RICŒUR ON TIME AND NARRATIVE

An Introduction to
Temps et récit

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THE OBJECT OF THIS BOOK IS TO MAKE THE KEY CONCEPTS OF Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* available to readers who might have felt bewildered by the twists and turns of its argument. Those who don’t read French may have assumed that their confusion was due to reading Ricoeur in translation. It is a reasonable enough assumption. What can be captured only approximately in another language might, after all, be luminously clear in the original. But that is not the case here. The English translation of *Temps et récit* is for the most part admirably reliable, and the experience of reading Ricoeur in English is pretty much the same as reading him in French. Indeed, existing commentary on Ricoeur shows that French readers have had their own difficulties with what can sometimes seem to be a perversely inconclusive style of philosophical argument. For readers new to Ricoeur, that style constitutes a major problem.

As François Dosse has shown in *Paul Ricoeur: Les sens d’une vie*, Ricoeur’s style was shaped by his resistance to an opposite style of Paris philosophizing. In France this sometimes goes under the name of *parisiannism*: the habit of treating argument as mere assertion and counter-assertion, along with a certain grandiosity of claims pushed to fantastic extremes. Dosse’s account brings out, for instance, the full bitterness of the famous episode in which disciples of Jacques Lacan accused Ricoeur of having stolen Lacan’s ideas for his own book on Freud. But behind that bitterness may be glimpsed a more abstract conflict of intellectual
styles. One of these styles is represented by Lacan himself, a flamboyant public figure issuing to packed seminars a stream of gnomic pronouncements offered as a new theory of the Freudian unconscious. The other is represented by Ricoeur, working alone in his study, trying to isolate through endlessly patient analysis the implications of Freud’s own theory of the unconscious for a philosophy of will and volition.

On the other hand, it is not immediately clear why analysis, no matter how painstaking, should count as argument. In 1970, Ricoeur was instrumental in introducing J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* to French readers. The title of the French translation, which has the virtue of at least hinting at such now-familiar concepts as performatives and constatives and illocutionary force, was *Quand dire, c’est faire*. But those who attended the original lectures on which Austin based *How to Do Things with Words* had no such guidance. Reading Ricoeur can sometimes seem like the experience they reported, a feeling of having somehow been set adrift on a sea of endless analysis that has no object but to lead to further analysis and then to still more. Nonetheless, as Austin saw, there comes a point at which analysis, if it is rigorous and purposeful enough, begins to show—cannot help but show—what it is all about. The same is true, with one important difference, of Ricoeur.

The difference is this. For Austin, the point of careful analysis was to bring to light truths not directly expressible in propositional terms. For Ricoeur, it is to push analysis to the point where there stands revealed, just beyond the limits of purely logical or rational argument, a lurking aporia or irresolvable paradox. The inescapability of such paradox serves as a guiding principle in Ricoeur’s philosophy. For what the long history of philosophical investigation shows, he thinks, is that the deepest paradoxes of human experience—the paradox, for instance, of a rational consciousness able to contemplate its own existence but unable then to say what is doing the contemplating—cannot be resolved by philosophical argument. Neither, however, can they be avoided, at least so long as existence itself insistently keeps thrusting them in various disturbing guises upon our attention. The value of philosophy lies, in Ricoeur’s view, in its perpetual struggle toward a goal of sense or meaning. Its danger lies in the temptation to believe that any truth one has managed to discover is absolute.
Ricoeur’s usual method is to dismantle established theories and philosophical arguments until he is able to show that, no matter how great their contribution to understanding an important problem—the nature of mimetic representation, say, or the concept of causality in psychological as opposed to physical explanation—they have left some crucial issue unresolved. Even for those highly sympathetic to Ricoeur’s approach, this process can sometimes seem to be too much an end in itself. Thus, for instance, we hear François Wahl—Ricoeur’s longtime editor, and one of his most informed and perceptive readers—trying gently in 1984 to get Ricoeur to see that the second volume of Temps et récit, which Wahl has just finished reading in manuscript, far too often loses sight of its main object while straying off into incidental matters (“les annonces, les rappels, les expositions parfois accessoires.”). It is a note of frustration one comes across in Wahl’s editorial correspondence with Ricoeur again and again over the years.

In hopes of sparing the reader that sort of frustration, I have chosen to write this book from a perspective I hit upon in discussions with Paul Ricoeur some years ago at an institute for advanced studies in the humanities. He and I occupied neighboring offices. Ricoeur was then in the early stages of writing Time and Narrative, and was concentrating on the work of Northrop Frye and Hayden White. My own background was in analytic philosophy. I knew, at that point, very little about French philosophy, but I did know a good bit about Northrop Frye and the formalist theory of W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley at Yale and Reuben Brower and his students at Harvard, in which Ricoeur also took a keen interest. We had daily discussions, and subsequently wound up co-directing a fellows’ seminar on the theory of literary autonomy, a subject that would greatly preoccupy Ricoeur in Time and Narrative. I also began, on my own, to read Ricoeur’s previously published works.

