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Narrative versus Analysis in History*

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Over the last three decades, historians have often found themselves in sharp disagreement about the role and status of narrative in their discipline; and their differences have been loud enough to be heard well beyond the confines of their professional conclaves. An avant garde, opting for something newer and better than mere 'story-telling', which they generally call 'analysis', have sometimes gone so far as to question whether those who continue to narrate can be said really to convey significant knowledge of the past; and there has been talk of the demise of narrative as part of a 'breakthrough' in historical method of an order comparable to the one which, now hallowed by the name of Ranke, occurred early in the nineteenth century and first encouraged historians to think of their inquiries as constituting a 'science'. Lawrence Stone, not many years ago, was prepared to say at least that all the really important historical works of the post-war period have been analytical in character, and to praise them for so being.¹ More traditional historians like J. H. Hexter and Geoffrey Elton have responded with what are now often seen, at any rate so far as the relevant literature in English is concerned, as classical statements of the continuing credo of the narrative historian.² Not all philosophers who have reflected upon the knowledge-claims characteristic of particular disciplines have recognized an obligation to take account of the self-conceptions of those who practice them. But philosophers of history who do recognize such an obligation—and their number seems to be increasing—can hardly fail to be interested in this controversy.

Of course, in recent years, analytical philosophers who write about historical knowledge have been pursuing their own inquiries into the idea of historical narrative. Morton White was the first to ask what the function of narrative was in historical inquiry—or, rather, since his major concern was with the logical structure of explanation as it might be sought in different domains, he asked in what way an historical narrative might explain.³ His answer was that, although other structural features

* Received 7.11.83


2 See, for example, J. H. Hexter's The History Primer, New York 1971, especially chap. 6. (Herein cited as HP); Elton's Political History, London 1970.

of narrative—for example, its having a central subject or its contents being selected in accordance with appropriate criteria of significance—would have to be considered in any overall account of it as an intellectual form, so far as it achieved explanation, it would have to do this by offering a series of explanations of its constituent events, these all necessarily being of the well-known covering law type since only that type, according to White, was logically sound. In fact, on White’s view, the ideal explanatory narrative would assume the form of a causal chain. A. C. Danto improved this causal model by pointing out that particular causal explanations characteristically call attention to intrusive conditions. In accounts of changes from antecedent to subsequent states of a development being narrated, causes generally come in, as it were, from the outside. They would thus seldom allow the examined development itself to be represented as a chain of causes and effects. W. B. Gallie modified White’s model further by arguing that what allows a would-be explanatory narrative to proceed from point to point is often reference to conditions which, although perhaps necessary for what occurred at each point, and in some relevant sense explanatory, are still not properly described as causes. For example, they might simply be conditions that provided certain agents with opportunities for doing what they did. An historical narrative may thus make a series of happenings understandable in the sense of being followable without puzzlement, even if seldom—and perhaps never—trying to show that what happened was more than contingent.

There were ideas in both Danto’s and Gallie’s responses to White, however, which offered a challenge, not only to the latter’s unrealistic model of a causal chain, but also to his more fundamental, and, I think, more persuasive notion that the understanding afforded by a narrative is just a function of the individual explanations which it contains, however varied these may turn out to be in logical type. Gallie made reference, although perhaps too vaguely, to the sense a narrative commonly conveys of individual episodes contributing to an as yet unknown but promised overall significance. Danto, bringing squarely into his analysis the crucial consideration that historical accounts are written with hindsight, drew attention to some of the ways in which the characteristic language of historical narratives presupposes—and perhaps, ideally, presupposes at every point—knowledge not only of what preceded but of what followed. It is Louis Mink, however, who has developed furthest the idea that, in consequence, an historical narrative normally has a synoptic aim—a feature which it shares with the classical novel.

most important thing a narrative does to make its subject matter intelligible, Mink maintained, is gradually to bring into view a larger whole, this by means of various literary techniques, such as the use of temporally overlapping descriptions—another way of making Danto's point. Mink went on to contrast the synoptic understanding which narratives seek with the sorts typically aimed at in philosophy and in science. Philosophers typically ask: What is the true nature of this thing? Scientists typically ask: Under what generalization or general theory does this thing fall? Historians typically ask: How does this thing fit into its particular context, past, present and future? Distinctively philosophical understanding could thus be called categorial, distinctively scientific theoretical, distinctively historical configurational. And configurational understanding, Mink maintained, is characteristically achieved by narrative.

I rehearse all this for two reasons. First, I do not think that what the philosophers have been doing has always been adequately understood by historians—even by those who, like Hexter, have taken the trouble to read them. Their conclusions have often been seen—especially when they address such problems as the nature of historical explanation or historical narrative—as too aridly formalistic to make useful contact with historians' attempts to render past events and conditions concretely intelligible. The way Hexter has sometimes phrased this complaint is that philosophers have failed to take account of the rhetoric as well as the logic of historical work. Yet much of what he means by rhetoric appears at least to overlap with that conceptual logic of historical inquiry to which White, Danto, Gallie and Mink, in their several ways, contribute. For example, what Hexter says about the need for 'processive' explanations in historical accounts bears a close resemblance to what Gallie had in mind when he claimed that following a narrative often requires, not reference to formally sufficient conditions, but to what the interests and perplexities of a likely reader make relevant at a particular point, this often being, at most, necessary conditions.

