



MIMETIC DEFIGURATION

The Retelling of Narratives in a Changing World

Thesis for obtaining a “Master of arts” degree in philosophy
Radboud University Nijmegen
Supervisor: prof. Jean-Pierre Wils
Words: 13.948
July 28, 2022

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I hereby declare and assure that I, Pieter Theunissen, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works - including electronic media - have been identified and the sources clearly stated. Place: Nijmegen, date: July 11, 2022.

“Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi.”

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa.

Abstract

Narratives are frameworks that allow us to make sense of human experience in a way that is rooted in temporality. Following Paul Ricoeur, narratives are constructed in a threefold process of mimesis: the prefiguration, configuration and refiguration of action. The scale of narratives ranges from small stories to grand cultural histories. In the latter case, the inevitable changing of the world renders the semantic, cultural paradigm on which a people's narrative is built vulnerable to becoming meaningless, bringing about a defiguration of the narrative. However, the semantics of the old narrative can be transformed to construct a new one. In this article, we will investigate this phenomenon of defiguration and integrate it into Ricoeur's theory of mimesis.

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Introduction

In everyday life, we constantly make use of narratives to entertain each other, to explain and to make sense of things happening around us. The structure of the story appears to us as a natural way to organise information. We can therefore find the phenomenon of narrative structure from the very smallest to the largest level. We narrate a day out in the park just as much as we narrate the history of a people. Every culture has its own literary narratives in the form of theatre plays, novels, epic poetry and so on, but they also have their own historical progression. Both are forms of narrative: both take place within language and require a meaningful organisation of events. Both serve to make sense of that particular cultural world. They carry within them the value systems which that culture lives by. Moral life is expressed through the narrative.

But what if these narratives collapse? What happens when the foundational concepts of the narratives we use to make sense of our lives, actions or society as a whole start to lose their significance? The world changes faster than we can comprehend. This is not just limited to value shifts from one generation to the other. What is now seen as morally right, may within a few years have become outdated and condemned and those who live to see those new days may have a hard time adjusting. The change of narrative in these cases means the change of ways of life. In this article, we will take a look the phenomenological ground and the ontological composition of narratives as presented by Paul Ricoeur. Further on, we will investigate two examples in which the concepts of a culture collapsed, bringing about drastic societal change and raising existential and moral questions to its people. This forces a transformation of the story of these respective peoples. We will investigate what place this deconstructive movement can take up in Ricoeur's constructive theory of narrative composition.

It is the aim of this article to apply the idea of the loss of concepts to Ricoeur's theory of narrative. Narratives are constructed through a process of mimesis. This process is threefold, consisting of the prefiguration, configuration and refiguration of action. The phenomenon of a collapsing narrative provides us with a new approach to this. The main question then will be whether the addition

of a fourth variant of mimesis is necessary to do justice to this phenomenon. The possible breakdown of a narrative and its consequences appears to call for an expansion of this theory, because it only deals with a narrative's nascence. To this end, we will first outline the essence of Ricoeur's theory of narrative composition and mimesis. Secondly, we will investigate two examples of the collapse of narratives. These are the history of the Native American tribe of the Crow and the story told in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*. In both these histories, the key building blocks of cultural and moral systems are rendered meaningless. The people to whom this applied had to reinvent themselves. They had to find a way to retell their narrative in the face of an uncertain future. In the final chapter we will apply the philosophical implications of this cultural devastation and retelling of one's story to Ricoeur's theory in order to see if we can expand his three-faceted conception of figurative mimesis with a fourth, defigurative element.

I. Mimetic Structure in Time and Narrative

The narrative is a framework that, very basically put, structures experience. Before we will investigate what it means for a narrative to be defigured, we first need to have a clear conception of how narratives come about. We will investigate the phenomenological foundations and technical establishment of narrative on the basis of Paul Ricoeur's work *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur regards narrative, along with metaphor, as a genre that belongs to the phenomenon of semantic innovation. This concretely means a particular use of language that produces meaning that is "greater than the sentence."¹ In other words, metaphor and narrative are linguistic tools that produce a meaning that is greater than the sum of its parts, namely words and sentences. They are creative uses of language that transcend their directly given semantics. Metaphor will not be treated in this article, but in short, their innovation lies in a displacement of literal meaning. New meanings arise through the attribution of something that lies outside of the literal referee. In narrative, the semantic innovation lies in a process of synthesis, namely a plot: "By means of the plot, goals, causes, and chance are brought together within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action."² All elements of a plot combined create a meaningful structure. Events are organised in a synthetic way through which a meaning emerges that transcends the sum of these events. In this chapter, we will outline how a narrative plot is constructed.

Ricoeur builds his theory of narrative on the shoulders of Augustine and Aristotle. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, investigated the phenomenon of time. Time is the most crucial element of narration, since in a narrative, the human experience of time is being reorganised. Ricoeur builds on Augustine to explore this experience of time, and then turns to Aristotle's *Poetics* to investigate emplotment, for emplotment is the very tool we use to create the temporal unity of the narrative. In the first two parts of this chapter, we will outline the conclusions Ricoeur draws from both authors. In the third part, we will delve into his own

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), ix.

² Paul Ricoeur, ix.

additions that make up his theory of narrative, namely, mimesis. A narrative is primarily a depiction of action, so what we need to do is perform mimesis in order to represent action in the plot. This mimesis happens in three stages. When we have put forth the combined elements of temporality, emplotment and mimesis, we will have a workable understanding of Ricoeur's theory of narrative.II.1 Augustine: Temporality

I.1 Augustine: Temporality

As already mentioned above, the essence of narrativity, according to Ricoeur, is its temporal character. The narrative ultimately serves to grasp and refigure the human experience of time. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur delves into Augustine's discussions of the aporias of time, in order to formulate an underlying conception of time that forms the background of his theory:

“What is ultimately at stake in the case of the structural identity of the narrative function as well as in that of the truth claim of every narrative work, is the temporal character of human experience. The world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world. Or (...): time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience.”³

As will become clear in the following, this conception of the experience of time is threefold. Ricoeur draws on Augustine's *Confessions* to clarify the positioning of man toward time. Augustine presents us with an initial aporia about time, namely the question how time is capable of being and non-being simultaneously. This paradoxical state arises from the fact that the past is no longer, the future is not yet and the present is not always. The ontological state of time then would appear to be reduced to the present. Given this, how is it even possible to measure time? Time could not be stretched out if it only existed as present. The answer to this problem lies in our mental ability to regard time. Namely, the human mind performs three

³ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3.

functions with regards to time: those of memory, attention and expectation. One remembers the past, attends the present and expects the future.⁴ Since we cannot reason from the position of the past or the future, we can only approach the extension of time from the present. Yet, we do have a notion of time past and time to come. This leads to the present being threefold. The present entails a threefold intention towards itself, the past and the future. Thus, there exists a present of the past, a present of the future and a present of the present.

The feature of the human mind (or soul) that Augustine presents to deal with the threefold of time, is called *distentio animi*: “the spreading out of the soul in the region of dissimilitude as the present expectation of the future, the present memory of things past, and the present intuition of things present.”⁵ He views time as an extension (distention) and our mind (animus) allows us to conceive and process this:

My expectation is extended over the whole; but when I have begun, how much soever of it I shall separate off into the past, is extended along my memory; thus the life of this action of mine is divided between my memory as to what I have repeated, and expectation as to what I am about to repeat.⁶

Our function of memory allows our experience of time to be extended, as opposed to an orientation towards a permanent, point-like present, which Augustine calls *intentio*. This dichotomy is essential to understand the temporal character of narrative. For unlike Augustine’s, Ricoeur’s aim is not to find an answer to the aporias of time. His aim is to clarify the background of temporal experience, because it is in this experience that lies the foundational referential function of the narrative plot:

⁴ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 19.