For anyone used to the straightforward arguments of analytic philosophy, I found, the best way to see what Ricoeur was doing was to ignore the occasional glimpses of aporia or paradox in the remote distance and pay close attention instead to the way established theories and arguments were dissolving and reconstituting themselves under the pressure of his analysis. A great deal of Ricoeur’s originality as a philosopher, normally unremarked in commentary on his work, seems to me
to lie precisely in his power to sustain this sense of constant renewal. In *Time and Narrative*, as I shall try to show, there is real intellectual excitement involved in watching how such theories and arguments—Aristotle and Augustine and Husserl on time, Frye and A. J. Greimas on narrative structure, Arthur Danto and Louis O. Mink on the nature of historical explanation—emerge from Ricoeur’s analysis not only transformed in themselves but in an entirely new set of relations to one another.

Commentary on Ricoeur has concentrated almost exclusively on what might be called the negative strain in his philosophy: the steady emphasis on a paradoxicality that denies all claims to absolute truth, or what in France is often celebrated as Ricoeur’s own renoncement au savoir absolu. But there is also a strongly positive strain in Ricoeur’s thinking, though it is admittedly harder to see, especially for first-time readers. My own breakthrough in understanding Ricoeur came when I realized that the strikingly original observations he kept coming up with while discussing the work of others were not mere random insights but related points in an extended argument that, though presented unsystematically, was meant to be understood in systematic terms. That is the line I have followed in *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative*. The subsequent chapters are devoted to reconstructing, from its dispersed presentation in three volumes of wide-ranging speculation on a variety of issues, what I take to be the underlying argument of *Temps et récit*. It perhaps goes without saying that I hope they might also suggest a useful way of understanding Ricoeur’s work as a whole.

As an Appendix to the Present Work, I have Included a Shortened version of an interview with Paul Ricoeur, originally published in *Magazine littéraire*. My translation first appeared in *Providence Studies in Western Civilization* 8, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2004). I am grateful to the editors for granting permission to reprint this shorter version. In addition, I want to mention a number of personal debts. At the National Humanities Center, besides conversations with Paul Ricoeur, daily discussions with David Falk greatly aided my grasp of issues addressed in the following chapters. Subsequently, a number of people—Linda Dowling, Kit Fine, Russell Goodman, Ruth Marcus, G. F. Schueler, the late Jerrold

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Chapter One

MIMESIS

At the center of Ricoeur’s philosophical argument in *Time and Narrative* lies an extended exercise in what looks like purely literary analysis, namely, his reconsideration—ultimately, as we shall see, his radical reinterpretation—of the concept of *mythos* or narrative emplotment in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Yet this, too, belongs to philosophy. As Ricoeur understands it, Aristotle’s account of *mythos* was nothing less than an attempt to come to terms with what the Greeks called mimesis, a word sometimes translated as “imitation,” sometimes as “representation,” but always as something having to do with that puzzling intuition that makes us want to say that art imitates life. For Plato, whose notion of mimesis drew mainly on the visual arts—the way a portrait or a marble bust can be said to imitate its subject, say—the idea was relatively unproblematic. For Aristotle, who by the time he wrote the *Poetics* had begun to wonder exactly what a tragedy like *Oedipus Rex* or an epic like the *Iliad* could be said to be representing or imitating, it had assumed the status of a philosophical problem.

Aristotle’s solution, famously, was to say that a work like *Oedipus Rex* is the imitation of an action. So long as we do not stray too far from Plato’s notion of mimesis as a copy—Ricoeur says “redoubling”—of some original, the notion has a good deal of plausibility. I can, at any rate, imagine without undue strain a social event like a dinner party where, unknown to the guests, a recording of the conversation was being made. And I can then imagine a group of actors, provided with
a transcript, later reenacting that event. Yet this could not have been what Aristotle, whose notion of *poiēsis* was meant precisely to account for imaginative or fictional works, had in mind. This is no doubt why the problem of mimesis is clearest in works set in imaginary surroundings. In some obvious sense, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* can be seen as an imitation of actions that took place in history. But in what world and in what time—unless we want to say, risking outright tautology, in the world and time of the play itself—did the action imitated in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* take place?

This is not simply a problem about mimesis. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, not least in its obvious proximity to a now vanished culture of folklore and magic, may be seen to raise in particularly insistent terms the problem of literary autonomy—the idea, which Ricoeur wholly endorses, that literary works are self-contained worlds with their own laws and their own logic, subject to distortion when made to answer to ideologies or doctrines external to themselves. At an inaugural moment in literary theory, this is part of what Aristotle had in mind in saying that poetry—by which, as I have noted, he meant imaginative writing generally—was a more philosophical and more universal thing than history. It is what Sidney would later mean in saying, in the *Apology for Poesy*, that art gives us a golden world and nature only a brazen one, and what is then distantly echoed in Shelley’s notion of poets as the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. In *Time and Narrative*, it is precisely Ricoeur’s controlling awareness of the claims of literary autonomy that moves him toward a vastly more complex understanding of Aristotle’s *mimēsis praxeōs*, or “imitation of an action.”