More troublesome, perhaps, is Hexter's objection that the sort of analysis of the idea of a causal chain offered by philosophers like White throws no light whatever on a question that would be of the first importance to any historian who was lucky enough to come across such a chain, namely where an account of it should begin.7 As Hexter rightly points out, nothing in White's formal logic of cause and effect would explain why such a chain should not be pursued backwards indefinitely. To my knowledge, no analytical philosopher of history has in fact seriously asked whether there can be good reasons, even rough ones, traceable to the very nature of the causal concept, for regarding one episode of a chainlike explanation as a more appropriate point of origin.

7 Hexter, The History Primer, p. 166.
than another; and that is certainly unfortunate—the more so since how far back particular causal explanations should be pushed is something that historians argue about a good deal. A recent example is the lively debate still going on, in which both Stone and Hexter have participated, over whether the causes of the English Revolution or Civil War were long or short term. But the question itself, if, in Hexter’s terminology, one belonging to history’s rhetoric, is also, in the terminology of analytical philosophers, clearly one belonging to its conceptual logic.

My second reason for having given a brief résumé of what analytical philosophers have been saying about historical narrative is that I shall want to draw upon it from time to time. If I do not set out systematically to criticize or develop it, that is because what I want especially to reflect upon in this paper is some of the things I have found, not philosophers but historians saying. Since Stone and Hexter are both on record on the question of the relative merits of narrative and analysis, I shall sometimes take pronouncements of theirs into account, and I shall draw illustrative material from a field to which both have made distinguished contributions, early seventeenth century English history. What I propose to respond to more directly, however, is certain elements of a rather comprehensive statement by a French historian, François Furet, of the reasons why narrative has come to rest under such a cloud in recent historiography. Furet, of course, works within the Annales tradition, where hostility to narrative history has long been the mark, not of an articulate minority as in English-speaking countries, but of the professional establishment. In 1975, he published, in English translation, an article somewhat tendentiously entitled ‘From Narrative History to History as A Problem’. In that article, most of the concerns about narrative which I have found scattered through the writings of other historians are forthrightly stated. Furet’s complaints include the following: that narrative history achieves only the illusion of explanation, its logic really being ‘post hoc ergo propter hoc’; that it assigns undue significance to events, and especially to events conceived as unique; that it unduly limits historical accounts to variations upon what the records of the past actually say, and hence to the judgements and recollections of the participants; that it is unquestionably and incurably teleological; and that it too passively allows the past to dictate the questions historians ask of it. What Furet has to say often seems addressed as much to the way he thinks narrative historians have traditionally performed as to what he sees following from the very idea of historical narrative. Taken either way, however, his contentions appear

to me a useful point of departure for any attempt to comprehend, and perhaps to resolve, the narrative/analysis dispute.

Let me turn, then, to Furet’s first contention: that the logic of historical narrative is *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (p. 110). This may seem a rather strange thing to say; but Furet is not alone in saying it. For example, in contrasting the account of the coming of the English Civil War offered by C. V. Wedgwood with what he calls ‘the more ambitious constructs of the analytical historians’, Stone also refers to her ‘straightforward *post hoc, propter hoc* narrative’. The *literal* interpretation of this would presumably be that although what narrative historians typically write is non-explanatory chronicle, they are commonly read as if offering implicit explanation. There is surely little excuse for reading a chronicle of events in this way, however, unless the historian supplies cues for so doing. Unlike some philosophers, I think that chronicles may indeed be non-explanatory (although still exhibiting some other features of genuine narrative, such as having a central subject and, if only through selection, registering judgements of importance). But narrative histories need not be, and never are in fact for long, mere chronicles. They characteristically offer what might be called ‘running explanations’ of the events they narrate—including the sorts envisaged by White, Danto and Gallie.

It is nevertheless striking how often historians themselves appear ready to reduce the idea of an historical narrative to that of a mere chronicle. Thus Christopher Hill expresses regret that Wedgwood’s histories only tell us what happened, when what the historian should be doing is *explaining* it—as if narrative, by its very nature, excluded explanation. J. P. Kenyon, in commenting on the tremendous change in Tudor and Stuart historiography from the days of the great nineteenth century narrative historian, S. R. Gardiner, observes that one could hardly expect to find in historical accounts of the latter’s day the explanation naturally demanded of contemporary analytical studies. It was necessary first, he says, to establish ‘what actually happened’. Narrative historians often appear to accept rather meekly such characterizations of their work. Thus Wedgwood tells of having made a deliberate choice of writing ‘what’ and ‘how’ history rather than ‘why’. Yet the notion that narrative is, by its very nature, entirely non-explanatory hardly bears examination. Certainly Wedgwood’s *The King’s Peace* and

11 Christopher Hill, Review of *The King’s War*, *Spectator*, 12 December, 1958.
The King's War are studded with what would normally be called explanations of actions, events and circumstances. The 'propter hoc' complaint can thus be taken seriously only as the suspicion that, given the exigencies of narration, a narrative historian's explanations will always be deformed or inadequate.

So let us ask whether there is some kind of incompatibility, or at any rate, serious tension, between the ideas of narrating and of adequately explaining a sequence of events. The concern is presumably that narrative, being necessarily linear, is explanatorily thin; analysis, relieved of the obligation to tell a story, can be as thick as you please. To put it another way, in tracing linear sequences, one must ignore the background; to the extent that one allows oneself to be diverted into characterizing the background the narrative loses its thread. But adequate explanation of any transition in a sequential narrative is impossible, it will be held, if the background is thus ignored. So one is forced either to narrate or to explain: one cannot do both. Maurice Mandelbaum put this difficulty in a usefully specific form when he argued that the commonsense notion of a cause normally employed in narrative history is itself enough to ensure explanatory incompleteness. That notion always requires the highlighting of one or a few relevant antecedent conditions belonging to possibly enormous sets, jointly more or less sufficient for what occurred, the unmentioned ones, however, being as necessary for it as the ones mentioned. Mandelbaum thinks causal narration proceeding in this way so certain to mislead that he would repudiate the cause/condition distinction altogether, and historical narration with it.

