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History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension

Louis O. Mink

I

PHILOSOPHERS have always betrayed a certain scorn for both history and romance. "I knew that the delicacy of fiction enlivens the mind," said Descartes, explaining how he had liberated himself from the errors of the schools, and "that famous deeds of history ennoble it." But in the end, he concluded, these are negligible merits, because "fiction makes us imagine a number of events as possible which are really impossible, and even the most faithful histories, if they do not alter or embroider things to make them more worth reading, almost always omit the meanest and least illustrious circumstances, so that the remainder is distorted."¹ This was Descartes's first and final word on all the tales and stories of human life, and until very recently it could have served to sum up the consensus of Western philosophy. Even when Hegel discovered that history is more philosophical than poetry, he gave no more comfort to the practitioners of historical inquiry than Aristotle had given to wise poets; for in both cases it was for relative proximity to the first principles of philosophy itself that the marks were passed out. It was the universals bodied forth rather than the vivid and particular details of the stories which bore them that commanded the attention of philosophers.

In recent years, however, there has come into being a new and still developing interest among philosophers in what is called (rather misleadingly) the logic of narration. This has not been a product of aesthetics, as one might think, and it has as yet made no connection with the sort of analysis of narrative fiction represented in such studies as Scholes' and Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative*. Rather it belongs to the analytical philosophy of history — the theory of historical knowledge, that is, rather than the speculative metaphysics of the historical process. The philosophical problems whose coastlines are being explored were discovered in the following way. Since the seven-

1 *Discourse on Method*, tr. Laurence J. Lafleur (New York, 1950), pp. 4-5.

teenth century, philosophy has been dominated by the problems of the cognitive status of perception on the one hand and the interpretation of natural science on the other. The great controversies of rationalism and empiricism now appear to have been complementary phases of the enterprise, extending over three centuries, to construct a comprehensive account of the relation between our direct perception of the world and our inferential knowledge of that world through the discoveries of natural science. In this epistemological enterprise there was no room for either imaginative worlds or the inaccessible world of the past. The latter, in particular, appeared significant only as something not perceptible, not as something *past*. In the riot of epistemological theories — new realism, critical realism, subjective idealism, pragmatism, objective relativism, phenomenism, etc., etc. — in which the modern epoch of philosophy came to an end within recent memory, not one took seriously the problem of how it is possible that the past should be knowable, although each constructed a more or less embarrassed appendix which restored some sort of cognitive status to history, some possibility of meaning to “statements about the past.” Meanwhile, historians were laying successful siege to the records of the past, but while they could point to notable achievements of inquiry there was no theory of historical knowledge to compare with the increasingly sophisticated philosophy of science. The “theory of knowledge” in fact was, by the implicit consensus of philosophers, the theory of *scientific* knowledge, and its very vocabulary — the language of induction and classification, of hypothesis and verification, of dependent and independent variables, general laws and probability coefficients, quantification and calculation — had its primary referents in astronomy, physics, chemistry and biology.

The clearest and most influential systematization of the view that philosophy is the logical analysis of scientific procedure has been that self-designated as logical empiricism, *né* “positivism.” A major principle of logical empiricism is the so-called methodological unity of science, that is, the view that there is no formal or logical difference among the various bodies of practice and consolidated inquiry which can count as scientific. With respect to explanation and the criteria for adequate explanation, for example, there is a single although complex formal model of explanation, which consists in showing that the statement asserting the occurrence of an event or other phenomenon to be explained follows by strict formal deduction (including mathematical deduction) from one or more statements about initial conditions of the system to which the laws apply and in which the phenomenon to be explained occurs. This is also the model of prediction; one can think of, say, either the prediction or the explana-

tion of an eclipse as a clear example in which this model is realized. Now to apply such a model of explanation to human action or social change raises grave problems; few if any explanations in psychology or social science can be shown to have this form, not least because the general laws formally required have not been empirically discovered. Nevertheless, the claim was not that the deductive or "covering-law" model of explanation can be discerned in every putative explanation but that it represents a rational demand by comparison with which most "explanations" reveal themselves as defective. The methodological preoccupations of psychology, sociology, and other social sciences in recent years have in effect resulted from the adoption of positivist prescriptions as imperatives for the organization of research. In history, however, these prescriptions have seemed least applicable and also least able to account for the fact that some historical accounts *seem* to explain and illuminate although they cannot by any Procrustean efforts be restated in such a way as to exhibit the required form. Yet the case for positivism is strong. "Do you claim to have explained why this event occurred?" it asks. "Well, then, you are claiming more than *that* it happened; you are claiming that given whatever you refer to as bringing it about or causing it to occur, it *must* have happened as it did, in fact that it could not have *not* happened. The force of explanation lies in the recognition of necessity, and necessity can be shown only by showing that the event is connected with its antecedents by a general and well-confirmed law. Until that is done, there is no explanation but only a sketch of what an explanation would be like if there were one."²