The best way to understand *mimēsis praxeōs*, Ricoeur believes, is to begin by freeing the concept of “imitation” from any narrowly conceived comparison of art work and object, as in the physical resemblance between a marble bust and its subject. What then comes to light is an alternative notion of *mythos* as what Ricoeur calls an arc of operations, a complex movement that originates in culture understood as a symbolic order, that then passes into fixed or frozen form in a work like the *Iliad* or *Don Quixote* or *Middlemarch*, and that is then finally reintroduced into the cultural sphere in the consciousness of listeners or readers whose way of being in the world has been altered by their
reading. To these three sectors of the arc Ricoeur gives the names, respectively, of Mimesis₁, Mimesis₂, and Mimesis₃, a nomenclature that never becomes cumbersome so long as one remains aware that they are three stages or phases of what *Time and Narrative* treats throughout as a single continuous process.

At the level of Mimesis₁, to which he variously refers as the prenarrative structure of experience, a prenarrative level of understanding, or, more simply, as “prefiguration,” Ricoeur’s focus is on the way any individual consciousness inhabits its culture as a symbolic whole. In very basic terms, this means that I am able effortlessly to understand, as I understand my native language, the sign systems of my own society. If I walk out of my house in the morning to see a new Rolls-Royce parked in a neighbor’s driveway, I instantly perceive that I am looking primarily at something meant as a sign of wealth or status, and only incidentally at a mechanical device for transporting its owner from point A to point B. (What Ricoeur means by “prenarrative” becomes clear, in turn, when we observe that whatever his Rolls-Royce is meant to “say” about my neighbor will also be said about a character in a novel who owns a Rolls-Royce.) At this level, Ricoeur argues, symbolism confers an initial readability on human action.

At the same time, even to speak about an intent behind my neighbor’s action is to move in the direction not simply of Aristotle’s *mimēsis praxeōs* but of what has been called the *Verstehen* sociology of cultural theorists such as Clifford Geertz. (Ricoeur approvingly quotes one of Geertz’s pronouncements: “Culture is public because meaning is.”)1 Here we encounter that more total conception of cultural symbolism that includes law, custom, tradition, religious beliefs and rituals, and every other system that may be seen to belong to any given culture perceived as a symbolic whole. Considered as an action, the buying of a Rolls-Royce belongs to a particular, local, and undoubtedly transient system of signs. But to understand a ritual action, as Ricoeur once says—the elevation of the host in a Roman Catholic Mass, the serving of the unleavened bread at a Passover Seder—is to understand the meaning of the ritual, which in turn implies an entire system of beliefs, values, and institutions. At this point we are very close to the notion of culture in its entirety as a symbolic system.
In *Time and Narrative*, the conception of culture as symbolic system is important most often as it provides a necessary context for interpreting human action. Even at the Mimesis level of “preunderstanding,” where we have a great distance yet to go before getting to Aristotle’s *mimēsis praxeōs*, Ricoeur is already deeply concerned with a semantics of action that must be observable, as he sees it, in anything that could be called a human community. For to count as an action, what would otherwise be mere physical movement must be understood within a context involving volition, motives, and goals. My scratching my ear when it itches is not, from this point of view, an action, nor is sneezing, or coughing, or anything I might do while sleepwalking. My going to the refrigerator to get a cold drink on a hot day is an action, but my dog’s going to his water dish under what might be seen as exactly similar circumstances is, from the same point of view, something else, an instinctual response to a purely physiological sensation.

This is not to deny that I, as much as my dog, might be experiencing the physical sensation of thirst. But that is not the only reason I might be going to the refrigerator. I might, for instance, be trying to cover over an awkward moment in a conversation I have just been having with you, or making a sociable gesture because friends have just arrived, though I am not in the least thirsty myself. Or, alternatively, I might be thirsty but still going to the refrigerator for one of these other reasons. The idea of a reason for acting, to borrow the title of G. F. Schueler’s well-known treatise, covers a very great range of goals, motivations, and circumstances, any of which might be plausibly attributed to a human agent in such a situation. These are precisely what cannot be attributed to the dog as it goes to its water dish. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein playfully pretends to a wide-eyed naivete as a means of illustrating the same point: “Why can’t a dog simulate pain? Is he too honest?”