Two sorts of response to this general line of argument suggest themselves. First, it is not true, without qualification, that narrative historians must ignore the background that falls outside the series of happenings they wish to trace. Narratives are not elaborated in the void; they presuppose general knowledge of the background conditions which would fill out the explanations they may offer at various points; and if the adumbration of this background is to be called analysis, they presuppose analysis. In fact, analytical inquiries are sometimes quite deliberately presented as providing, or perhaps as correcting, background knowledge required for associated narratives—as seems to be true, for example, of Hexter's investigation of the political and religious significance of the labels 'presbyterian' and 'independent' in English Civil War historiography. Sometimes whole analytical works are offered as background for revising narratives: Stone's Crisis of the Aristocracy has certainly been read this way, and some of the author's own remarks

14 Maurice Mandelbaum, 'A Note on History as Narrative', History and Theory, 6, 1967, 417.
encourage such a reading (pp. 5, 13). Nor are narrative historians without techniques for calling attention to necessary background knowledge, whether by way of prolegomenon, as in the famous third chapter of Macaulay's *History of England*, or in a more allusive and piecemeal manner. All of which concedes, of course, that sophisticated narrative is not independent of analysis. But it does not show that an historical work that places the main emphasis on tracing a linear sequence is to that extent defective or scarcely explanatory. It is so only to the extent that it requires background knowledge that we do not have.

This point needs reinforcement with the reflection that analysis may equally, from time to time, require, and perhaps also presuppose, narrative. First, as has already been suggested, pre-existing narrative histories—or the need to revise them—are what often give particular analytical works their point. But beyond that, analytical accounts whose subject matter spans any considerable period of time often find it difficult to get by without narrating at all. If there is any 'lesson' that most historians would agree that history teaches, it is that nothing in human affairs stays as it is for very long. Analytical works—Christopher Hill's *Economic Problems of the Church* is an example—17—are sometimes accused of forgetting this, tending to treat as homogeneous for purposes of analysis what cannot be safely so treated because of the passage of time. Analysis does not have to ignore change, of course; some sorts of change can be shown conveniently on a graph, while others can be indicated by successive cross-sectional soundings. But sensitivity to change generates a propensity to narrate—to trace out the change, to show in detail what it is.

In fact, it is as notable a feature of good analytical historical works that from time to time they pause to narrate as it is that narrative histories pause to analyze. This is eminently true of those that are overtly explanatory, like Stone's *Causes of the English Revolution*. As Stone himself remarks, an analysis of the Revolution's causes into explanatory factors not related chronologically fails to close the gap between generally predisposing conditions and the actual event: narrative eventually proves necessary if only to show how a society in some danger of catastrophe went over the edge (pp. 135ff.). But the accounts given by Stone of predisposing conditions like economic growth or the rise of a parliamentary opposition themselves tend to offer at least the materials of narrative, and constantly threaten to break out into narrative. Even analytical works more deliberately oriented towards structural description, like *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*, seldom renounce narrative altogether. In the latter, for example, Stone frequently offers mini-narratives like this summary account of the causes of the Essex rebellion: 'It was lust for power and responsibility which had lured these men

to Court in the first place, thwarted ambition which had driven them to
dissipation, dissipation which had caused the mounting burden of debts,
and the necessity to reduce the burden which provided the added incentive
to an attempt to seize office by force' (p. 221). As Morton White
would doubtless be cheered to note, this mini-narrative even traces out
something remarkably like a causal chain.

Stone is nevertheless surely right to insist that clear answers to ques-
tions like 'What were the causes of the English Revolution?' are not easy
to find in the writings of classical narrative historians like Clarendon and
Gardiner— in spite of the running explanations these contain. He
makes a related point when he associates the return to detailed narration
in work currently being done on Stuart England with a disinclination on
the part of historians any longer to ask ‘the big why question’ (PP,
p. 81). What he has in mind is a contrast with what was more characteris-
tic of the three preceding decades, when leading historians sought inter-
pretations of the Revolution informed by Marxism or other social
science theories. But should we really say that what has changed here is
the question? Isn’t it rather the answer that many historians are now
giving to it? Contemporary revisionists still surely ask the big why
question, but they offer what Stone would regard as little answers—
citing, for example, the character of Charles I, or the timing of the Irish
Rebellion. What certainly must be recognized is that answers to ques-
tions like ‘What were the causes of the English Revolution?’ , whether
big or little, are not normally set forth in the course of a narrative, even
by narrative historians. Answering such a question requires an act of
retrospective abstraction. What provides the materials for supporting
one answer rather than another, however, may still be an explanatory

II

In his second criticism of narrative history, Furet points out, as if it were
obviously a weakness, that such history typically concerns itself with
events regarded as unique (p. 107). What narrative historians write
about, he says, is the battle of Waterloo or the death of Stalin. The
implied argument is the familiar one that although all historical events
may indeed be unique, they do not need to be considered in their
uniqueness—the price of so considering them being their remaining
inexplicable in any way that could plausibly be called scientific. In rather