At this point historians have been known to say something about history being an art rather than a science. Some philosophers, however, agreeing with the positivists that the task of philosophy is to make explicit the patterns of rational inference which inform complex thinking of all sorts, but unlike the positivists willing to entertain the hypothesis that there are different patterns of rationality not reducible to a single and fundamental pattern, have taken history to be a possibly autonomous and in any case rich and logically unanalyzed mode of inquiry and knowledge. As Arthur Danto has said,

2 The classic statement is by C. G. Hempel, in "The Function of General Laws in History," *Journal of Philosophy* XXXIX (1942), later weakened to accommodate probability laws in "Deductive-Nomological vs. Statistical Explanation" (*Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. III, ed. H. Feigl and G. Maxwell), and in "Reasons and Covering Laws in Historical Explanation," *Philosophy and History*, ed. S. Hook (New York, 1963). There are also characteristic statements in Karl Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London, 1959) and Ernest Nagel's *The Structure of Science* (New York, 1961).

not casually but prefatory to a detailed analysis of historical language and explanation, "The difference between history and science is not that history does and science does not employ organizing schemes which go beyond what is given. Both do. The difference has to do with the *kind* of organizing schemes employed by each. *History* tells stories."³

So here there is a beginning of an attempt to carry out the program originally signalled by Collingwood: that while "the chief business of seventeenth-century philosophy was to reckon with seventeenth-century natural science . . . the chief business of twentieth-century philosophy is to reckon with twentieth-century history."⁴ By "history," of course, Collingwood did not mean the course of public events (as in history vs. nature) but rather the inquiry, practiced by professional historians but not limited to them, into institutional change and purposive human action (as in history vs. natural science). The change is from a preoccupation with theory to an interest in narrative: "narrative explanation" is no longer a contradiction in terms. But there is also a shift from the concept of explanation, defined in terms of a formal model, to the concept of understanding, perhaps indefinable but clarified by reflection on the experiences in which it has been achieved.

No one has gone further in this direction than W. B. Gallie, in his book *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*. I shall review his argument briefly, at the expense of doing scant justice to its intrinsic interest, for the sake of calling attention to what I think to be an unusually interesting and suggestive mistake. Gallie observes, quite correctly, that no critical (that is, post-Kantian) philosopher has worked out a clear account of "what it is to follow or construct an historical narrative."⁵ History, he eventually is to conclude, is "a species of the genus Story."⁶ But to understand what a story is, is to know what it is to *follow* a story, that is, not merely to have done so (as everyone has) but to know what in general are the features of a story which make it followable. And this in turn is not significantly

3 Other discussions of historical narrative are by Morton White, *The Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, ch. vi (New York, 1965); A. R. Louch, "History as Narrative," *History and Theory*, VIII (1969); Maurice Mandelbaum, "A Note on History as Narrative," *History and Theory*, VI (1967); replies to Mandelbaum by Richard C. Ely, Rolf Gruner, and William H. Dray, *History and Theory*, VIII (1969); and W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London, 1964), which is discussed below. For the reflections of a working historian: G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History*, Ch. iii (Sydney and New York, 1967).

4 R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford, 1939), pp. 78-79.

5 *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, pp. 12-13.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