The idea of a semantics of action matters most importantly to Ricoeur not simply because I might have any number of reasons for going to the refrigerator, but also because those same reasons are necessarily the means we use to explain to ourselves the actions of other people. Here we are in the vicinity of what Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, calls the probable. If the day is hot and I am alone in the house, a neighbor who happens to look through the window will probably conclude that
I have taken a cold drink from the refrigerator because I’m thirsty. One of Aristotle’s points, however, is that probability shifts with the circumstances. If you and I are having a conversation painful to us both, and if at a particularly awkward moment I get up to get a drink, you might very well conclude that my action had more to do with an intolerable sense of embarrassment than with thirst.

Even so simple a scenario permits us to see why Ricoeur wants to insist that the ways we understand each other in daily life involve an irreducible narrativity. For your explanation of why I went to the refrigerator is in some elementary sense a story: we were both embarrassed, and to get over the awkwardness he got up and went to get a cold drink. In such moments, Ricoeur thinks, lies the genesis of Aristotle’s conception of mythos as a mode of explanation by emplotment. Ordinary life, Aristotle said, is most often made up of actions and events that take place in meaningless succession: “one thing after another.” But narrative always involves, due to the logic of emplotment, a strong implication of causality: “one thing because of another.” The same point is implicit in E. M. Forster’s well-known aphorism in Aspects of the Novel. “The king died and then the queen died,” said Forster, is a chronicle. “The king died and the queen died of grief” is a story.

What is the logic of emplotment that permits a narrative sequence to imply causality? This is a problem to which Time and Narrative will devote a great deal of attention in the course of its long and intricate argument, but even at the early stage of Mimesis, two important principles stand out clearly. The first is that emplotment permits an intuitive grasping together (prendre ensemble) of otherwise heterogeneous elements, by which Ricoeur will always mean events occurring in separate orders of reality. To ask how the drink I fetch from the refrigerator came to be cold, for instance, is to invite an explanation in terms of the kinetic behavior of gas molecules under compression. To ask why I am thirsty—if that is the reason I am fetching the drink—is to ask about a physiological sensation in terms of the endocrine response to cellular dehydration. To ask why a sense of embarrassment has led me to get up, on the other hand—an event occurring in a purely psychological realm of social interaction—is implicitly to demand an explanation in terms of human or group psychology.
How, then, does emplotment permit us to grasp occurrences at such heterogeneous levels in a single moment of intuition? The answer takes us to the second of Ricoeur’s major principles, which he most often calls “discordant concordance,” counting on his readers to recognize his invocation of the *concordia discors* of ancient philosophy. For Heraclitus and Empedocles, thinking in terms of a Greek physics that pictured the material universe as a war of contending elements—earth, air, fire, and water engaged in perpetual struggle—this was an attempt to understand how such elements could coexist harmoniously in such obviously unified entities as flowers, trees, animals, or the human body. Even today, in the age of modern science, something of the same perplexity may occasionally be felt. I am convinced, intellectually, that every atom now in my body circulated billions of years ago in the interior of distant stars, but understanding how they came to form the hand that is writing this sentence—or, even more oddly, how they are related to the sense of intellectual purpose now moving the pen across the page—seems to ask for some different mode of explanation.

Nonetheless, to call a harmonious relation among heterogeneous elements *concordia discors*, as the ancients did, is only to give a name to something that remains to be explained. For Ricoeur, the explanation of emplotment as discordant concordance lies in the concept of *mythos* or plot as a teleological principle: the inexorable movement that drives the story toward an anticipated conclusion. As we shall see, *Time and Narrative* treats this movement as a purely formal consequence of narrative structure, and in particular of what I shall be calling the double temporality of narrative. At the moment, what matters is that both the conclusion and its anticipation count as what might be called objective correlates of the “grasping together” that Ricoeur sees as central to the logic of narrative causality. The telos of the plot may be viewed, at this preliminary stage, simply as an ordering principle with a power to suspend or neutralize what might otherwise seem to be troublesome questions about a vast heterogeneity of motives, goals, actions, and material circumstances.

The reason that motives and goals become central to Ricoeur’s argument at this point is that he views narrative emplotment as always grounded in what he calls a preunderstanding of the world of action. At
the most basic level, as we have seen, this means that your attempt to understand why I have gone to the refrigerator may well take the form of a story about our mutual embarrassment. But it also means that, at the level of social existence, events in ordinary life will strike many of us as stories waiting to be told. And it means, at a further extension, that certain striking episodes will crystalize and pass into collective or communal consciousness, as in the stories of Robin Hood or William Tell or Patrick Henry. This last is no doubt what Roland Barthes had in mind in pointing out, in a celebrated essay on semiotic theory, that “narrative occurs in all periods, all places, all societies; narrative begins with the very history of humanity; there is not, there has never been, any people anywhere without narrative. . . . Narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural; it is there, like life.”

