthesizing, informing, narrating, or any cognition we care to speak of, as Mitscherling has persuasively shown, is an activity in which what we are doing is tracing connections, tracking down leads, seeing X in light of Y, reconciling a particular with a universal, regarding in context, and grasping relations that are organic and not static.

The larger picture is of a tensional circularity of subjectivity and objectivity, no longer regarded as separate orders of being but as a unified system. To cite Mitscherling once more, “human consciousness consists in the *mutual creation* of subject and object, these two poles of awareness. To speak of the ‘priority’ of one over the other, either of ‘ideal’ mind (idealism) or of the ‘material,’ external world (materialism), is mistaken. . . . Both mind and world exist, and they exist independently of each other. What they don’t exist independently of is the relation that gives rise to and dialectically maintains them both. This relation is intentionality at work, and we find intentionality at work everywhere.”³⁷ Our experience is replete with an operative intentionality in which we and everything we encounter are suspended, a meshwork of associations that are neither objectively given nor subjectively constituted but pre- or intersubjective, and historical consciousness is no exception.

Historical imagination encompasses not only the overtly poetic dimension of inquiry into the human past—reckoning with visual and quasi-visual images, filling in gaps, constructing metaphors—but a broader capacity of synthesizing the myriad elements that comprise a narrative in a way that makes it possible to render us conversant with a time and place remote from our own. Kearney speaks of a “power . . . of *vicarious* imagination”³⁸ and “empathic imagination,” “a power capable of intending the unreal *as if* it were real, the absent *as if* it were present, the possible *as if* it were actual.”³⁹ We are not transported into the past, but it is as if we were, for by

³⁷ Mitscherling and Fairfield, *Artistic Creation*, 27.

³⁸ Kearney, *On Stories*, 137.

³⁹ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 38, 17.

virtue of the historian's labor the reader is able to make vicarious contact with the occupants of a world that is ultimately both theirs and ours. The schema within which the historian works is no closed system but opens onto a past that is extant. Whether we speak of empathy, transcendence, understanding meanings, or what have you, historical imagining is a mode of engagement and a meeting of minds. We are following and unravelling threads of intentionality that reveal to us not only "what happened" but "what it must have been like," letting it speak to us by creating openings in which we can experience something of the flavor of the times.

Let us speak of the imagination in an expansive way as an art of gathering, composing, revealing, making contact, seeing the connectedness of things, and narrating—and not in any way but in the way that the story needs to be told and indeed in a non-fanciful sense tells itself. The historian's freedom is neither unconditioned nor unlimited, and if we may speak of truth here then it is not the whole truth but the dimension of it that a particular mode of access makes visible. When successful, an imaginative account makes it possible for the reader to "get it," to see how events came to pass and might have been otherwise, how they played out and resonated, how one thing led to another, what it meant to them and what it may entail for us, what they thought they were doing and what we may have to say about it. Imagining involves no little hypothesizing and analyzing, following trails, seeing-as, and creatively synthesizing bits of evidence that never speak for themselves. We are trying to bridge the distance, to understand how things stood, what it was like, who these people were, what things meant to them and might yet mean.