different from following a game in progress, such as a cricket match, and understanding the features which make it followable. In following a story, as in being a spectator at a match, there must be a quickly established sense of a promised although unpredictable outcome: the county team will win, lose or draw, the separated lovers will be reunited or will not. Surprises and contingencies are the stuff of stories, as of games, yet by virtue of the promised yet open outcome we are enabled to follow a series of events across their contingent relations and to understand them as leading to an as yet unrevealed conclusion without however necessitating that conclusion. We may follow understandingly what we could not predict or infer. At the same time, following requires the enlistment of our sympathies and antipathies, the "basic directing feelings" which account for one's being pulled along by a story; in fact, "what discontinuities we are willing to accept or able to follow depends partly upon the set or orientation of our sympathy . . . and partly upon the intrinsic nature of the kind of sympathy that has been established."⁷ Stories may be followed more or less completely, as a wise old hand at cricket may notice nice details which escape the spectator of average keenness, and there can be no criteria for following *completely*.⁸ But the minimal conditions are the same for all. The features which enable a story to flow and us to follow, then, are the clues to the nature of historical understanding. An historical narrative does not demonstrate the necessity of events but makes them intelligible by unfolding the story which connects their significance.⁹ History does not as such differ from fiction, therefore, insofar as it essentially depends on and develops our skill and subtlety in following stories. History *does* of course differ from fiction insofar as it is obligated to rest upon evidence of the occurrence in real space and time of what it describes and insofar as it must grow out of a critical assessment of the received materials of history, including the analyses and interpretations of other historians.¹⁰ But the researches of historians, however arduous and technical, only increase the amount and precision of knowledge of facts which

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 44-47.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

9 "What is contingent . . . is of course, *per se* unintelligible. But in relation to a man's life, or to a particular theme in a man's life, it can be understood as having contributed to a particular, acceptable and accepted conclusion," p. 41. While this sums up a notion of intelligibility with which I would quite agree, it does not support what Gallie thinks it supports, namely, the "intellectual indispensability of the act of following." As I try to argue below, it is not following but *having followed* which carries the force of understanding.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 56-64, 71.

remain contingent and discontinuous. It is by being assigned to stories that they become intelligible and increase understanding by going beyond "What?" and "When?" to "How?" and "Why?"

The difficulty in Gallie's adventurous account is not, I believe, in his emphasis on narrative but in his assumption that its essential features are revealed by a phenomenology of "following." What he has provided is a description of the naive reader, that is, the reader *who does not know how the story ends*, and who is "pulled along" by interest, sympathy, and curiosity. It is not incidental but essential to Gallie's view that contingent events are made acceptable and intelligible insofar as the story so far directs them toward a promised but open conclusion. Yet of course this is an experience which no *historian* and no moderately knowledgeable reader of historical narrative can have. Nor can a critic reading *King Lear* for the twentieth time nor any reader for the second find himself carried along by sympathetic curiosity about the fate of Lear and Cordelia. It may be that narrative historians more or less artfully construct their stories in order to lead readers through "possible routes towards the required but as yet undisclosed conclusion," but of the many historians who regard Garrett Mattingly's *The Defeat of the Spanish Armada* as the unsurpassed recent example of narrative history, I have never heard one complain that his reading of it was marred by knowing how it all came out. Among both historians and critics, on the contrary, familiarity sometimes breeds respect.

What I mean to suggest is that the difference between following a story and *having followed* a story is more than the incidental difference between present experience and past experience. Anticipation and retrospection are not simply different attitudes or vantage-points which may be taken (or must be taken) toward the same event or course of events. We know that the difference between past and future is crucial in the case of moral and affective attitudes; we do not fear something that is over and done with, nor feel regret for something not yet undertaken. My thesis is that the difference is crucial as well for cognition: at least in the case of human actions and changes, to know an event by retrospection is categorically, not incidentally, different from knowing it by prediction or anticipation. It cannot even, in any strict sense, be called the "same" event, for in the former case the descriptions under which it is known are governed by a story to which it belongs, and there is no story of the future. But to give this thesis plausibility requires a consideration of what the "logic of narration" neglects: not what the structure or generic features of narratives are, nor what it means to "follow," but what it means *to have followed* a story.

II

As we have known since Kant, one of the most difficult of all tasks is to discern and describe correctly those generic features of experience which we do not attend to and which we have no appropriate vocabulary to describe, precisely because their ubiquity leaves them unnoticed; their presence is not signalled by contrast with their absence or with competing features. It is only by the most intense conceptual effort that the structure of all experience can be distinguished from the vivid details of particular experience which commonly command our attention. It is perhaps for this reason that theories of knowledge have unaccountably neglected the significance of the simple fact that experiences come to us *seriatim* in a stream of transience and yet must be capable of being held together in a single image of the manifold of events in order for us to be aware of transience at all. It is a contingent fact of empirical psychology that the "specious present" — that duration in which we seem to be simultaneously aware of actually successive events such as the series of sounds that make up a spoken word — is of the order of between half a second and a second. But it is a necessary truth that we could not even form the concept of the specious present were we not able to hold in mind, through *this* sequence of presents, right *now*, the thought of past and future, of past futures and future pasts. Memory, imagination, and conceptualization all serve this function, whatever else they do: they are ways of grasping together in a single mental act things which are not experienced together, or even capable of being so experienced, because they are separated by time, space, or logical kind. And the ability to do this is a necessary (although not a sufficient) condition of *understanding*.