Throughout Aristotle’s *Poetics*, as Ricoeur remarks, a sense that works such as *Oedipus Rex* emerge from something very like a collective consciousness is strongly implicit. This is why, for instance, Aristotle is able to praise tragedy for using historical names, like Oedipus and Agamemnon, not because they are historical but because they carry in themselves a strong suggestion of probability. What has been, Aristotle says, becomes probable as soon as it is conceived as having actually happened. He is not making a claim about historical veracity. As with certain subjects, such as the Trojan War or the house of Atrides, such names serve as reminders that the story is rooted in a cultural past from which all stories ultimately derive—a common humanity that, much as in Barthes’ account of a primordial narrativity, precedes tribe or nation or historical epoch. This, too, is part of what Ricoeur takes Aristotle to mean in saying that *poiēsis*, as opposed to history, which is tied to the singular or particular event, possesses universality.

It is clear from Aristotle’s discussion of emplotment that while *Oedipus Rex* counts for him as a preeminent example of *poiēsis*, the Robin Hood ballads would not. The reason is that Sophoclean tragedy possesses what Aristotle calls unity, an abstract structure of beginning, middle, and end that creates a new and self-contained reality in a way that tales and legends sedimented in cultural memory need not. For Ricoeur, this structure—what by linguistic analogy might be called a deep structure of narrative grammar—is actually the abstract object
of imitation in Aristotle’s *mimēsis praxeōs*, the universal or recurring human event that it is the purpose of *poiēsis* to represent. In life, we remember Aristotle saying, one thing follows another. I get up, I check my mail, I go back for a second cup of coffee. In *poiēsis*, one thing happens because of another. Oedipus puts out his own eyes because the terrible double revelation of parricide and incest has made it intolerable to look any longer on a world in which he has done such things.

Where does the Aristotelian unity that makes *Oedipus Rex* a self-contained whole (*holos*) come from? Aristotle contrasts the arbitrary unity of a single temporal period, in which numerous unrelated things happen to a multitude of people, to the artistic or poetic unity that comes from positing an internal logic of events. In the same way, he praises Homer for having omitted many extraneous elements of the Odysseus legend so as to make the *Odyssey* a single story of epic or heroic return. The *holos* in this sense always implies a logic of development that is not, as Ricoeur says, taken from experience, which is why Aristotle’s beginning, middle, and end must be viewed as effects of the ordering of the poem rather than features of some real action. Yet a problem remains. There is obviously a strong conception of narrative causality at work here, but, as most readers of the *Poetics* will recall, Aristotle says little that serves to illuminate it. A beginning, he unhelpfully remarks, is what does not follow something else by causal necessity. An end is what follows something else but has nothing following it. A middle comes between the two.

This is where Ricoeur’s analysis crosses the dividing line between Mimesis₁—again, the level of “prefiguration,” or the prenarrative structure of ordinary experience—and Mimesis₂, where his subject will be the logic of narrative causality implicit in Aristotle’s scheme. For where Aristotle saw an essentially spatial structure, with beginning, middle, and end as parts of a simultaneous whole, Ricoeur sees a structure that is at once spatial and temporal: a chain of causal implication that must be traversed in time, and in a state of partial or imperfect knowledge, before there dawns any intimation that these same events might also be seen as a unity of action. This is the level of what Aristotle calls *peripeteia* or reversal, those changes of fortune during which characters like Oedipus find themselves caught up in developments they try vainly,
and often with a growing sense of desperation, to understand. An important point for Ricoeur is that any audience outside the horizon of the events in the story—the original spectators at an Athenian festival, say, or a modern reader of *Oedipus Rex*—must make this traversal in just the same state of imperfect knowledge as those inside it.

Yet Aristotle was not mistaken to see this in terms of spatial structure, for it is that as well. Ricoeur has from the beginning, we recall, described emplotment as a *telos* or movement toward a destined or predetermined end. As one looks back on a completed series of events in a plot, it does seem as though there is something like unity or simultaneity in the causal chain. Within the horizon of the story, the moment that the plot reveals itself as *telos* is what Aristotle called *anagnorisis*, or recognition—in *Oedipus Rex*, that moment of terrible clarity when everyone sees that *this* outcome, though wholly unforeseeable from any previous perspective, was inevitable all along. Then, once again, there is outside the horizon of the story an audience that experiences its own version of this moment of sudden clarity. The logic of narrative causality involves a paradox we encounter in every version of emplotment, from *Oedipus Rex* to the detective stories we read in bed: no, it was entirely unforeseeable; yes, we now see that it was inevitable after all.