⁵ M.B. Pranger, “Time and Narrative in Augustine’s “Confessions,”” *The Journal of Religion* 81, no. 3 (July 2001): 377-393.

⁶ Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Edward B. Pusey (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), 163.

“A constant thesis of this book will be that speculation on time is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity alone can respond. Not that this activity solves the aporias through substitution. If it does resolve them, it is in a poetical and not a theoretical sense of the word. Emplotment, I shall say below, replies to the speculative aporia with a poetic making of something capable, certainly, of clarifying the aporia (...), but not of resolving it theoretically.”⁷

The question of time is the underlying metaphysical question to which narrative emplotment is the only viable response. The enigma of the experience of time may be forever clouded to our understanding, still, our human experience is characterised by its rootedness in time. It is through emplotment that we make time into something workable, and thus are able to make sense of our experience.

1.2 Aristotle: Emplotment

Ricoeur then turns to Aristotle, to use the concepts of plot and mimesis, which Aristotle explains in his *Poetics*, to supplement Augustine’s notion of time, as this notion alone is insufficient to provide a full theory of narrative. He establishes a relation between the two authors out of which emerges “the triumph of concordance over discordance.”⁸ What this entails is that the verbal experience lends unity to the disunity of lived experience. In order to achieve this, two fundamental concepts of Aristotle are investigated, namely emplotment (*muthos*) and mimetic activity (*mimesis*). As will become clear, mimesis is necessary to construct a plot, and plot, or narrative understanding, is, according to Ricoeur, deserving of primacy over other forms of understanding of our lived experience. We will briefly outline the elements that Ricoeur takes from Aristotle, in order to fully understand his own theory of mimesis that we will present in the next paragraph.

Ricoeur’s reading of Aristotle is based on the conceptual pair of *muthos* and *mimesis*. *Muthos* is the organisation of events, *mimesis* the imitation or

⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 6.

⁸ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 31.

representation of action – the events themselves. This imitation or representation takes place in the medium of language. From all the genres that Aristotle discusses in the *Poetics*, namely tragedy, comedy and epic, he regards the tragedy as the superior genre. The reason for this is that tragedy deals with characters whose depiction is of a higher moral type than that of comedic characters. Ricoeur, on the other hand, does not make a difference between any genre whatsoever to apply the concept of emplotment to. Therefore, his aim is to “extract from Aristotle’s *Poetics* the model of emplotment I am proposing to extend to every composition we call a narrative.”⁹ These compositions may range from the theatre to literature, and from anecdote to world history. Their common denominator is that the act of emplotment is employed in all of them. Ricoeur sets out to determine whether the rigorous order, that is characteristic of tragedy in Aristotle, can be applied to the whole narrative field.

Muthos and mimesis are both two sides of the same medal. The organisation of events on the one hand, and the imitation of action on the other: both focus on *sec* action. Mimesis provides the imitation of action, and muthos places that in an effective whole. Aristotle states therefore that tragedy is “not an imitation of men but of actions and of life.”¹⁰ He prioritises action over character. Other than in virtue ethics, in which the subject precedes the action, in poetics, a character’s ethical qualities are determined by the poet’s composition of the action. This seals the notion of plot as an organisation of events as being equivalent to the representation of action. In the play, characters emerge as personalities from the actions that are being displayed. It is not the other way around, in the sense that a character has given traits and acts according to those. It is from the organisation of the action taking place, in other words, the poetic composition, that any sense of the play is derived.

The link that Ricoeur draws between Aristotle and Augustine lies in the temporal implications of Aristotle’s poetic model. The organisation of events

⁹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 35.

¹⁰ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 37.

emphasises concordance, which is characterised by the three features of completeness, wholeness, and an appropriate magnitude:

We have laid down that tragedy is the representation of a complete i.e. whole action which has some magnitude (for there can be a whole with no magnitude). A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion.¹¹

The magnitude of the work applies to its length, for which exist certain requirements. The narrative should neither be too short nor too long, but it should have “whatever magnitude a change from misfortune to good fortune, or from good fortune to misfortune, can come about by a sequence of events in accordance with probability or necessity.”¹² This, along with the wholeness consisting of a beginning, middle and an end, thus implicates the temporal character of poetic composition. The beginning, middle and end, however, are not necessarily temporal. They are first and foremost the effect of the ordering of the poem or play. The beginning is not determined by the absence of an element that took place earlier in time, but by absence of necessity of an element that precedes it logically. The logic of the ordering lies in the succession of elements, not in their place in time. Beginning, middle and end are not taken from experience, but from logical ordering. Therefore, Aristotle distinguishes between temporal unity and dramatic unity. The first unity means a single period of time in which all action happened. The second means a single action, which forms a whole, complete in itself with a beginning, a middle and an end. Time itself is therefore not directly being implicated in the plot. What happens, is that the succession of events creates a causal necessity. The overall logic of the plot dictates a causal sequence: one thing after another and thus one thing because of another. The plot calls for these kind of universals in order to make sense. The structure of the action of a plot rests on the connections internal to the action. External elements have no part in it. The internal logic of the actions makes up the plot.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 10.

¹² Aristotle, *Poetics*, 11.

This internal logic of the action already comes about in mimesis. Mimetic activity “composes action” when it turns it into plot-elements.¹³ The selection of action is already a part of the emplotment. This means that mimesis primarily aims

“at the coherence of the muthos than at its particular story. The whole problem of narrative *Verstehen* is contained here in principle. To make up a plot is already to make the intelligible spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the necessary or the probable from the episodic.”¹⁴

In short, muthos organises into a plot the action that has been configured through mimesis. Yet, Ricoeur points out that there is more to mimesis than Aristotle has elaborated on. The meaning of mimesis as imitation or representation is more profound. Mimesis is not a copy of something that pre-existed in reality, it is more creative. If we translate it as representation, it is not a representation in the sense of Platonic ideas, but of a breaking point that allows the represented element to be used in a plot. Thus, through mimesis, the as-if is invented. The things that a poet produces are quasi-things, meaning that elements from reality are being imitated and creatively handled into an imaginative sphere, the realm of the as-if.¹⁵ Furthermore, mimetic activity needs a reader or a spectator – a recipient to complete it. Mimesis, it has become clear, consists of multiple elements. It is with this insight that Ricoeur departs from Aristotle and elaborates on his own theory of mimesis.

1.3 Threefold Mimesis

Now that we have established the elements that Ricoeur takes from Augustine and Aristotle, we can explicate his own theory of mimesis that serves as the foundation to narratives. As we have already stated, a temporal framework is essential for any philosophical model that tries to understand human existence. The narrative model is the most suitable candidate to provide this temporal framework. Summarising, within the narrative, a representation of action is given, the world of action is being

¹³ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 42.

¹⁴ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 41.

¹⁵ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 45.

represented. This act of representing happens through the process of mimesis. Departing from Aristotle's one-sided view of mimesis, Ricoeur distinguishes three stages within the mimetic process: the prefiguration of action, the configuration of action and the refiguration of action. In the following, we will go through each of them.