A few random examples may help to bring out the way in which the act of "grasping together" can be found in every variety of experience. For one case: in hearing the first movement of an unfamiliar Haydn symphony, one may "understand" the development in the sense that melodic motion and harmonic modulations are familiar and anticipatable. But of course this would be the case even if we had entered the hall or set down the needle in the middle of the movement. There is a different and more appropriately named kind of "understanding" when we hear and assimilate the exposition of the themes from the beginning, and then hear the development together with the retained memory of the themes. Without the ability to hold in mind the sequence already passed through, one would simply not understand, in *any* sense of "understand," musical passages such as the minuet of Beethoven's seventh symphony, in which the trio returns

for a third appearance but is cut off abruptly after a few bars. Or again: Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* begins with the first-person impressions and recollections of the cretin Benjy. No one "understands" these pages on a first reading; no one is expected to. It is not until later in the book that these opaque pages become intelligible in retrospect; one must read the later pages with the earlier in mind, and in fact reread the earlier pages with the later in mind. But of course this is merely an especially vivid illustration of a character which every narrative has in some degree. Aristotle's observation that a play must have a beginning, a middle, and an end is not a trivially formal description but a corollary of his principle that a drama is an imitation of a *single* action, that is, that both action and mimesis must be capable of being understood as a single complex whole. It is also the sense in which Weigand said of *The Magic Mountain* that "the whole novel is present on every page."

But the phenomenon of grasping things together is not limited, as these examples might suggest, to the temporal arts. Consider logical inference, as represented in the following simple argument: All creatures are mortal; all men are creatures; all Athenian citizens are men; Socrates is an Athenian citizen; hence Socrates is mortal. Now suppose that we infer from the first two premises that all men are mortal, and then destroy our notes and forget the premises; and similarly with the premises which yield intermediate conclusions and again with these when the final conclusion has been drawn. This is analogous to the addition of a column of figures, forgetting the earlier figures with each sub-total, and also to every more complex instance of mathematical inference. In such hypothetical cases it is clear that we have lost the special quality of understanding the conclusion *as following from* the premises. We could in such a circumstance still *test* the validity of an argument, but could not *see* it. That grasping together a complex sequence of inference is possible is attested to by mathematicians, who commonly are able to see a demonstration as a whole rather than as merely a sequence of rule-governed transformations; and most probably the ascription of "elegance" to a proof acknowledges the especial neatness of its presentation in such a way as to facilitate one's seeing it as a whole.

In all of these instances, and in indefinitely many more, there thus seems to be a characteristic kind of understanding which consists in thinking together in a single act, or in a cumulative series of acts, the complicated relationships of parts which can be experienced only *seriatim*. I propose to call this act (for obvious etymological reasons) "comprehension." It is operative, I believe, at every level of consciousness, reflection and inquiry. At the lowest level, it is the grasping

together of data of sensation, memory and imagination, and issues in perception and recognition of objects. At an intermediate level, it is the grasping together of a set of objects, and issues in classification and generalization. At the highest level, it is the attempt to order together our knowledge into a single system — to comprehend the world as a totality. Of course this is an unattainable goal, but it is significant as an ideal aim against which partial comprehension can be judged. To put it differently, it is unattainable because such comprehension would be divine, but significant because the human project is to take God's place. Naturally enough, attempts to describe the aim of ideal comprehension have always been put into theological terms. Boethius, explaining why human freedom does not limit God's knowledge, described God's knowledge of the world as a *totum simul*, in which the successive moments of all time are copresent in a single perception, as of a landscape of events. The omniscient scientist envisioned by LaPlace, knowing the laws of nature and the position and velocity of every particle of the universe at a single instant, could predict and retrodict the detailed character of the world at any moment of time. (So, in the classic story, when Napoleon remarked to LaPlace that he had found no mention of God in the *System of the World*, LaPlace replied, "Sire, I have had no need of that hypothesis.") And Plato, who thought divine knowledge not unattainable, regarded it as the contemplative vision of a set of essences grasped as a single intelligible system — a "comprehensive view," he calls it in discussing the education of the Rulers in Book VI of the *Republic*, "of the mutual relations and affinities which bind all the sciences together."