18 Reply to a review by H. G. Koenigsberger in The Journal of Modern History, 46, 1974,
107.

19 J. P. Kenyon performs such an act on behalf of Gardiner and Wedgwood when he
summarizes their view of the Civil War’s causes as ‘a defect of personality and
government on the part of the Stuarts’ plus ‘an upsurge of precocious democracy riding
on the back of militant Puritanism’ , in a review of Stone’s Crisis, New York Review of
Books, 6, 1966, 23.
figurative language for someone calling for a more scientific form of
historiography, Furet therefore exhorts historians to cease thinking of
historical fact as 'the explosion of an important event, which ruptures
the silence of time', conceiving it rather as 'a chosen and constructed
phenomenon whose regularity facilitates its identification and
examination...' (p. 111). He applies this principle to the demographic
history in which he is himself especially interested in the following way.
For the demographic historian, he says, the birth of Napoleon 'has
exactly the same importance as that of any of his future soldiers' (p. 114).
The narrative historian can hardly complain that Furet leaves it obscure
what his preferred type of history would leave out.

It is a strength of Furet's statement, I think, that it acknowledges as
the important question, not whether historical events, unlike, say, events in nature, are unique, but rather whether historians may legiti-
mately be interested in them in ways other than as members of design-
nated classes. The battle of Waterloo may be of interest as a battle, a
class of historical phenomena about which it is possibly worth theoriz-
ing. But we could see it also as an episode in the political history of
France or England, with respect to which most other battles would be
irrelevant—that is, in Furet's language, we could ascribe significance to
it 'according to its position on... the axis of time' (p. 108). In terms of
Mink's epistemological trichotomy, Furet's rejection of this possibility
really amounts to a rejection of configurational understanding in favour
of the theoretical, or perhaps even the categorial kind. It is important to
see how wide a swath this cuts. For it would be arbitrary to rule out
interest in events as unique only to the extent that they entered into serial
configurations. Furet's position would thus have to be taken as ruling out cross-sectional configurational studies as well, and, in conse-
quence, much of what is done under the name of analysis: certainly
Hill's Century of Revolution (excluding its brief narrative introduc-
tions), probably Stone's Crisis of the Aristocracy, and perhaps even
some of that 'total' history practised especially by French historians
which attempts to relate in immense detail aspects of the life of a
particular village, country or region. I see no reason for any such
self-denying ordinance on the historian's part—unless Furet can show
that configurational understanding is not really understanding at all.

It might perhaps be questioned to what extent narrative construction
does, in fact, require its constituent episodes to be regarded as unique.
Certainly—to cite a consideration often underlined by positivist philos-
ophers of history—in using descriptive language at all, the historian
necessarily applies general concepts. What these concepts are applied
to, however, is not seen as significant merely because it falls under them.
A point emphasized by Mink is of interest in this connection. The
descriptions under which narrative historians bring events in order to
show their configurational significance, he points out, are characteristi-
cally of a kind that would not easily find a place in theoretical inquiries. 
Descriptions like ‘the birth of the first French Emperor’, for example, or
‘the last time Charles was to see London before returning to it as a
prisoner’, which derive from the historian’s grasp of the way the indi-
cated events enter into narratives, are, to say the least, theory-
resistant—as Furet clearly recognized.

The question of how much narrative history concerns itself with the
unique arises again at the level of the configurations. Mink has claimed
that historical configurations are themselves unique—and not contingen-
tly but necessarily. This claim is related to a still earlier contention
of his which, more than anything else, I think, helped to liberate analyt-
cal philosophers of history from the trench warfare into which their
arguments over the covering law model of explanation had settled by the
mid-sixties: namely, that the conclusions of historical inquiries, consist-
ing as they do of the entire system of relations which those inquires
reveal, are not detachable from the works that body them forth.

Strictly speaking, Mink held, they can neither be summarized nor
categorized. I am happy enough with the idea that between any two
historical configurations which historians might want to compare there
will almost always be found significant differences. However, to stress
the uniqueness of such configurations to the point of denying the possi-
bility of overall categorization seems to me questionable. This amounts
to a denial that, at the level at which a narrative is grasped as a whole, it is
ever proper for an historian to try to impose categorial understanding
upon configurational, or theoretical upon that. One might perhaps have
qualms about attempting this at the level of a Toynbee concerned with
the patterns of whole civilizations, but surely not—at any rate, in
principle—at the level of a Marxist interpreting the English Revolution
as a bourgeois one, or of a whig regarding the events leading up to it as a
response to tyranny in the name of constitutionalism. In fact, it is a
common historical practice to bring whole concatenations of events,
actions and circumstances under what W. H. Walsh called ‘colligatory
concepts’. Even to regard as a ‘rise of the gentry’ what was happening
to that stratum of Tudor and Stuart society whose representatives sat in
the House of Commons would involve conceptualizing a configuration.
It would also involve taking sides—if belatedly—in one of the most
famous substantive controversies of modern English historiography.