The first stage of mimesis, mimesis₁, is what Ricoeur calls the prefiguration of action. This entails that, in order to represent action, one must have a preunderstanding of what human acting is in the first place:

To imitate or represent action is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality. Upon this preunderstanding, common to both poets and their readers, plotment is constructed and, with it, textual and literary mimetics.¹⁶

The prefiguration of action, therefore, is the description of the way in which human acting is always already prefigured with certain competencies. These competencies include competency in the structural, conceptual network of the semantics of action. These are expressed in questions like how, why, who for, who with and against whom.¹⁷ These questions mark the ontological distinction between action and mere physical movement. Next, one needs competency in the use of symbols, which means being able to grasp that one thing stands for something else. Symbolism in this is seen as a meaning that is incorporated into action and decipherable by other social actors, since it exists within a system of interacting symbols. Social customs and cultural codes stem from this. Lastly, an understanding is required of the temporal structures that govern the order of the narration; the way in which the temporal structures are being expressed to make for a followable story. This also means an understanding of the threefold present as set out by Augustine. It is, in short, a practical understanding of what it means to act. This understanding, finally, is shared by all who share the same semantic paradigm. We can clarify this by

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 64.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 55.

pointing at the shared understanding of cultures. A culture is by definition semantic paradigms since within a culture, the use of symbols, rituals and actions is understood by all and one's actions are explained and valued by this presupposed understanding. This preunderstanding that we see in culture is the semantic reservoir that contains the paradigm of meaning.

Mimesis² is called the configuration of the world of action. This will prove to be the most important stage of mimesis for our later inquiry. The diverse elements figuring in the field of action at the level of mimesis¹ are being brought into an imaginative order, which is why Ricoeur describes this as the "kingdom of the as if."¹⁸ Individual elements, being events, agents and objects, are made part of a meaningful whole in which each has a constitutive place. This is also called narrative emplotment: the elements are put together to form a plot. This putting together is what Ricoeur anticipated with Aristotle as the triumph of concordance over discordance or, in other words, concordant discordance. The heterogeneous elements are synthesised into a coherent whole according to the preunderstanding of semantics established in mimesis¹:

A narrative makes appear within a syntagmatic order all the components capable of figuring in the paradigmatic tableau established by the semantics of action. This passage from the paradigmatic to the syntagmatic constitutes the transition from mimesis¹ to mimesis². It is the work of the configuring activity.¹⁹

In this construction of plot, the linear chronology as it is being constructed is able to represent different experiences of time. It is possible to put the elements in a non-chronological order, or one can construct long passages describing short events or, vice versa, condense long-time situations into shorter plot elements. A good example of this feature is Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* (*Der Zauberberg*). The protagonist visits a sanatorium in the Alps, initially intending to only stay for three weeks. Eventually, he stays there for seven years. In the book,

¹⁸ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 64.

¹⁹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 66.

the three initial weeks are stretched out over many pages, since they recount the period in which the experiences of the protagonist are fullest. In the years that follow, time seems to fly by and this is expressed in the book by stretching longer amounts of time over relatively fewer pages. This illustrates how emplotment is able to make variations between the narrated time, the time of narrating and the fictive experience of time that is the result of either a conjunction or disjunction of these two. The final aspect of mimesis² is the way in which the internal logic of the narrative unity forges causal continuity from temporal succession: one thing *after* another becomes one thing *because of* another. The narrative endows the connections between its elements with necessity. Thus, the narrative imitates the continuity demanded by life.

Finally, mimesis³ designates the refiguration of action. In this stage, the imaginative or fictive perspective that has come about in mimesis² is integrated into actual, lived experience.²⁰ This happens in the conveying of the narrative to someone: “structuration is an oriented activity that is only completed in the spectator or the reader.”²¹ Ricoeur’s model for this serves as a phenomenology of reading. The narrative has been constructed or “written” (literally, in the case of literature) and now must be “read.” This is the intersection between the configured world and the real world. This may be Ricoeur’s most prominent departing from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, in which it is said that “the traversal of mimesis reaches its fulfilment in the hearer or the reader.”²² Here, the story is being told. According to Ricoeur, the hypothetical representation of time and action is being manifested in the actual, lived time. The depicted time is anchored the actual “now.” The narrative is taken in and integrated by the reader. This is why Ricoeur views mimesis as cyclical, rather than reaching its fulfilment: as time passes, new insights, new events and new opportunities for reflection emerge that may cast a different light on the same narrative.

In conclusion, we have seen how Ricoeur starts of from Augustine’s

²⁰ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 70.

²¹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 48.

²² Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 71.

meditations upon the enigma's of time. The threefold present, in which one remembers the past, is attentive to the present and anticipates the future, is the phenomenological key to the narrative. Aristotle's emplotment and the unity of action, which is characterised by a beginning, a middle and an end, allow for a framework in which the temporal experience may be expressed. This expression happens through the mimesis of action. This mimesis, however, is more complex than it would seem from a volatile reading of Aristotle. Ricoeur points out that mimesis exists in three ways: prefiguration, configuration and refiguration of action. In short, one first needs to thoroughly understand the implications of human action within a given semantic paradigm. Second, the mimetic elements need to be put into an imaginative order, the order of the as-if, in which the experience of time can be expressed in accordance with the narrative relevance of the duration of certain episodes. The heterogenous, discordant elements are synthesised into a meaningful, concordant whole. Lastly, the narrative needs a proverbial reader, it needs to be told. The narrative calls for application. Then, the world of text intersects with the world of the audience. All these elements form up the mimetic foundations of narrative. In the next chapter, we will investigate our two examples that will show to have strong implications for what we have seen so far, and that may lead us to revise Ricoeur's mimetic framework.

II. Narratives in Crisis: Virtue and the Loss of Concepts

In the previous chapter we have seen how narratives are constructed. In the following, we will have a look at two examples in which cultural, moral and political narratives come under pressure. These examples take place on both sides of the Atlantic, underlining that the phenomenon they articulate is by no means unique. The world changes and existing narratives may lose their connection with reality. This has great implications for those who live the narrative in question. Meaningful action is embedded in the narrative structure. The concepts that form a meaningful whole through the narrative constitute cultural meaning and collective history. Thus they provide guidelines of what is the right thing to do. These concepts, however, are linked to reality, since we have seen how mimesis is necessarily embedded in the lived world. If the situation in the concrete world changes, then so does the significance of the concepts that make up the narrative. Consequently, the notion of what it means to live a meaningful life is bound to change as well. A changing world requires humans to have a change of life. This more often than not proves to be a demanding challenge. In this chapter, we will have a look at two instances in which this has happened and whether or not the people involved overcame this challenge and, if they did, how.

The first example we will examine is the story of the Crow People, a tribe of Native Americans, as described by philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear (1948) in his book *Radical Hope*. In this book, Lear examines how chief Plenty Coups (1848-1932) managed to lead his people into the future at the time when their traditional way of life came to an end. The Crow Tribe managed to survive the turbulent years of the late 19th century, but found that the transition into the new world order had rendered their cultural concepts meaningless. This case raises profound ethical questions: how should one face the possibility that one's culture might collapse? How to act virtuously if the until then accepted conceptions of what it is to be virtuous become, at the least, irrelevant? The second example is the situation as sketched in the novel *The Leopard (Il gattopardo)* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1896-1957). The book tells us how Don Fabrizio, the prince of Salina, tries to adapt to the new upcoming order in his native Sicily during and after

the Risorgimento, when Garibaldi's troupes invade the island to put an end to the feudal order and turn the whole of Italy into a unified, liberal country. The prince is forced to choose to either uphold the continuity of his aristocratic values, or breaking with the old traditions in order to secure the continuity of his family's actual influence.

It may have occurred to the reader that this second example is a novel giving a fictionalised account of historical events, whereas Lear's book is a philosophical reflection upon real events. Furthermore, one might say that the novel is itself a narrative, thereby confusing our investigation. This, however, is by no means an obstruction to our inquiry. The events depicted in the novel are, firstly, strongly based on real events and, secondly, provide an insightful look into a specific, inherent human vulnerability. The fact that it is itself a narrative will not obstruct the purpose of our inquiry, since we will be dealing with the narrative as it is lived by the people involved, albeit fictionally. We will outline the philosophical and ethical implications of our two examples from a narrative perspective. We will examine how in each respective example the loss of concepts manifests itself and what it concretely entails when the semantic paradigm of a people's narrative is threatened. We will then see how in their respective stories Plenty Coups and Don Fabrizio tried to find ways to guide their people or family through those tumultuous times of uncertainty and in what way they could act virtuously, even though their original conception of what it concretely meant to be virtuous had become a thing of the past.