These different descriptions of the ideal aim of comprehension are not merely visionary. Rather they are extrapolations of several different and mutually exclusive modes of comprehension which run through our more mundane and partial understanding. There are, I suggest, three such fundamental modes, irreducible to each other or to any more general mode. I shall call these the *theoretical* mode, the *categorical* mode, and the *configurational* mode. They are roughly associated with types of understanding characteristic of natural science, philosophy and history; but they are not by any means identical with these, and in fact their real differences expose the artificial and misleading nature of academic classifications. It is the configurational mode alone which is relevant to the concept of a story, but the issues which it may illuminate cannot be clearly stated except by contrasting it with the alternative modes.

What are the different ways in which a number of objects can be comprehended in a single mental act?

First, they may be comprehended as instances of the same generalization. This way is powerful but thin. It is powerful because the generalization refers to things as members of a class or as instances of a formula, and thereby embraces both the experienced and the unexperienced, the actual and the possible. It is thin because it refers to them only in virtue of their possession of certain common characteristics, omitting everything else in the concrete particularity of each. I discover, let us say, that a piece of paper ignites easily, and repeat the experiment with an old letter, a page from a calendar, a sheet of music, and an unpaid bill. Thus I quickly reach the generalization "Paper burns," by which I comprehend an indefinite number of similar observations. By analogous experience of needles, fenders, boathooks and washing machines, I can comprehend an equally great number of instances under the generalization, "Steel rusts." But then it occurs to me that both processes may be the result of chemical combination, and I am on the way toward explaining both combustion and rusting as instances of oxidation. And in this way I can comprehend both classess of phenomena, superficially very unlike each other, as instances of a single law. This *theoretical* mode of comprehension is also often called "hypothetico-deductive," and its ideal type is that expressed by LaPlace.

A second and quite different way of comprehending a number of objects is as examples of the same category. Thus both a painting and a geometry are examples of complex form, and Edna St. Vincent Millay's famous line, "Euclid alone hath looked on beauty bare," issues from *categoreal* comprehension in which the category of the aesthetic is linked with the category of form, and both subsume not merely works of art but all formal complexes in a scale of degrees. Categoreal comprehension superficially resembles theoretical comprehension and is often confused with it, but such confusion is virtually the defining property of philosophical obtuseness. The relation of theory to its objects is that it enables us to infer and coordinate a body of true statements about that kind of object; the relation of categories to their objects is that they determine of what kind those objects may be. Thus a set of categories is what is now often called a conceptual framework: a system of concepts functioning a priori in giving form to otherwise inchoate experience. Perhaps the simplest examples of categoreal comprehension are those cases in which a concept belonging to a developed theory — e.g., evolution, equilibrium, repression — is extended to cover a range of instances for which the theory itself has no validity in principle. Thus we come, for example, to think of the "evolution" of ideas, as a way of conceiving what counts as an idea rather than as a theory about natural

variation and selection. It is categoreal comprehension, of course, which Plato — and, in fact, most systematic philosophers — envisioned as an ideal aim.

Yet a third way in which a number of things may be comprehended is as elements in a single and concrete complex of relationships. Thus a letter I burn may be understood not only as an oxidizable substance but as a link with an old friend. It may have relieved a misunderstanding, raised a question, or changed my plans at a crucial moment. As a letter, it belongs to a kind of story, a narrative of events which would be unintelligible without reference to it. But to explain this, I would not construct a theory of letters or of friendships but would, rather, show how it belongs to a particular configuration of events like a part to a jigsaw puzzle. It is in this *configurational* mode that we see together the complex of imagery in a poem, or the combination of motives, pressures, promises and principles which explain a Senator's vote, or the pattern of words, gestures and actions which constitute our understanding of the personality of a friend. As the theoretical mode corresponds to what Pascal called *l'esprit de geometrie*, so the configurational mode corresponds to what he called *l'esprit de finesse* — the ability to hold together a number of elements in just balance. The *totum simul* which Boethius regarded as God's knowledge of the world would of course be the highest degree of configurational comprehension.