20 Louis Mink, ‘The Divergence of History and Sociology in Recent Philosophy of
History’, in P. Suppes et al. (eds.), Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science IV,
21 Louis Mink, ‘The Autonomy of Historical Understanding’, History and Theory, 5,
1965, 38ff.
I have been concentrating upon Furet’s reaction to the fact that
narrative historians consider it their task to understand events in their
possibly unique relations to other events and conditions rather than as
falling into classes of theoretical interest. Some of his fire, however,
seems to be directed against the idea of historians being much concerned
with events at all—a wish to narrate being seen as encouraging such a
concern. That narrative history has been largely about events, including,
of course, human actions, seems true enough. The conclusion we
seem invited to draw is that it has therefore concentrated upon the
relatively trivial. In thus taking aim at l’histoire événementielle, Furet
gives voice to a dominant strain in the thought of the Annales historical
school, but I think he also speaks for many others who see analytical
history as the kind more likely to yield significant knowledge. Not for
Stone, however, despite his acknowledgment of some inspiration from
Annales.23 It is true that Stone has excoriated the current crop of English
Civil War historians—narrativists all—as ‘antiquarian empiricists’,
mere ‘chroniclers of the petty event’ (PP, p. 93). But I take it that his
emphasis was on ‘petty’. In any case, like many other analytical histo-
rarians, he often finds it necessary, even when not narrating, to talk at
length about events. And when he does so, interestingly enough, he
frequently talks of them in a language appropriate to narrative (or, as
Hexter might say, he employs a ‘rhetoric’ of narrative). For example, in
The Crisis of the Aristocracy, he calls the period 1580-1620 ‘the real
watershed between medieval and modern England’ (p. 12); in The
Causes of the English Revolution, he points out the ‘milestones’ of the
developing constitutional crisis from 1603 (p. 94), and refers to the
Revolution itself as ‘a critical episode in modern English history’ (p. xi).
Terms like ‘watershed’, ‘milestone’, and ‘episode’ presuppose a serial,
narrative understanding of the subject matter to which they are applied.
In Furet’s terminology, they draw attention to what ‘ruptures the silence
of time’.

But how important is it really for analytical historians to take a tough
line about history’s traditional concern with events? In this connection,
it is perhaps worth noting at least the extreme elasticity of the notion of
an event. Cromwell’s winning the battle of Naseby is obviously an event
in any historian’s vocabulary. But so, according to Hill, is the Industrial
Revolution, which he calls ‘the most important event of modern histo-
ry’.24 Furet, at one point, observes that the whole of history can be seen
as an event (p. 114). Unless some arbitrary spatio-temporal limitation is
placed upon the application of this concept, to say that a narrative
approach commits the historian to a study of events therefore need not

23 Reply to Koenigsberger, op. cit., p. 106.
24 Discussion with Lawrence Stone and Peter Burke, The Listener, 4, October 1973,
p. 448.
be very confining. In a pinch, we might even so describe a work like Stone’s *Family, Sex and Marriage in England*,25 which traces the development of the English family over a period of three hundred years from an ‘open lineage’ stage through a ‘restricted patriarchal nuclear’ stage to a ‘closed domesticated nuclear’ one. This work is overtly analytical; but, in Hill’s sense at least, it too concerns itself with events. It might also be said to owe something, if only at the most general level, to an embryonic narrative framework. At that level it at any rate exemplifies Stone’s own definition of narrative as ‘the organization of material in a chronologically sequential order, and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with subplots’ (*PP*, p. 74).

III

Furet’s third criticism of narrative history is expressed as follows: ‘Historic narrative must follow a division of time which is dictated by the crude premisses of experience: basically it records the recollections of individuals and communities. It keeps alive what they have chosen of their past ... without taking apart or reconstructing the objects within this past’ (p. 107). There appear to be echoes of this view in comments sometimes made by other historians who have reservations about narrative history. Stone, for example, in a study of the English Reformation, remarks: ‘What really happened to the English in the 1530s—indeed, what really happens to any people at any time—cannot be discovered merely by examining the correspondence of the leading minister’ (*PP*, p. 113). To some extent, of course, this can be read as a caution against concentrating too much upon élites—according to Furet, another failing of narrative history (pp. 107-08). But the alternative proposed, namely that the real truth be dug out of local and legal records, suggests his present point as well.

As Furet bluntly phrases it, part of the complaint seems to be that narrative historians follow what R. G. Collingwood called a method of ‘scissors and paste’.26 They are pictured as simply repeating, or refusing to repeat, what alleged eyewitnesses recorded for posterity. Now if narrative history really were circumscribed in method and interest in this way, there would indeed be good reason to call for methodological revision. But in what sense could it plausibly be said that the task of narration confines the historian to repeating unreconstructed ‘recollec-

difficult, if not impossible to achieve. Hence the thinness of pre-history, based only on what can be eked out of artifacts. But it is surely a great exaggeration to say that, basically, narrative history 'records the recollections of individuals and communities' of the past. No reputable narrative historian uses a mere method of 'scissors and paste'. As Collingwood himself constantly reiterated, good history is based, not on testimony but on evidence—which may well include testimony which is made to reveal what it does not itself say.

Any implication that a narrative historian would be bound even by the original agent's views of what was important also needs to be resisted. The retrospectivity of narrative construction will ensure that the historian's own judgements about what was causally important in his subject matter will sometimes differ from those of the original agents, if only because he is able to draw upon expertise not available to them. And his judgements about what was intrinsically important in it—what in it really mattered most, humanly speaking—can also be expected to diverge in some respects from those of the men and women of the time. For example, a relative unconcern with economic matters on the latter's part need not bind the historian to disvalue them in the same way. The same could be said about the concepts in terms of which the original agents made their lives intelligible to themselves. These will certainly have to guide the historian in his attempts to understand why various individuals and groups did what they did; but there is no case for their exclusive employment in his own judgements about what actually happened.