II.1 "After this, nothing happened"

In *Radical Hope*, Jonathan Lear depicts and analyses the devastation, vulnerability and creative courage of chief Plenty Coups and his people in the face of violence and the loss of their cultural traditions. Like so many other Native American tribes, the Crow, living in present-day Montana, were faced with the expansionist advance of the white man in the Americas, and were put before the challenge of finding a way to survive. In a series of interviews with ethnographer Frank Linderman, an ageing Plenty Coups recounts his story of how he guided his people through these

times of uncertainty. Plenty Coups was born in times when the Crow were still a vibrant nomadic tribe, but would grow up to be the chief that had to lead the tribe during the times during which they would end up to be confined in a reservation. When asked what happened directly after this confinement, Plenty Coups responded negatively:

I can think back and tell you much more of war and horse-stealing. But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.²³

After this nothing happened. It is this phrase that initiates Lear's investigation. Plenty Coups does not have many things to tell about the period after their way of life – that included hunting buffaloes – had come to an end. There was a moment after which history itself came to an end. “It would seem to be the retrospective declaration of a moment when history came to an end. But what could it mean for history to exhaust itself?”²⁴ At first sight, the idea that nothing happened anymore seems rather enigmatic. After all, life goes on. Lear, however, sets out to explore the idea that if a way of life collapsed, things actually cease to happen:

What is it about a form of life's coming to an end that makes it such that for the inhabitants of that life things cease to happen? Not just that it would *seem* to them that things ceased to happen, but what it would *be* for things to cease happening.²⁵

The case presents us with an insight into a particular form of human vulnerability. What happened to the Crow, is the collapse of their way of life, of their culture. As humans, we are a cultural species, but our actual cultures are in many ways vulnerable. If our culture itself should come into a crisis and collapse, the foundation that supports our actions and all events in our lives disappears.

²³ Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.

²⁴ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 3.

²⁵ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 8.

In order to understand how it could come to this, we will give a short overview of the events that led up to this state of affairs and the implications it had for subjectivity and virtue in Crow society. The Crow were a nomadic tribe, whose main virtues were established around courage. Certain acts were deemed courageous, such as the stealing of horses from enemy tribes like the Sioux, or the planting of a coup-stick (a type of spear) during a war and not moving away from it until either death or victory ensued. With the advance of the European settlers, the Crows territory came under threat. As we will elaborate on later on, under Plenty Coups' guidance the Crow allied with the whites and thus were able to secure a peaceful transition into the future. But it came at a cost. They were now confined to a reservation, instead of living nomadically on the wide plains of Montana, and the way in which they lived their lives had become a thing of the past. Hunting buffalo had become impossible and waging war with other tribes had been forbidden by the U.S. government. Yet, what it meant to live a meaningful life was deeply rooted in these practises. The ideals that were to be lived up to were linked to certain practises that could no longer be acted out without buffalo to hunt or rival tribes to fight. The Crow had survived, but their rituals had not. Their lives had become empty.

The history of the Crow is one that presents us with a vulnerability that concerns all humans. It shows us the strong link between culture and subjectivity. Events take place within a cultural framework, and it is from this framework that they derive their meaning. Everything that happens is interpreted and ordered according to a meaningful scheme. Should that scheme collapse, then so does the meaning attributed to the events. Lear distinguishes three characteristics of a vibrant culture: it has established social roles, it has ideals or standards of excellence associated with those roles, and it has the possibility of constituting oneself as a certain sort of person who embodies those ideals.²⁶ In order to be a subject of a culture, identification as such is not sufficient. It requires for the ideals associated with excellence to be internalised. These ideals entail concrete practises, rituals and

²⁶ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 42.

traditions. They are grounded in reality and acted out. One commits oneself to these ideals and organises one's life around them, striving to live up to them. In this conception, as Lear says, "subjectivity is a never-ending task."²⁷ The Crows' conception of what the good life was could no longer be acted out. Though the group endured, and one was able to identify as a member of that group, it had become problematic to compose oneself as a certain type of subject:

I have no idea what is going on. This isn't primarily a psychological problem. The concepts with which I would otherwise have understood myself – indeed, the concepts with which I would otherwise have shaped my identity – have gone out of existence.²⁸

This makes it clear what Plenty Coups meant with "nothing happened." Nothing happened because it was no longer possible to do so. Without lived meaning, nothing can happen. Their semantic paradigm, their shared preunderstanding, could no longer be configured. The narratives, rituals and actions that traditionally formed the horizon to the Crow's daily lives and future had been lost. Without this horizon, everything is meaningless. If everything is meaningless, nothing happens.

II.2 The Virtue of Plenty Coups

Since the tribe was permanently threatened by other tribes such as the Sioux and Cheyenne, the Crow had developed a warrior culture. These traditional enemies opposed the whites, but Plenty Coups eventually decided to ally with the latter. He had experienced visions that convinced him that cooperation with the non-Native Americans would benefit the Crow more than opposition. Thus, he found a peaceful road into the future for his people. The Crow way of life and warrior culture, however, were doomed to be irreversibly changed. The decision to opt for cooperation, therefore, was not an easy one. It required courage to face these circumstances, but at the same time this seems to be very much at a odds with the traditional conception of courageous behaviour according to the Crow. Yet, the

²⁷ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 43.

²⁸ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 49.

Crow tradition somehow inherently carried the tools that enabled Plenty Coups to transform his own conception of courage. This is a main point of interest in Lear's analysis. Plenty Coups faced the cultural devastation with a creative and moral imagination that paved the path for the rebirth of the Crow subject. In the following paragraph we will delve deeper into Plenty Coups' story and outline how it illuminates this reconceptualisation of virtue.

Plenty Coups witnessed the death of the Crow subject, but he understood that only in this manner, the space could be created for a rebirth: "Only if one acknowledges that there is no longer a genuine way of going on *like that* might there arise new genuine ways of going on *like that*."²⁹ New ways of living had to be found. But in order to get there, a renewed understanding of virtue was needed. Plenty Coups grew up in a warrior culture. Counting coups, stealing horses: that was how one lived up to the ideal of a good Crow subject. The new circumstances required a completely different course of action, a new figuration of what it meant to be courageous. The question Lear asks here is a question of legitimacy: "are there ways in which a person brought up in a culture's traditional understanding of courage might draw upon his own inner resources to broaden his understanding of what courage might be?"³⁰ For Plenty Coups, these ways were found in his dreams.

The Crow had the practise of sending young, mostly male members of the tribe into nature to dream in order to push the limits of their collective understanding. The visions that a dream brought about were afterwards put before the elders and were supposed to provide meaningful, albeit often enigmatic, revelations about an order in the universe that could not be comprehended through ordinary conscious contemplation. Without either delving into the religious foundation of this more or less shamanistic practise, nor by trying to give a psychoanalytical interpretation, we can recognise that the dreams the nine-year-old Plenty Coups had were a way for him and his people to face the devastating events. It provided the insights that would later lead him to the decisions he would make. We will not delve too deeply in the details of Plenty Coups' dreams, but in short, it

²⁹ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 51.