Now it may seem that what I have tried to call attention to is merely an array of techniques or "approaches" from which one may select now one, now another as is appropriate to the subject-matter at hand and its particular problems. It is true that one *may* do this, and also that each mode may enter into a process of inquiry — which however must culminate in a single mode. But they cannot be combined in a single act. One reason for such a conclusion is simply the observation that notable intellectual achievements and the style of undeniably powerful minds are characterized by a kind of single-mindedness: the attempt to extend to every possible subject of interest a single one of the modes. One notes that eminently theoretical minds attempt to apply to political problems or even to personal relationships the techniques of abstraction and generalization which enable messy particularities to be stripped away from the formulary type. Configurational minds on the other hand organize whatever they know of biology into a sense of place. As ecologists, they use their theoretical knowledge to illuminate their grasp of the concrete interactions of individual plants and animals in a specific environment; for a population biologist, on the other hand, the foxglove and the hare are countable units of their species. A more general reason for con-

cluding that the modes are incompatible is that each has ultimately the totality of human experience, or if one prefers, the "world of fact," as its subject matter. There is nothing which cannot in principle be brought within each mode, although of course it will be modified by being comprehended in one mode rather than another. Of course it would be a mistake to try to understand sub-atomic particles in the mode of configurational comprehension; but this is because sub-atomic particles are not objects of direct experience but hypothetical constructs whose very meaning is given within the mode of theoretical comprehension. Moreover, the *practice* of each mode is an object for the others; hence there can be a psychology of philosophy and a philosophy of psychology, a biography of Freud and a psychoanalysis of the biographer. Each mode tends to represent the others as special cases or imperfect approximations of itself. And those to whom a single mode has become a second nature tend to regard the others like Gulliver's Houyhnhnm master, who thought Gulliver's forelegs impractical because his forehooves were too tender to bear his weight.

One of the more convincing reasons for acknowledging the intellectual function of comprehension and distinguishing its modes, I have come to think, is that it provides a way of understanding and explaining *rationality* the disputes of the schools and the misunderstandings in which intellectual controversy abounds. One can see, in this light, that what are called "disciplines" are actually arenas in which the partisans of each mode contend for dominance, each with its own aim of understanding, identification of problems, and privileged language. Behaviorism, for example, is essentially the claim that human action and social reality can be understood only in the mode of theoretical comprehension, as against the more traditional historical and institutional schools, whose aim was to grasp configurations of organization and stages of change. Or again there are the differences among psychoanalytic critics who seek to understand a poem by psychoanalyzing the poet or the reader (seeking theoretical comprehension), the New Criticism, whose aim is to achieve configurational comprehension of the poem alone in all its internal complexity, and archetypal critics, who apply everywhere a categoreal system — which unfortunately, unlike the categoreal systems of philosophy, fails to include concepts of logic. If it is true that the three modes are incompatible as ultimate aims, we must abandon hope of achieving an eclectic or panperspectival outcome, but we might hope for an increase in intellectual charity, and be grateful for a rational defense against the imperialism of methodologies.

Everything I have said in the attempt to distinguish modes of comprehension, of course, is in the categoreal mode.

III

It is not a theory of knowledge which is at issue. Comprehension is not knowledge, nor even a condition of knowledge: we know many things as unrelated facts — Voltaire's full name, the population of Rumania in 1930, the binomial theorem, the longitude of Vancouver. On the other hand, a pseudo-scientific theory such as "hollow-earth" astronomy is as much an instance of theoretical comprehension as is astrophysics. It is by reference to standards other than comprehension that we must decide what is true and what is false. Knowledge is essentially public and may even be distributed through a community; we know collectively what no one individually could possess. But comprehension is an individual act of seeing-things-together, and only that. It can be neither an input nor an output of data-retrieval systems, nor can it be symbolically transformed for convenient reference. As the human activity by which elements of knowledge are converted into *understanding*, it is the synoptic vision without which (even though transiently and partially attained) we might forever pass in review our shards of knowledge as in some nightmare quiz show where nothing relates "fact" to "fact" except the fragmented identities of the participants and the mounting total of the score. Some physicists speculate in conversation that the physics of the future may be entirely unlike the physics of the past, since computation at electronic speeds permits the development of theories too complex for any mind to grasp as a whole. In the past, of course, the achievements of physics have been distinguished by the construction of elegant models, whether visual or just sets of equations, which were intellectually satisfying because they could be so grasped and seen to comprehend a vast range of otherwise unorganized data. So it may be that the possibility and even the desire for comprehension may disappear from some kinds of theoretical inquiry, as problem-solving and techniques of control and manipulation become dissociated from the satisfactions of understanding.