All this has a bearing upon the more general question whether the narrative historian's concepts are, as Furet says, 'constructed' or only 'received'. In fact, quite familiar concepts of narrative history, like 'Puritan Revolution'—apparently an invention of S. R. Gardiner in the nineteenth century—are just as much historians' constructs as is Furet's favoured concept of the birth rate—and just as remote from the consciousness of the agents to whose activities and experiences the historian applies them. Seventeenth-century Englishmen did not know at the time that they were making a Puritan Revolution (if they were), any more than their eleventh century ancestors knew that they were establishing the feudal system. In fact, there are reasons—or so some historians argue—for questioning whether the men who made the so-called Puritan Revolution even had the concept of revolution as we know it. They certainly had the word; but when they talked of revolution they seem to have meant something entirely different from our notion of it: something essentially backward-looking.27

Of course, what I have been saying accepts the Mink-Danto thesis that historical narratives are characteristically retrospective. This is some-

thing that distinguished narrative historians have at times appeared to question. Wedgwood, for example, immediately associates her desired status as essentially a narrative historian with the claim that she tries only to recreate the past as it appeared to the agents themselves.\footnote{C. V. Wedgwood, The King's Peace, New York 1956, pp. 15-16.} Conrad Russell, in what Hexter has called his 'old-fashioned march' through the parliaments of the 1620s,\footnote{J. H. Hexter, 'The Not-So-New-Men', New York Review of Books, 18 December, 1980, 58.} almost makes it a point of honour to avoid talking at any stage as if he, unlike the agents, knew what was coming next. Herbert Butterfield appears close to adopting the position Furet fathers on narrative history generally when he describes its task as a kind of 'resurrection'.\footnote{Herbert Butterfield, 'Narrative History and the Spade-Work Behind It', History, 53, 1968, 165-66.} It is true that he also describes it as 'an attempt by literary means to show the deployment of the actual events, perhaps as an ideally situated contemporary might have seen them', this at least renouncing the aim of representing them as contemporaries did in fact see them. But the envisaged task is still the recovery of the past from its own standpoint.

The theory of such historians is one thing, however; their actual practice is another. Even Wedgwood does not succeed in writing as if she did not know what no contemporary, even an ideally situated one, could have known. The prescient description of Charles leaving his capital noted above was actually a paraphrase of one of her chapter endings.\footnote{C. V. Wedgwood, The King's War, London 1966, p. 58.} Nor do Russell or Butterfield entirely practice what they preach. In fact, good narrative history characteristically exhibits a tension between what might be called the standpoint of the participant and the standpoint of the hindsight observer; it entails a constant dialogue between empathy and retrospection. Perhaps retrospective knowledge could, in theory, be excluded from what is actually \textit{said} in a history; that is, a Gallie-type narrative simply showing how the original agents responded to their problems as they arose may, in principle, be possible. It may even, at times, be salutary for historians to urge each other to move towards something like this for a while—for example, after a period of interpretation in which a given segment of the past has been studied too exclusively for its significance for some later state of affairs. It is apparently with a view to correcting an undue emphasis of this sort (or what is perceived as such) in much work done on the English Civil War, that advocates of writing history 'forwards' rather than 'backwards', like Elton and Russell, have attacked their predecessors for representing the Tudor and Stuart period as a 'high road to civil war'.\footnote{See, for example, G. Elton, 'A High Road to Civil War?', in C. M. Carter (ed.), From the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation, London 1965, pp. 325-47.} But revisionists
commonly exaggerate to make their point; and the idea that history should be, or even could be, written entirely ‘forwards’ is surely, at most, a sometimes useful exaggeration.

It is worth emphasizing that the indispensable, if not in itself sufficient, empathetic aspect of historical narrative is not a feature only of that kind of historical inquiry. The empathetic aspect doubtless shades off to zero in simple reports of changing birth rates and the like; but it is by no means absent from a good deal of what would generally be called historical analysis. An interesting case in point is an account offered in Stone’s *Crisis of the Aristocracy* of a seventeenth century landholding arrangement called a beneficial lease, which Hexter has praised as a model of historical reconstruction. Stone’s problem was why this, the most common form of agreement for letting land in Stuart England, was one which, from the tenant’s standpoint at any rate, we should probably regard as economically irrational. Rather than setting up a schedule of tolerable annual rents after an initial payment of something close to what the prospective tenant could afford, the lease required a huge initial outlay that often put him in a position of great hardship. Stone’s explanation of this peculiarity evokes a whole view of the world from the standpoint of seventeenth-century English peasants, the most obvious characteristic of whose life was uncertainty. Such men, he says, ‘positively preferred a few years of misery and hardship while the fine was being paid, followed by a long period at a low rent...’ (p. 150). The explanation is of a customary action, not a particular one; it presumably belongs to what Elton has called ‘the thick molasses of social history’, but its logic is of the empathetic type. Stone himself has said elsewhere—and apparently with regret—that the sorts of questions that seem increasingly to preoccupy historians nowadays, and which demand knowledge of ‘what was going on inside people’s heads in the past, and what it was like to live in the past’, will ‘inevitably lead back to the use of narrative’ (*PP*, p. 85). This may ultimately be so; but as his own work shows, these questions can also guide good analysis.

**IV**

Furet’s fourth criticism is of special interest, not only in itself, but because it brings into view some further features of narrative history, and touches on still another issue which historians often debate among themselves. What gives ‘meaning’ to all narrative, Furet declares, is ‘temporal finality’. In this kind of history, ‘only the “final cause” ... makes possible an understanding of the events of which it is made up’ (pp. 108-09). In other words, narrative history, according to him, is incurably teleological. Somewhat to my surprise, I have several times found historians of the seventeenth century applying the term ‘teleologi-
cal’ to each other’s interpretations as an expression of censure. Paul Christianson, for example, makes its allegedly teleological character one of his main complaints against the whig interpretation of the pre-Civil War period in England—an interpretation that contemporary revisionists are especially concerned to show mistaken. Critics like Christianson, however, seem to assume that a narrative can be, and ought to be, non-teleological.