The perspective from which Aristotle sees events in *Oedipus Rex* as a simultaneous whole is much more, Ricoeur argues, than a way of looking at narrative structure. For what Aristotle was seeing, whether or not he recognized it as such, was an invariant coordinate of narrative discourse, something built right into the logic of emplotment at the level of *poiēsis*, which here may be taken to include detective stories or other popular fiction as much as Sophoclean tragedy. The perspective Ricoeur wants to isolate resembles, as he notes, the one that Boethius, trying to imagine how God would view the universe, called the *totum simul*: a gaze from outside the limits of human temporality that is able to take in creation, from beginning to end, as a single timeless whole. The difference is that the *totum simul* is not, for Ricoeur, a theological conjecture but, as it operates within narrative structure, a continuous implication of plot during the time that events in the story are unfolding. The originality with which he develops the idea in *Time and Narrative* makes this one of Ricoeur’s own important contributions to narratology.
The *totum simul* is, then, essential to Ricoeur’s account of the double temporality of narrative structure. Every story, as he later demonstrates in his analysis of both historical and fictional narrative, is in an important sense told forward and backward (“d’avant en arrière et d’arrière en avant”) at the same time. The forward movement, which belongs to what Ricoeur calls the syntagmatic order of discourse, links a movement from event X to event Y in an irreducibly temporal way: “The King died, and then the Queen died of grief.” This is Aristotle’s *mythos* as the logic of emplotment that creates a narrative whole, linking such heterogeneous elements as agent, motive, and circumstance together in a single intelligible order of events. At the same time, any continuous implication that the story has already been grasped as a whole—as we shall shortly see, an implication necessarily at work whenever a narrator tells a story in the past tense—means that events must be moving toward a conclusion so far unforeseen by its characters and by us as its audience. The moment at which the forward motion of emplotment comes into abrupt collision with the *totum simul* is Aristotle’s *anagnorisis*.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes between drama, as in his analysis of *Oedipus Rex* as *mimēsis praxeōs*, and what he calls diegetic narrative, in which, as in Homer’s *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, the story is told by a narrator who exists outside its horizon of events. In drama, where the *totum simul* perspective has been almost entirely absorbed into emplotment, it is normally implied by elements within the dramatic structure, as with the oracle that has foretold a destined outcome, or premonitions experienced by characters in moments of fear or anxiety, or the Chorus that views events and draws its conclusions as the detached observer of the main action. In diegetic narrative, on the other hand, which stretches from Homeric epic in Aristotle’s day to works such as Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* in our own, the *totum simul* is always associated with the narrator’s perspective on the story he is telling, giving its double temporality a continuous visibility. For this reason, Ricoeur chooses to concentrate mainly on diegetic narrative throughout his own argument.

Ricoeur’s analysis of the *totum simul* perspective begins in what narratologists like Harald Weinrich have called the preterite family of narrative tenses, namely, all those verbs—imperfect, perfect, pluperfect,
and so on—that in themselves indicate that the action has taken place in a past relative to the time of utterance. In English, this gives us the normal third-person narrative past of the Victorian novel, as at the beginning of Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” In this case, the times being talked about are the years immediately preceding the French Revolution, gazed upon from the vantage point of a narrator living in mid-nineteenth century England, but the identical structure is also present in the case of first-person narratives, as when an older Nick Carraway looks back on the younger self who was Gatsby’s bemused neighbor in *The Great Gatsby*. Within this narrative structure, as Ricoeur says, the events of the story always take place within the past of the narrative voice.

The same structure generates what I have called the double temporality of narrative as Ricoeur conceives it. For within the horizon of events, the story told in *A Tale of Two Cities* or *The Great Gatsby* will move forward in the sequence of ordinary time: *a* happened, then *b*, then *c*. Yet intimations of a *totum simul* in the narrative voice—a structuring of narrative time that highlights certain events so as to imply a chain of narrative causality known to the storyteller but as yet unknown to the listener or reader—will serve as a continuous reminder that the story is already being grasped as a whole. The question of “voice” then becomes simply a question about who is telling the story: in what narrative consciousness do these events already constitute an intelligible whole? In the same way, the question of point of view, that reliable standby of the college handbooks, will simply be about the relation of this narrative consciousness to the events being recounted.

How does the *totum simul* perspective produce that unity that Aristotle saw in the logic of emplotment? The answer lies, once again, in the past tense of narrative discourse, but now in the possibilities of temporal variation made possible by shifts within the preterite group. Thus, for instance, Weinrich, in his *Tempus: Besprochene und erzählte Welt*, is able to show that the imperfect always signals a receding of the narrative content into a background of continuous or ordinary occurrences. In French, this gives us, for instance, Proust’s normal use of the imperfect in *À la recherche*: “J’appuyais tendrement mes joues contre les belles joues de l’oreiller.” The perfect, on the other hand, signals a completed
past action on which, as it stands out against that background, attention is being concentrated. Ricoeur’s example is Caesar’s veni, vidi, vinci. In English, the same effect can be achieved through tense and temporal markers: “I was sitting, as I normally did in the evening, staring into the fire” versus—Ricoeur calls this a mise en relief or putting-into-relief—“That night, a knock came suddenly at the door.”