It is in the light of such a possibility that it seems not unimportant to make a just estimate of the nature and autonomy of other modes of comprehension than the theoretical mode. And it is the configurational mode which seems most often to be confused with the others or regarded, so to speak, as one of the shadows where their light has failed to reach. Implicit in the classical positivist account of explanation as it was summarized above is the theoretical principle that it is only as an instance of a law-governed type that an event or action can be truly understood. From this standpoint, a narrative may enliven sensibility (if it is fiction) or recount facts (if it is history), but it

answers no questions except, "And then what happened?", and affords no understanding beyond such answers. In reply to this, "narrativists" like Gallie have had a firm sense that stories produce a different and sometimes indispensable kind of understanding. But they have, I believe, failed to identify the genus to which narrative belongs, and therefore have tried to find it in the sequential form of stories, in the techniques of telling and the capacity for following, in the experience of interest, expectation, surprise, acceptability, and resolution. But as we saw, this cannot be an illuminating account of the *historian's* understanding of his own narrative. One must set against it the testimony of an eminent historian, in whose considered judgment Lord Acton was an amateur, even though a prince of amateurs, because "he was for ever expressing distress or surprise at some turn in the story." The professional historian, Geoffrey Elton goes on to say, must do more than just immerse himself in his period until he hears its people speak; one must "read them, study their creations and think about them until one knows *what they are going to say next*."¹¹ It is worth reflecting, too, on those stories which we want to hear over and over again, and those which shape the common consciousness of a community, whether they end with the funeral rites of Hector or before the empty tomb.

Why do stories bear repeating? In some cases, no doubt, because of the pleasure they give, in others because of the meaning they bear. But in any case, if the theory of comprehension is right, because they aim at producing and strengthening the act of understanding in which actions and events, although represented as occurring in the order of time, can be surveyed as it were in a single glance as bound together in an order of significance, a representation of the *totum simul* which we can never more than partially achieve. This outcome must seem either a truism or a paradox: in the understanding of a narrative the thought of temporal succession as such vanishes — or perhaps, one might say, remains like the smile of the Cheshire Cat. It is a paradox, of course, if like Gallie one fixes one's attention on following the development of a story or the course of a game. But in the configurational comprehension of a story which one *has followed*, the end is connected with the promise of the beginning as well as the beginning with the promise of the end, and the necessity of the backward references cancels out, so to speak, the contingency of the forward references. To comprehend temporal succession means to think of it in both directions at once, and then time is no longer the river which

11 *The Practice of History*, p. 17; italics added.

bears us along but the river in aerial view, upstream and downstream seen in a single survey.

The thesis that time is not of the essence of narratives also loses its paradoxical air if one considers that historians commonly say (if they are asked) that they think less and less of chronology as they learn more and more of their fields. The date of an event is functionally an artificial mnemonic by which one can maintain the minimum sense of its *possible* relation to other events. The more one comes to understand the actual relations among a number of events, as expressed in the story or stories to which they all belong, the less one needs to remember dates. Before comprehension of events is achieved, one reasons *from* dates; having achieved comprehension, one understands, say, a certain action as a response to an event, and understands this directly. So one could reason *to* the conclusion that the event preceded the action, but from the standpoint of comprehension this would be trivial, except as information for someone else who did not already understand what the action was — who, that is, did not know its story. Even to describe the action correctly would mean describing it as a response and therefore *as* an element in a story. Otherwise it would not even be represented as an action (that is, as intentional and having a meaning for the agent), but as an opaque bit of behavior waiting for its story to be told.

It is implied by this account that the *techniques* by which narratives are shaped — from “Meanwhile, back at the ranch . . .” to the ironies of the fictive narrator who fails to see in his own tale a significance which author and reader share — can be regarded as, in part, instruments for facilitating the comprehension of the story as a whole. But one should ask at this point: what *are* the connections of the events arrayed in a single configuration? According to Gallie, the fundamental connection between the events of a story is their mutual orientation toward the promised end. According to Morton White’s well-known account of historical narration, the fundamental connection is causal: antecedent events are presented as contributory or decisive causes of subsequent events.¹² There is also the unreflective view that the connection is simply that of temporal succession, but our whole argument has been that the significance of this connection evanesces between the activity of following a story and the act of comprehending it.