At least part of what lies behind both Christianson’s and Furet’s concern shows itself, I think, in Furet’s further remark that the inclination to write narrative history has declined with a decline in the belief in progress (p. 110). He apparently sees more than an accidental connection between these two ideas. Is any general difficulty for narrative history to be derived from such an association of ideas? I suppose it is possible that most narrative historians have in fact believed in historical progress. If so, that is something for which it may be worth finding an explanation—perhaps a psychological, perhaps an historical one. But it is hard to see that writing narrative in any way commits an historian to such a belief. An account which traces the decline of a cherished value or which probes the remote origins of a disaster is surely just as viable as one that traces a rise or tries to explain what is regarded as a step forward. A linear historical account, in other words, could display regress as well as progress.

But there is an even more important misunderstanding of the nature of historical narrative implied by Furet’s linking it in some essential way to a belief in progress—one which was expressed in an influential form by John Dewey when he maintained that every historical account is concerned with a movement towards some selected outcome. Little reflection is required to see that there are at least three, and perhaps four, different overall patterns available to narrative historians. One is Furet’s progressive pattern. This is what we should expect, for example, from any political and constitutional history of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century in England that took as its title some variation on Wallace Notestein’s well-known phrase, ‘The Winning of the Initiative by the House of Commons’. What might be called the point of reference for such a history would clearly be the happy outcome: this is what would provide the narrative with its criterion of selection and its standard for judging the relative causal importance of whatever found a place in it. Something very different would be expected of a work entitled, say, ‘The Aftermath of Buckingham’s Ascendancy’. Here what would give ‘meaning’ to the narrative (to use Furet’s own term) would be the point

of origin; and what Furet calls teleology would be turned upside down. Still another type of narrative history would have its meaning or point of reference in its middle—as would be suggested, for example, by a title like 'The Rise and Fall of the Leveller Movement'. What is said about origins or dissolution, about waxing or waning, in such a work would be relative to the 'flourishing' of what is taken as the chief object of interest. Still other narrative histories may have no identifiable points of reference at all, simply setting out to recount what was memorable in a temporal slice of a chosen subject matter. The aim of a work entitled 'The Reign of James I' would hardly be to show either the consequences of the King's accession or what culminated in his death. Thus the claim that narrative history is, by its very nature, teleological in the sense of being outcome-oriented, appears to have little to be said for it.

Of course, even an outcome-oriented history need not be judged 'teleological' in any sense which implies the operation of 'final causes' in a metaphysically mysterious sense: a sense which might tempt employment of the metaphor of the future 'drawing' events towards it rather than the past 'pushing' them on. Still less need there be any implication that events are inevitably drawn to some future outcome. An outcome-oriented history need not, in fact, succumb to the thesis of inevitability at all—although the epithet 'teleological', when used by historians as a term of reproach, nearly always seems to be taken as implying it. Nor, of course, need a history written on the outcome model imply that nothing of importance was happening other than what led to the designated outcome. Many things omitted from such an account may be acknowledged to be important in some general historical sense. It is just that they are not judged to be important for the particular problem treated.

Lack of clarity on such points seems to me sometimes to infect disputes between historians about whether a certain account has fallen into a 'whig interpretation' of the events its traces. Following Butterfield,\(^\text{36}\) I take such an interpretation to mean, first, one that views past events as if their importance lay solely in their tendency to produce some result considered valuable in the historian's own day. Taken in this sense, 'whiggism' can surely be perfectly innocent provided the historian's \textit{question} is how much a past period had the seeds of a specified future development in it (rather than, for example, what that period was like). And this despite the endemic dangers of such an approach, like failing to see what was there because of not expecting to find it, or crudely reading back what was true only of later times.

The other main characteristic of what historians often call 'whiggism'—ascribing inevitability—is, I think, a permanently seductive feature of the retrospective standpoint. Because things turned out in a certain way, it is all too easy to assume that that was how they \textit{had} to

turn out—or, to put it in a fashion more likely to be called teleological, the way they were going to turn out. I fear that philosophical analyses of the idea of narrative are sometimes presented in a way that could encourage, and even seem to legitimize, what I am calling a seductive illusion. I do not think, for example, that Mink would accept an inevitability theory of history, and still less a theory of specifically teleological inevitability. Yet in the course of the argument in which he very properly advances beyond Gallie’s analysis of historical understanding—the idea of following events in a frame of mind very like that of the original agents who, since they had to act, necessarily saw their future as open—he may easily be taken to mean that, once things have happened, the course events took must be viewed as having had to be that way. In reconstructing the past, he says, historians trace backwards developments which were seen as contingent going forwards; but ‘there are no contingencies going backwards’.

In a summary statement which, I think can hardly fail to give comfort to teleological inevitabilists, he adds: ‘thus what may be contingent in the occurrence of events is not in their narration’. Events which are judged by the historian to have occurred contingently, however, ought surely to be represented in narratives as contingent, no matter how much the techniques of sophisticated narration superimpose retrospectivity and synthesis. The point of substance behind what Mink has to say is surely no more than that if an earlier event was necessary for a later one to occur, then that later event was sufficient for the earlier one’s having occurred. Or perhaps better: if reasoning forwards, an event or condition is seen as contributing to the intelligibility of an explanatory narrative by being necessary for a selected end-result, then reasoning backwards from the end-result, that very same condition can be asserted certainly to have occurred. But this is only a claim about the nature of conceivable arguments from evidence, not one about the way an historical narrative would necessarily represent the course of events.