For Ricoeur, an important consequence of double temporality in narrative is that it produces not only the unity that Aristotle recognized in mythos, but an inescapable sense of the narrated world as a moral or ethical whole. For the narrator who gazes back on events as a totum simul is also someone dwelling within a structure of values and beliefs that necessarily entail ethical judgment. Consider the way all these elements—a structured temporality, emplotment as telos, ethical implication—combine when the narrator of Dickens’s A Tale of Two Cities comes to deal with the outbreak of the French Revolution. It is a sobering moment, as a narrator who has so far invariably shown a deep and anguished sympathy with the plight of dire poverty and exploitation that has led the populace to revolt is compelled to acknowledge an equal sympathy for the innocent victims of indiscriminate social frenzy:

There was no pause, no pity, no peace, no interval of relenting rest, no measurement of time. Though days and nights circled as regularly as when time was young, and the evening and morning were the first day, other count of time there was none. Hold of it was lost in the raging fever of a nation, as it is in the fever of one patient. Now, breaking the unnatural silence of a whole city, the executioner showed the people the head of the king—and now, it seemed almost in the same breath, the head of his fair wife. . . .

And yet, observing the strange law of contradiction which obtains in all such cases, the time was long, while it flamed by so fast. A revolutionary tribunal in the capital, and forty or fifty thousand revolutionary committees all over the land; . . . prisons gorged with people who had committed no offence, and could obtain no hearing; these things became the established order and nature of appointed things, and seemed to be ancient usage before they were many weeks old.4
Finally, in A Tale of Two Cities, as in other fictional narratives, the continuous use of the past tense announces that the story is wholly imaginary and that, as such, it constitutes an autonomous or self-contained world. For Weinrich, whose analysis of tense structure in narrative began with the question of what could be said about a past tense that turned out to refer to no actual past, this is a fundamental principle of literary autonomy. In fiction, says Weinrich, the primary function of tenses in the preterite group is precisely to signal a break between the narrated world and any actual or historical time: “The space in which fictional narrative unfolds is not the past.” Yet from the “once upon a time” that introduces a fairy tale to invocations of the heavenly Muse in epic, narrative has always had conventions meant as a signal to listeners or readers that they were about to enter an imaginary reality. For Ricoeur, the important point will be that fictional narrative—unlike history, which, as we shall see, is always for him an irreducibly narrative mode as well—has and uses such means to insist in purely formal terms on its own fictionality.

In the Poetics, Aristotle speaks of Oedipus Rex and other Greek tragedies as works that, just as they had their origins in an earlier body of myth and legend, survive now in the permanence of written form to pass back into communal consciousness as part of an ongoing cultural heritage. The equivalent in the English-speaking world would be, no doubt, Shakespearean drama, as it has provided a common point of reference, or even what might be called a basis of invisible community, among readers through successive generations. Yet for Ricoeur the great point about Oedipus Rex or Paradise Lost or Madame Bovary is not that they are taken back up into the culture within which they originated, but that they are also available in the timelessness of their literary autonomy—Horace’s aere perennius, Shakespeare’s “Not marble, nor gilded monuments”—to a humankind that possesses a universal power to grasp narrative reality. “All classes,” says Barthes in the essay already cited, “all human groups, have their narratives, and very often these are enjoyed by men of different, even opposing, culture.”

The notion of listeners or readers far distant in time or language or culture from a work’s original audience takes us into the region of Ricoeur’s Mimesis, by which he means the total act of comprehension—he calls
this “refiguration”—through which a story comes to life in the consciousness of those outside its imaginary world. A crucial point is that this always begins as a matter of purely formal projection, a special instance of the power of language to posit a reality existing independent of discourse. Ricoeur is drawing here on Émile Benveniste’s theory of discourse, for which even a simple utterance like “Shut the door!” is intelligible only as it is understood to refer to an immediate and separate physical environment that includes, at a minimum, a room or building or other enclosed space. In narrative, it is the entire set of conventions signaling the immemorial situation in which someone is telling and listening to a story—as in, again, the “once upon a time” of fairy tales or Märchen—that projects a world with a potentially limitless set of listeners or readers who may come to join its audience so long as the written work survives the vicissitudes of historical time.

In general terms, Ricoeur’s account of Mimesis3 might thus be thought to involve something like Wolfgang Iser’s notion of the “implied reader,” and, as we shall see in chapter 6, Ricoeur does in fact dutifully mention Iser at several points. Yet “refiguration” demands a far greater respect for the claims of literary autonomy than is evident in Iser’s The Act of Reading, and Ricoeur takes great pains to ensure that his presentation of Mimesis3 does not dissolve into a mere psychology of reader response. This is an extremely delicate moment in his argument. On the one hand, Mimesis3 demands a conception of audience that is a purely formal projection—a “virtual site” of literary comprehension, as Jonathan Culler once put it. On the other hand, it also demands readers who belong wholly to a world where people eat and drink and, as no purely formal projection can, suffer pain and grow old and die. Ricoeur’s point will simply be that, while those whose consciousness is altered by Oedipus Rex or Don Quixote or A Tale of Two Cities may constitute a minority in any given population, that alteration must also take place in a world they know themselves to share with other beings subject to time and mortality.