The example given above of an action in response to an event suggests an entirely different understanding of the internal organization of a comprehended story. For we do not describe the action

12 *The Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, pp. 223-25, and ch. iv.

and then add the statement that it was a response ("Next morning he sent off a telegram. I forgot to say that he had received an offer the day before for his interest in the company, and the telegram was his reply to the offer, actually . . ."). Rather we describe it correctly *as* a response ("He considered the offer overnight, and next morning accepted it by telegram . . ."). There are two points here. The first is that the correct description of the significant action is "accepting the offer," and "sending the telegram" is not a different action but part of the first. The second is that "accepting the offer" is already what might be called a story-statement. It refers to the story of which it is a part and overlaps conceptually with earlier statements about receiving the offer, and the like. "Sending a telegram" is not a story-statement. It suggests that there *is* a story to which it belongs, but it does not refer to that story and tells us nothing about what sort of earlier statements if any it may be linked to.

Not all parts of a story are about actions correctly describable only by story-statements, of course. But if we generalize from this paradigm we can say that the actions and events of a story comprehended as a whole are *connected by a network of overlapping descriptions*. And the overlap of descriptions may not be part of the story itself (as one thing after another) but only of the comprehension of it as a whole. For consider the narrative function of "discovery": we follow Oedipus on the road from Delphi to the crossroads where he is insulted by a stranger and in anger kills him. And then we follow him along the road to Thebes and across the years to his dreadful discovery. With Jocasta, we know the truth before Oedipus does, but not much before. All this occurs in following the story. But since we already know the story, we can only play at following it. In the comprehension of the story as a whole, there are no discoveries, and descriptions have no tense. For comprehension, the incident at the crossroads is *fully* describable only by a set of descriptions which jointly refer to all the rest of the story. The doomed man is a noble stranger to Oedipus, but he is also king of Thebes, the father of Oedipus, the husband of Jocasta, the predecessor of Oedipus as husband of Jocasta, the man whose house is cursed, the man who sent Oedipus to be bound and exposed as an infant, the man whose wife is a suicide, the man whose son blinds himself, and above all the man whose identity is discovered after his death by his slayer. He is alive and he is dead, and he could not be elsewhere than at the crossroads in the sunshine.

For comprehension, of course, there is a similar array of descriptions for every incident and character. The blinded Oedipus is the son of the king of Thebes, the man who brought the plague to the city, and the one who killed the stranger at the crossroads. Thus in the

array of descriptions grasped together in the understanding of any incident or character, each overlaps with at least one in another array, and at least one overlaps with a description in every other array.¹³ But this is only a formal account of a complex act of mind which directly apprehends its tableau of objects in their concrete particularity as well as in their manifold of relations.

IV

"Narrative," Barbara Hardy has said, "like lyric or dance, is not to be regarded as an aesthetic invention used by artists to control, manipulate and order experience, but as a primary act of mind transferred to art from life." More important than the artifices of fiction are the qualities which narrative shares with the story-telling of lived experience: "For we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative."¹⁴ It is true, I have argued, that narratives are in an important sense primary and irreducible. They are not imperfect substitutes for more sophisticated forms of explanation and understanding, nor are they the unreflective first steps along the road which leads toward the goal of scientific or philosophical knowledge. The comprehension at which narratives aim is a primary act of mind, although it is a capacity which can be indefinitely developed in range, clarity, and subtlety. But to say that the qualities of narrative are transferred to art from life seems a *hysteron proteron*. Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends; there are meetings, but the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later, and there are partings, but final partings only in the story. There are hopes, plans, battles and ideas, but only in retrospective stories are hopes unfulfilled, plans miscarried, battles decisive, and ideas seminal. Only in the story is America which Columbus discovers, and only in the story is the kingdom lost

¹³ Descriptions of course must belong to the narrative and not to our interpretation of it. It is not a description of Creon in *this* story that he is the man who condemns Antigone to death, nor a description of Oedipus that his downfall comes about as a result of a flaw in his nature. But we could not very well discuss the latter claim unless we already had the whole story in mind; and I even suspect that many interpretations or "readings" have very little point except as an aid to achieving or maintaining comprehension. In any case, comprehension is a necessary condition of interpretation but not vice versa.

¹⁴ Barbara Hardy, "Towards a Poetics of Fiction: An Approach Through Narrative," *Novel*, II (1968), 5.

for want of a nail. We do not dream or remember in narrative, I think, but tell stories which weave together the separate images of recollection. (One recounts a dream: "And then suddenly I was in the Piazza Navona — now how did I get *there*?") So it seems truer to say that narrative qualities are transferred from art to life. We could learn to tell stories of our lives from nursery rhymes, or from culture-myths if we had any, but it is from history and fiction that we learn how to tell and to understand *complex* stories, and how it is that stories answer questions.

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