³⁰ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 65.

entailed that he witnessed a forest that was ravished by a terrible storm. All trees had been knocked down, save one: the tree that lodged the chickadee. This bird is considered to be a good listener; he never intrudes and only listens carefully to everything around him. Thus he learns from others' successes and failures. While the trees of the other birds vanished in the storm, the chickadee's lodge was left unharmed. The dream told Plenty Coups that the example of the chickadee must be followed in order to survive: one must learn from others. The council of elders took this dream for an oracle, though it was still unclear what exactly was to be learned:

The dream gained its authority via divine sanction; but the exact nature of this divine source – as well as what kinds of narratives and rituals were appropriate to it – was also left open. All the Crow needed – minimally speaking – was a sense that the dream provided a legitimate source of guidance.³¹

Young Plenty Coups' dream was a manifestation of an anxiety that was already festering in the Crow community at that time. Even though their culture was still very vibrant back then, European settlers stirring in the East, disease, and fierce rivalry with other tribes were troubling the tribe and provoked a sense of anxiety that a young boy could very well have been receptive to. The dream then turned this anxiety into a narrative form. The anxiety that everyone felt could now be treated as a comprehensive story. The dream of the later chief provided the tribe with articulated thoughts anticipating the challenges that lay ahead.

The Crow had no means to understand what kind of fate was awaiting them. Even if they could have known, they would not have had the concepts with which to grasp it. The traditional ways of explanation would not have served to make sense of the disappearance of these very traditions themselves. They would have left something unsaid, for sheer lack of concepts with which to say it. A new paradigm cannot be described with the concepts of the old. Plenty Coups' dream informed them that something devastating lay ahead, though they could not conceive of its concrete essence. Usually, when faced with challenging times, a culture would

³¹ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 98.

provide a conception of virtuous behaviour via which to tackle them. “But a culture does not tend to train the young to endure its own breakdown.”³² Plenty Coups managed to create a context in which the virtue of the chickadee could exist next to the traditional warriorlike virtues. The thick concepts, the evaluating concepts that describe concrete characteristics as either virtues or vices,³³ of their virtues needed to be revised, to be *thinned out*. He had to find a way to live by their traditions in a new way:

In such a case, one would begin with a culture’s thick understanding of courage; but one would somehow find ways to *thin it out*: find ways to face circumstances courageously that the older thick conception never envisaged. The issue would then be one not simply of going over to the thick concepts of another culture, but of drawing on their traditions in novel ways in the face of novel challenges.³⁴

The dream was the product of a traditional custom but at the same time it guided him to diverge from the traditional path. It told him that their traditional way of life and their conception of the good life were coming to an end. They could not in any way know what to hope or aim for, so they had to open themselves up to a utterly uncertain future. Still, it was important to retain one’s integrity in this, for “there is a faith worse than death.”³⁵ Mere biological survival alone will not suffice. Plenty Coups maintained the radical hope that the goodness of the world transcended their capacity to understand it. He used what virtue his culture provided and managed to apply it as well as possible to an inconceivable new situation. In terms of Ricoeur’s schema of mimesis, we can say that he drew on their old semantic paradigm (prefiguration) during their crisis in the stage of configuration. He managed to reconfigure some of the elements it contained. This allowed him to tell his people’s narrative anew (refiguration). His commitment in doing so rested in the idea that

³² Lear, *Radical Hope*, 83.

³³ Pekka Väyrynen, “Thick Ethical Concepts,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, September 21, 2016, accessed June 23, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thick-ethical-concepts/>.

³⁴ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 65-66.

³⁵ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 94.

eventually, something good will emerge. Because their way of life came to an end, Plenty Coups could embrace the hope for revival, even though the form of that revival could not yet be grasped. He committed to the possibility of new possibilities. This type of hope is the radical hope that gave Lear's book its title.

II.3 Everything Needs to Change

The story of people facing a new world order is by no means reserved for the Crow. Throughout history and all over the world, we can see the same mechanisms at work. Our second example will serve to illustrate the universal nature of the vulnerability that lies at the core of this kind of circumstances. Also, these events eventually take a different turn than for the Crow. This will allow us to distinguish the features of a successful refiguration of a people's narrative. In Di Lampedusa's famous novel *The Leopard*, we see a protagonist faced with similar challenges. Both the novel and its 1963 film adaptation have been equally applauded and criticised by both left and right. Marxist critics assailed the novel for its criticism on the Italian unification and its lament about the downfall of the aristocracy, as well as its non-Marxist depiction of the working class. Conservative critics, on the other hand, were unhappy with the portrayal of the aristocracy's and the clergy's decadence. Both sides, however, applauded what the other side was unhappy about.³⁶ If this controversy shows us one thing, it is that the value of the novel lies not in any ideological agenda. It is telling of a far more profound phenomenon, namely that of people facing the changing of their world.

Set in Sicily between 1860 and 1910, don Fabrizio Corbera, Prince of Salina, also called 'the leopard' after their family weapon, is faced with the turmoil of civil change and revolution of the *Risorgimento*, the social-political movement that resulted in the unification of Italy. Giuseppe Garibaldi and his army of redshirts are conquering Sicily and are overthrowing the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, making the island part of the new, unified Italian kingdom under king Vittorio Emanuele. The days of the old, feudal order are over and the prince's position in the class

³⁶ David Forags, "The Prince and His Critics: the Reception of *Il Gattopardo*," in *Il Gattopardo at Fifty*, ed. Davide Messina (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2010), 23.

system becomes less and less self-evident. The prince is the patriarch of the family and the keeper of old aristocratic values, along with a strict Roman Catholic code of conduct. Now, he finds himself put before the choice of holding on to his traditional, aristocratic values, or compromising tradition in order to uphold his family's influence. Even though the choices he makes throughout the story are not unwise and in many ways admirable, the changing of the world is a process that cannot be stopped and at the end of his life, he must face that after him the traditional order of Sicily will be a thing of the past. He witnesses that the nobleness has disappeared from the hearts of the new generations. The position of his house eventually declines. He was the last of the leopards.

In the wake of the political developments, the implications of the new order become clear when the family moves to their summer residence in the town of Donnafugata. There, the rich merchant don Calogero Sedàra has become the mayor. He is a shabby, minor gentry figure, a parvenu whose lack of courtesy and sense of class and convention appears to be only made up for by his wealth. It is made clear, however, that it is people like him who will be at the helm of the new nation. When the prince's nephew Tancredi decides to marry Sedàra's beautiful daughter Angelica, the two heads of family become connected both politically and family-wise. The two men are representative of the old order and the new. They realise both have their pros and cons, but most of all, the prince comes to realise that the new government does not necessarily appear to be much better than the old one. New people rise to prominence and new, more democratic mechanisms come about, but the same human flaws come to the surface nonetheless. Greed, hypocrisy and corruption are just as much of a problem as they used to be, and in some respects even worse. Nevertheless, don Fabrizio must find a way to maintain the continuity of his family's influence in a world that is no longer theirs. They must adapt, while at the core, the island of Sicily will remain the same it has ever been. This is summarised by Tancredi in what has become one of the most famous citations of Italian literature: "If we want everything to stay as it is, everything has to change."³⁷

³⁷ Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il gattopardo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1958), 10.

Despite the obvious differences of their respective situations, we can see Don Fabrizio placed before a similar challenge as Plenty Coups. Despite the situation of the Crow being, it must be said, a lot graver than that of the prince, in essence, they share the same principle. Both faced the demise of their traditional way of life and values. Both had to find a way to guide their people and family respectively towards the future. Both needed to employ virtues that were not very dominant in their existing thick concepts, namely the virtue of cooperation. Plenty Coups cooperated with the whites instead of fighting them, radically holding on to the hope that something good would come from it, even though he could not possibly know what this was. Don Fabrizio tried to uphold his family's position. He was even offered a position as senator in the new government, but he refused because, like other Sicilians, he was not interested to be involved politically: throughout the centuries, the island has been conquered many times over, but nothing has ever really changed. Yet, eventually the grandeur of his house decayed. The only people of the house of Salina who are alive by the end of the book in 1910 are Don Fabrizio's three daughters. They have become solitary spinsters, spending their days in their decaying palace in prayer and the memory of happier days, while his son and heir was a weak-minded boy with idle interests who failed to uphold the family's prestige. Time has passed and little that was noble remains. In principle, both Plenty Coups and don Fabrizio had to reinvent their narratives. The stories of where they came from could tell them little about where they were going. They faced the collapse of their culture, or at least of their traditional way of living and had to refigure how they could uphold their traditional values while at the same time securing their survival in a world that was now determined for them by others. But it is clear that don Fabrizio has not succeeded.