At a later point in Time and Narrative, Ricoeur speaks of every encounter with narrative as a struggle or contest between opposing spheres of reality, a confrontation between what he calls the fictive world of the text and the actual world of the reader. Here, however, in his account
of Mimesis, he wants to emphasize the way in which the semantics of action he earlier discussed at the level of Mimesis provides the means of moving back and forth freely between one sphere of reality and the other. As what we have heard Ricoeur call a prenarrative structure of experience, Mimesis takes on importance not simply because we inevitably make up stories to explain the motives and actions of others to ourselves, or even because doing so represents an elementary version of the more elaborate logic of emplotment that we encounter in works like *A Tale of Two Cities*. It is important because the characters in whose company we move inside the world of Dickens’s story—Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton and Madam Defarge and Jerry Cruncher—think and act in terms wholly familiar to us in ordinary life, which, as Ricoeur’s earlier account of Mimesis has taught us to see, is rooted in the same semantics of action as the world of the novel.

When we are inside the world of *A Tale of Two Cities*, following the story thus means understanding the narrative causality that sustains its plot, that chain of seemingly inevitable events that commentators, from Aristotle to modern semioticians such as A. J. Greimas, have wanted to see in structural or spatial terms. Against this view, Ricoeur wants to insist that the process of following a story at the level of Mimesis is irreducibly temporal, involving that state of partial or imperfect knowledge on the part of both characters and audience that would lose its entire point if the moment of *anagnorisis* as sudden clarification had been known from the outset. Ricoeur’s point here has nothing to do with whether one knows how the story will in fact turn out: a Sherlock Holmes story like *The Hound of the Baskervilles* can be read and reread many times with, if anything, increased enjoyment. What is at stake is a cognitive process, the movement from imperfect knowledge to a total clarity that lays bare a new and alternative landscape of reality. Here lies the basis of what Ricoeur means by calling Mimesis a “refiguration.”

By refuguration Ricoeur means, too, an alteration in consciousness that derives less from a new way of seeing reality than from the impossibility, after reading *King Lear* or *Rasselas* or *Middlemarch*, of not seeing it that way. Mimesis, in this sense bears some resemblance to those alterations in perception conventionally associated with paradigm shifts in the history of science. We can imagine, at any rate, a educated person
at the end of the sixteenth century gazing at the night sky and seeing
the orderly Ptolemaic universe—crystalline spheres carrying the sun,
moon, and planets around a fixed or stationary earth—that his father
and grandfather had gazed upon before him. And we can imagine the
same person some years later, having learned about Copernicus and
Galileo and a new universe in which the earth revolves on its own axis
while traveling around the sun, gazing wonderingly on a night sky that
is at once the same and radically different. Something like this notion of
radical alteration in the context of the same is also implied in Ricoeur's
conception of Mimesis, as refiguration.

The ultimate object of imitation in Aristotle's *mimēsis praxeōs* thus
becomes, in Ricoeur's theory of mimesis, that sudden change from im-
perfect knowledge to *anagnorisis* or recognition that the *Poetics* had
identified in merely local terms with a feature of Greek tragic plot.
The point of the arc of operations that Ricoeur traces from Mimesis1
to Mimesis3, from a prenarrative structure of experience that exists in
every human community to the alteration brought about in individual
consciousness by narrative experience, is to suggest that what *poiēsis*
imitates is not action itself but a certain abstract structure present in a
multiplicity of meaningful actions, and given lasting visibility in a thou-
sand narratives composed in numerous languages and a great variety
of cultures. Yet all converge on that alteration of consciousness—what
David Parker has called the “epistemic gain” of narrative experience—
that Ricoeur sees as the culminating moment in the process of refi-
figure he calls Mimesis3.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle famously associates the events leading to
*anagnorisis* with a purging of pity and fear in the spectators of tragedy.
Ricoeur's more elaborate theory of mimesis suggests an alternative pos-
sibility, which is that the clarification brought about by *Madame Bovary*
or *Eugene Onegin* or *The Sun Also Rises* may be carried back into the
ordinary or everyday world in the altered consciousness of at least some
readers. Yet this is not, for Ricoeur, an inevitable consequence of nar-
rative experience. Other readers might, after all, remain unmoved by
any given story. Another consequence, to which *Time and Narrative* will
devote a great deal of attention, is both inevitable and universal. It is that
readers who have dwelt for a certain interval in the imaginary world
inhabited by Emma or Tatiana or Lady Brett, a reality that will also exist and be available to other readers a century or more from now, then inevitably return to a world where everything that lives must grow old and die. This is the point at which Ricoeur takes up the central philosophical problem addressed by his argument, which is on exactly what terms the seemingly timeless world of narrative can be understood to exist in a world of mortal time.