Of course, in a more general, and surely quite innocuous sense, historical narratives are typically teleological in that, being concerned with human actions, they are concerned with the way intentions and purposes enter into the explanation of the past. That is not to say, of course, that such accounts deal only, or even chiefly, with what past agents brought about intentionally: it is not to recommend a conspiracy theory of history. Historians do, from time to time, have to trace conspiracies; and short of that, they commonly have to reconstruct enterprises or movements which exhibited a remarkable continuity of purpose, even when their membership was not continuous. Accused of seeing too much purposive continuity of this sort in the activities of the parliamentary gentry of the 1610s, 1620s and 1940s, Hexter’s surely

satisfactory reply was that this was the overlapping sort found in a rope. Even the understanding of unintended historical consequences, however, may have as prerequisite an empathetic grasp of the intentions of those whose actions composed them.

V

There remains the rather strange criticism implied by the title of the article by Furet to which I have been responding: 'From Narrative History to History as a Problem'. Furet is quite explicit about what he would regard as an historical problem: it would be something like charting the price level in England in a specified hundred year period or comparing the productivity of slave and free labour in the United States before the American Civil War (p. 122). Apparently piecing together the events historians sometimes refer to as the Puritan Revolution or the Great Rebellion or the English Revolution (and finding out which was the more apt way of characterizing them) would not count as solving a problem at all. There would seem to be echoes in this of Lord Acton's advice to 'study problems, not periods'—with its surely false implication that periods cannot be problems. Anyone wishing to claim for history the status of a science in some honorific sense (even if not one that entirely assimilates its concepts and methods to those of the natural sciences), will, of course, want to emphasize the extent to which historians are active in inquiry. As Collingwood liked to say, they must put the record 'to the question'. But the Furet-Acton way of applying this idea is surely quite bizarre. Some questions taken to the record explicitly require narrative answers. Others are found to require them once the record is carefully examined.

The idea is nevertheless well entrenched that the work of narrative historians is divided into two parts: on the one hand, the establishment of the facts, which, at its best, is a matter of highly skilled research; on the other, the construction of narratives out of these facts, which is a matter of literary art. Among anti-narrativist philosophers, this position has recently been restated by Mandelbaum, whose case against narrative history is, finally, the complaint that narration is not inquiry, and by C. B. McCullagh, who sees narration as no more than 'a dramatic means of describing historical events'. A generation ago, the analytical historian, F. J. Teggart, expressed a similar view when he insisted that 'with whatever care the facts are sifted, and with whatever sincerity they are subsequently presented, narrative statement remains art, and as

40 Mandelbaum, 'A Note on History as Narrative', p. 414.
such, not science'. 42 Unfortunately for the reputation of narrative history, its defenders often talk as if they thought in terms of the same dichotomy. Thus Elton, at one point, opines that whereas analysis is a work of 'ratiocination', narrative is one of 'imagination'. 43 He hardly compensates for this unflattering division of labour by adding that it is imagination which is in shorter supply.

What all such talk of science versus art is in danger of obscuring, I think, is that the configurations outlined by historical narratives are themselves historical facts to be established. Their elaboration does not simply decorate the historian's real conclusions: they are themselves among the conclusions sought—which, if Mink is right, may not be adequately expressible in any other way. The untenability of sharply separating narrative construction from historical inquiry shows itself, among other things, in the directive role, already noted, which a received narrative often plays in historical research. The research is undertaken because an existing account seems unsatisfactory in certain ways; its results are the emendation of that account. In Mink's terminology, the narrative functions as a 'cognitive instrument'. Much of what Hexter has to say about narrative as an essential element of history's 'rhetoric' seems aimed at making a similar point. The term 'rhetoric', however, suggests a communicative art, a literary skill; and what Hexter sees as falling under it does sometimes seem more concerned with how truth is best conveyed than with what its content is. To take a single example: when a narrative should change scale—one of the 'rhetorical' problems Hexter considers 44—seems to me chiefly a literary problem. By contrast, where a causal account should begin—a problem noted in the introduction to this paper—seems to me rather one of content: it concerns the nature of the process under examination. Hexter maintains that the rhetoric of history, far from being a mere literary icing on the historical cake, is 'mixed right into the batter'. 45 I find this more persuasive in the second sort of case than in the first.

If the tendency to separate narrative from inquiry survives all such considerations, I suspect this may owe something to an underlying ontological worry that surfaces from time to time in the literature on narrative history. Stories, it is tempting to say (with Charles Beard), are just the historian's personal 'selections and arrangements of facts'. The real historical past is not composed of stories—'untold stories' waiting to be told by historians. Even as committed a narrativist as Mink bridles at the notion of an 'untold story'. This, he says, is as nonsensical as the

43 Elton, Political History, pp. 159-60.
44 Hexter, The History Primer, p. 171.
notion of 'undiscovered knowledge'. Perhaps the word 'story' is unfortunate here. But shouldn’t we be prepared at least to say that the serial configurations which historical narratives delineate really characterize the historical process? And isn’t this all that the more daring form of words really intends to convey? The notion of an as yet undiscovered historical configuration is surely no more problematic than that of an as yet undiscovered scientific law. ‘There is a story waiting to be told’ is thus not a form of words entirely lacking in point and substance. The danger of maintaining the contrary is that of relapsing into some virtually unintelligible notion of the human past as a process any abstraction from which would necessarily be a falsification. Worked through, such a notion would put in jeopardy much more than narrative history.

47 The research upon which this paper draws was done during the tenure of a Killam Research Fellowship.