What these two examples show us is the crisis of configuration. The old way of synthesising the elements into a concordant whole has become impossible. What we saw most strikingly in the story of the Crow is what happens when the reality that grounds a culture's rituals, ideals and traditions has lost its relevance; when it has ceased to make sense. The building blocks of the narrative crumble, and those who have lived by it find themselves in a world in which nothing happens. Life is

devoid of the meaningful structures that, until then, upheld it. In Ricoeur's terms: the semantic reservoir has drained, the paradigm of preunderstanding is not universally shared anymore. The survival of a people in devastating times is one thing, but that is no guarantee for being able to live as one has always done. If one wants everything to stay the same, everything must change. Plenty Coups had to be imaginative with his traditional conceptions in the face of the new world order. He had to look for a way to maintain what was important to him while there hardly seemed to be a ground for that anymore. Just so, don Fabrizio stuck to his upper class values, while accepting the fact that the days of the aristocracy had come to an end. The difference, however, is that Plenty Coups approached the matter progressively. He reformed the Crow's conceptual framework according to the new situation. Plenty Coups reacts progressively, trusting in hope. Don Fabrizio, on the other hand, reacts reluctantly and resigning. He watches the world change around him, and by the end must conclude that the change was irreversible. He is not able to refigure his semantics, he observes with melancholy how the new world order takes over. The narrative of the novel itself can then be seen as the swan song of the old semantic repertoire of the Salinas. What both stories of the leopard and the chickadee have shown us is the vulnerability of humans and their culture. Cultural and moral narratives can crumble just as well as they can be built up. In the first chapter, we have seen how narratives are constructed. Now we have seen how they can collapse. In the next chapter, we will investigate the place of these stories in Ricoeur's schema of the positive threefold process of mimesis, and see how we can create a place for this negative movement.

III. Towards Defiguration and Onwards

In the first chapter, we have seen how narratives are built according to Ricoeur. We have seen how a narrative is phenomenologically grounded in the experience of time and that it is the only philosophical framework that can do justice to human experience while accounting for the temporality of existence, thanks to the element of emplotment. In turn, this emplotment is built up with elements that are obtained via a mimetic practise. This mimesis represents action and it is a threefold process, consisting of a prefiguration, configuration and refiguration of action. Ricoeur's theory of narrative is constructive, in that it only deals with a positive process of how a narrative is built. However, what we have explored in chapter two is a clear deconstruction of narrative. The semantic paradigm on which a narrative rests has collapsed and the people who lived through these times had to find ways to build it anew. In other words, the configuration of the world of action fails. The possibility of this failure and the subsequent renewal and refiguration of a narrative is unaccounted for in Ricoeur's work. It is our aim to integrate this negative movement into the schema of the threefold mimesis.

In order to do locate the crisis of configuration in the schema, we will first look at the role of time in both cases, since the narrative is rooted in temporal experience. As we have seen, this is the main reason for Ricoeur why the narrative is the preferred framework to do justice to human experience. We will therefore look at the way in which the experience of time evolved in our examples. Secondly, we will look at the action-related material that the examples provide us with. Mimesis is essentially the representation of action, so we need to abstract from the actions depicted in the stories of Plenty Coups and don Fabrizio. We will look at what changes of action took place in the respective stories, as manifested in the traditions, rituals, acts and, in Plenty Coups' case, dreams that established the old and new narrative situation. Then we will see how the old stories, the old conceptual languages, were transformed into a new, viable semantic paradigm. When we have identified the particularities of our examples as elements fitting in Ricoeur's mimetic theory, we can implement them and find a way to expand Ricoeur's theory

to such an extent as to be able to account for this particular situation in which the old narrative collapses and a new one is constructed from the debris.

III.1 The Times They Are a-Changin'

When we want to locate the events of chapter two in the theoretical framework as presented in chapter one, we need to start from the same phenomenological ground, namely temporal experience. In the case of the Crow, Lear points out that their view on time altered after the collapse of their culture and they were confined to their reservations. Their proper, meaningfully lived lives lay in the past and they lost their orientation towards the future. Time had lost its linearity and had become formless. The days, weeks and months passed, of course, but they had no longer any points of orientation in time. Lear mentions the example of a Crow woman cooking. Usually, she would cook for a purpose in the future: her husband would prepare to go to fight or hunt, and the meal would be an important part of this preparation. Now that waging war or hunting had become impossible, the meal was just a meal.³⁸ Crow activity used to be at the service of a broader cultural practise, it would take place in the light of circumstances that would give it sense. Time as such is marked by regular movements of sun and moon, by the passing of day and night and the seasons, but temporality is experienced through happenings. The memory, attentiveness and anticipation that we talked about with Augustine, is necessarily applied to a time when something occurred. This should be understood in the sense Heidegger expresses with his conception of datability:

When I say “now” I am always tacitly adding “*now, when such and such.*” When I say “then” I always mean “then, when.” When I say “at the time” I mean “at the time when.” To every now there belongs a “when” – now, when such and such. By the term “datability” we denote this relational structure of the now as now-when, of that at-the-time as at-the-time-when, and of the then as then-when. Every

³⁸ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 39-40.

now dates itself as “now, when such and such is occurring, happening, or in existence.”³⁹

This indicates what became lacking for the Crow: there was no longer any sensible “such and such” to talk about. It would have consisted out of hunting and waging war. Other activities like cooking a meal would have been preparations for this. Hunting and fighting were the categories that would have supplemented such phrases as “now, when,” but these phrases had now seized to make sense:

But in the situation as we are envisaging it, the Crow ran out of *whens*: the categories that would normally have filled the blanks lost their intelligibility.⁴⁰

The Crow ran out of ‘whens.’ Even though they could of course still grasp their life in the past and what their present activities amounted to, there was no larger framework of significance anymore into which it could be placed. Their time could no longer be dated because nothing of significance happened. They had, as Lear put it, ran out of time.⁴¹

The disappearance of the buffalo marked a breaking point in the Crows’ temporality. In the case of don Fabrizio, we see that the changing of the times is more gradual. Both are faced with the approaching of a new order and are required to act swiftly, but though there are clear demarcation points, such as Garibaldi’s landing on Sicily or the instalment of the new king, in the case of *The Leopard* it would be wrong to speak of a rapid and all-encompassing change like the Crow endured. The temporality that we see in *The Leopard* is one of slowly increasing loss; time as it were slips out of don Fabrizio’s hands. The orientation towards the future is uncertain, but melancholy is taking over more and more. Don Fabrizio faces the changes that are upon him with vigour and wisdom, but in the end he must acknowledge that, despite his efforts, the days of the leopards are over.

At the same time, Tancredi’s adage “if we want everything to stay as it is,

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 1988), 262.

⁴⁰ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 41.

⁴¹ Lear, 41.

everything has to change” points at the fact that the times do not change at all. Politically, systems come and go, but human (or at least Sicilian) nature will remain the same and the same flaws will still manifest themselves – they will just be wearing different coats. To the people of Sicily, the changes for their daily lives are minimal. The new liberal order does not substantially ameliorate their socio-economic positions. Only minor gentry and upper bourgeoisie are shown to profit from the democratisation. But the prince’s tenants and the larger part of the population hardly experience any positive change. This is exemplified by the corrupted elections, when one of the prince’s tenants declares to have voted against, while the election result was said to be unanimously in favour of the new liberal, unified state. For this tenant, the only change is the fact that he will no longer serve a master he has known all his life. But the decline depicted in the book concerns the decline of the family and the value system they embody. By the end, taking place in 1910, all things have lost their shine and those who live to see these days live empty and unhappy lives. The customs the family held dear, the beauty of the country, the thousand year old world of the feudal aristocracy is a world of the past. Thus, the house of Salina fades into the twentieth century.

Here we touch upon the temporality of *The Leopard*. To a certain extent, they too ran out of ‘whens.’ There was no future for their house, and the ageing, spinster sisters look back upon their lives and see that all vitality and joy has left them. Their old relics are taken from their chapel as their authenticity is being denied by the new clerical authorities, signifying the loss of the Salina’s last straw of prestige, namely their great piety and high regard in ecclesiastical circles. The difference with the Crow is that for the Salina’s, there literally is no future. There will be no one to pass on their traditions to a next generation. They will have either died or assimilated to the new world. The Crow found themselves suddenly without a meaningful framework. The Salina’s had, over the course of fifty years, been overtaken by the new order. Under the guidance of don Fabrizio they tried to adapt and find a place for themselves, but as the years progressed it became clear that the new developments were going so rapidly that their influence along with their ancient customs no longer had a place in the new age. The ‘now’ to ‘when the House

of Salina has its glory days' has turned into a 'then.' And the temporal orientation of the remaining Salina's is little more than a nostalgic looking back.

We read in Lampedusa's novel a lament about the inevitable disappearance of everything we hold dear. The stance don Fabrizio takes is, despite his efforts, primarily one of melancholy. New thick concepts of morals that both Plenty Coups and don Fabrizio were presented with, marked the discontinuity with the past and the tough challenge of reorienting towards the future. In the following, we will examine more closely how exactly this reorienting happens.

III.2 Emplotment: Retelling the Story

The rupture between past and future in the two examples marks a temporal threshold, but also a change of narrative. New times call for a new story. This is what Plenty Coups has successfully brought about and what don Fabrizio was unable to do. Plenty Coups reforged the story of the Crow for the new age. Within the passage of time, a retelling of the plot took place. The process of emplotment was gone through again to transform the old language in a novel way. This is what we will investigate in this paragraph. As we have seen, Plenty Coups managed to defend a course of action to his fellow tribe members that would, strictly spoken, not be regarded as courageous. The virtue of courage was associated with acts of valour on the battlefield. The courage that was needed to embark on the uncertain road into the future by bending along with the wind of change instead of resisting it, was not associated with their thick concepts of what it meant to be courageous. To act in the way they did was something unprecedented. Still, Plenty Coups succeeded to both stay faithful to their traditional semantic paradigm while at the same time deciding to act in a way that was completely unheard of. We will now look more closely at how he did that.

Lear identifies Plenty Coups' act as a *thinning out* of the Crows' thick concepts. He defines this as a way to draw upon one's traditional resources to broaden one's understanding of what courage might be. The question is whether one's thick conception of courage has a certain plasticity:

One would begin with a culture's thick understanding of courage; but one would somehow find ways to *thin it out*: find ways to face circumstances courageously that the older thick conception never envisaged. The issue would then be one not simply of going over to the thick concepts of another culture, but of drawing on their traditions in novel ways in the face of novel challenges.⁴²

This is a transformation of one's conception of virtue, building upon the same foundations that supported the traditional conception. Drawing on what the tradition already provided, Plenty Coups made space for a new conception of courage. He made a new building from the old bricks. The element of his dreams is important in this. Since it was a traditional custom for a young Crow boy to go into the desert and dream, his dreams were an acceptable authority to inspire a certain course of action. It was from within the tradition itself that the untraditional course of action was suggested. Since the Crow could not even envision what was awaiting them, the dreams first "gave the tribe imaginative tools with which to endure a conceptual onslaught."⁴³ The metaphor of the storm gave them the means to grasp the devastation that lay ahead. But apart from that, it also served as a traditional justification for untraditional acts. The dream told Plenty Coups to embrace the virtue of the Chickadee: to listen and to learn from others. Living up to this virtue called for a new form of courage, but was still rooted in tradition, since the chickadee already had an established position in Crow culture.

What matters is that Plenty Coups was able to create a psychological world in which the traditional virtues of the war eagle and the new virtues of the chickadee could cohabit.⁴⁴

From this basis, the thick concept of courage could be 'thinned out.' The courage of Plenty Coups was the courage of the chickadee, not that of the warrior. It would not have been an obvious course of action that a combative tribe would have settled

⁴² Lear, *Radical Hope*, 65-66.

⁴³ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 79.

⁴⁴ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 91.

for, but this very fact may even mark it as so much the more courageous. For instance, Sitting Bull, chief of rival tribe the Sioux, scorned Plenty Coups for his decision. He thought his choices cowardly and his hope foolish.⁴⁵ Sitting Bull's courage in face of the whites was derived from traditional notions. He stood, fought and, ultimately, perished. Plenty Coups' courage was, on the other hand, by no means an instance of naïve optimism or looking away. He took a radically hopeful stand in the face of anxiety and uncertainty. The chickadee kind of courage is rooted in listening instead of waging war, in reserved wisdom instead of in direct action. It enabled him to survive the devastation of expansionism. In the years that followed the transitional period of the Crow, Crow leaders were respected by U.S leaders and successfully protected their people. They learned the ways of the whites – Plenty Coups himself was persistent on education – but were not assimilated. They remained Crow in the face of cultural devastation. Their old narrative could no longer be configured, as their preunderstanding had become meaningless. But during this crisis, Plenty Coups reconfigured some elements of their existing semantic repertoire that allowed him to refigure their story into the future. This demonstrates how the three stages of mimesis are gone through: the stage of prefiguration, the semantic paradigm, is undermined, thereby causing a crisis in the stage of configuration. The Crow now lacked the means for rendering concordance to the discordant elements of their story. Yet, by reconfiguring the elements of their shared preunderstanding under the new circumstances, Plenty Coups made an acceptable semantic framework that allowed him to put the Crow's actions into a new, meaningful whole again. He made it possible to refigure the Crow's narrative.

III.3 Mimesis: Defiguration of Action

The crisis of configuration that Plenty Coups managed to overcome, we will from this point on designate as defiguration. Do be precise, with defiguration we mean the negative movement in the mimetic process in which the configuration based on the previous stage of prefiguration fails to proceed. One tries to construct a narrative, but the underlying semantic paradigm has lost its validity, resulting in a

⁴⁵ Lear, *Radical Hope*, 106.

crisis. This crisis, then, takes place in mimesis², meaning that instead of a configuration of action, we are dealing with a defiguration of action. In these final pages, we will integrate this defiguration into Ricoeur's existing schema of mimesis, in order for it to account for the possibility of the collapse of narratives. We will relate the concrete events of our examples to the abstract notions of our theory, so we will eventually be able to create the required theoretical space for such events in Ricoeur's framework of mimesis.

To create a place for our new concept of defiguration in Ricoeur's schema, we will first look at mimesis¹, for it is there that root lies of the issue of cultural devastation such as we have sketched. It is this, the realm of shared preunderstanding, that is under threat in the case of collapsing concepts. We will look at what the theoretical implications are when the concrete instances of cultural devastation are applied to them. Ricoeur said that "to imitate or represent is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality."⁴⁶ This preunderstanding is shared by the storyteller and his listeners. Mimesis¹ is the part of the mimetic process in which the presupposed understanding of the realm of human action is established. This realm is our semantic repertoire, our paradigm of meaning, and it exists, as we have stated in chapter one, of three features: structural, symbolic and temporal. We will focus here on the structural and symbolic features, since we have already discussed the temporal at length in the paragraph above. The structural feature is about a practical understanding of action, "our competence to utilize in a significant manner the conceptual network that structurally distinguishes the domain of action from that of physical movement."⁴⁷ Actions imply goals, agents, responsibilities of those agents, interaction with others and an either fortunate or unfortunate outcome. The conceptual network of questions as to the how, who, why et cetera of this actions is what Ricoeur means with our practical understanding. What we have seen in our examples is that the paradigm of practical understanding was disturbed by a different understanding. The implicit agreements of both the Crow and the Salina

⁴⁶ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 64.

⁴⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 55.

family were not shared by those who overruled them. The differences between the Native and white American cultures are obvious. For instance, we can look at the nomadic culture of the former and the modern, urbanised culture of the latter. In *The Leopard*, it becomes clear from scenes in which there is an interaction between don Fabrizio and don Calogero. Don Calogero has no knowledge of etiquette and courtesy. He dresses poorly and is very direct and rather tactless in his social interactions. Only when he and the prince get to know each other better, he finds that it can actually be to his advantage to display a certain amount of politeness. He and the prince have polar opposite outlooks on life.

The second and symbolic feature of prefiguration lies “in the symbolic resources of the practical field.”⁴⁸ It is the meaning that is communicated through our actions. We live and act within a symbolic system that provides a context for our actions. Cultural codes and customs govern our behaviour and determine the meaning of what we do. The ethical qualities of the characters in a narrative are evaluated by the standards provided by this network. In the case of the Crow, this was their tribal culture, manifested for example in the esteem that was awarded for warlike deeds. This was strongly at odds with the U.S. law system that they later found themselves subjected to and that downright forbade those practises. In the case of don Fabrizio, we can take the same example as above and contrast his courteous manners with the rudeness of people like don Calogero. Also the strict Roman Catholic code of conduct is a fine example of this. The ecclesiastical authority was, though not completely undermined, strongly diminished under the new, liberal government. The relics cherished by the spinster sisters were declared unauthentic by the Church. Both in the case of the Crow and of *The Leopard*, we can see clearly how the concrete manifestation of their semantic paradigm is overruled by another. This overruling of preunderstanding cuts away the very foundations of the story the peoples in question had for themselves. Their customs of the past were the basis of their outlook into the future.

The structural and symbolic prerequisites to proceed on to mimesis², to

⁴⁸ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 57.

configure the elements of one's experience into a meaningful, concordant narrative leading into the future, are compromised. Thus, with one's semantic paradigm in shatters, it has become impossible to configure any heterogenous elements into concordance. The framework that would provide meaning is gone, so the construction of a narrative becomes an impossibility. Instead of being configured, the narrative is defigured. In the case of *The Leopard*, the story ends there. Don Fabrizio was the last of the leopards, the last living embodiment of their world. After the disappearance of its shared preunderstanding, this world is gliding more and more into the past and there is no transformation that alters their course through the following years. Don Fabrizio cannot translate his old paradigm into the new world. Refiguration of the Salinas' narrative is no longer possible, they have no story to tell themselves anymore. The only remaining narrative is the echo of their history, the lament resounding in Di Lampedusa's novel.

In the case of Plenty Coups, on the other hand, the story of the Crow is adapted and retold. Plenty Coups held on to one particularly useful element of their traditional virtues, that of the chickadee, which allowed him to keep their symbolic system at least partly intact. He thinned out their concepts, translating their old semantics and adjusting it to the new paradigm that was upon them. He built upon their old conceptual system by transforming existing notions of virtue according to the new circumstances, which would at the same time still be acceptable according to the old system. He translated their original conceptual language. This new language would provide the semantics of the narrative that made up their historical progression from that moment on. So, technically speaking, at the instance of defiguration the old semantics from mimesis¹ were renewed to make a new phase of mimesis² possible, leading to a new, hopeful mimesis³. If we are to place this movement in the schema of threefold mimesis, we could designate defiguration as mimesis^{2B}, since it is, after all, a crisis taking place in mimesis² that is subsequently resolved into a second attempt at configuration. Defiguration is, then, the collapse of the narrative such as it was. This may, as in the case of *The Leopard*, end in resignation and the death of the narrative. Or, as in the case of the Crow, it may be the old narrative's shedding of skin, and one can eventually continue the

mimetic process towards a new refiguration.

Thus, we hope to have demonstrated that the vulnerability that lies at the core of every cultural paradigm can lead to what we have called defiguration. This possibility was not a part of Ricoeur's theory of mimesis, but it can now, under the name of mimesis^{2B}, be integrated in the schema. Then, Ricoeur's theory of narrative will be able to account for the crumbling of an existing narrative, and provide us with a theoretical background to how one can live hopefully through such devastating times and continue telling one's story.

Conclusion

In this article, we have set out to explore Ricoeur's theory of mimesis and the function it has in the construction of narratives. A narrative for Ricoeur is the preferred method to do justice to and make sense of human experience since experience is rooted in time. With Augustine, we saw that our orientation towards time is threefold: from the present, we orient towards the past, the future and the present itself. This orientation can be processed in a plot. This plot is the meaningful composition of elements in a temporal framework. These elements are derived from mimesis, they represent human action. This mimesis, in turn, is also threefold, consisting of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration. Thus, we have seen how from a phenomenological ground – namely, the experience of time – a narrative is created. A narrative, then, can take many forms, be it literally, everyday conversation, or a grander tale of historic progression.

What the examples of the *Crow* and *The Leopard* have shown us, however, is that there is another aspect to narrative. The narrative that a people have for themselves is not inherently bestowed with eternal life. The semantic paradigm on which it rests, established in mimesis¹, is culturally determined and cultures, as we have seen, are vulnerable. Plenty Coups and don Frabrizio are figures who lived through times of cultural devastation. Their foundational concepts, virtues and ideals that provided meaning to their lives became under threat from external influences and eventually collapsed. For don Fabrizio and his family, this was the end of his traditional world and of his narrative. They had no story left to be told. Plenty Coups, on the other hand, found a way to transform his traditional semantics into a new language that would give his people the means to make a story for themselves despite their old concepts being lost. Their story crumbled, but was built again.

We have seen that Ricoeur's theory of mimesis does not deal with this collapsing of mimesis¹. His theory is solely constructive. The preunderstanding of the realm of action is presented as a given. It exists within a cultural, semantic paradigm and is not called into question, but its existence is, as we have seen, is far from self-evident. We have therefore added our new, negative mimetic movement,

that we have called mimesis2B, the defiguration of action, to his theory. This designates exactly what happened in the case of the Crow and *The Leopard*. The shared preunderstanding of the semantic paradigm can no longer be drawn upon and so mimesis2 is no longer possible: instead of configuration, we get defiguration. The providing of concordance to the discordance of the heterogenous elements that are to make up one's narrative is obstructed by the lack of a meaningful frame of reference. It then takes a lot of insight, creativity and courage from those involved to thin out and translate their old concepts that were presupposed in mimesis1 into a new semantic repertoire that can be made viable under the new circumstances. Then, from the ashes of the old narrative, a new narrative can emerge and one can complete the mimetic process again into its final stage, mimesis3. The crisis of configuration, i.e. defiguration, then ends in a hopeful refiguration. As we have seen, this does not always succeed. But at least, we have hereby provided Ricoeur's framework with the tools to account for this possibility. Therewith, we have demonstrated that, if it wants to stay as it is, also Ricoeur's theory might have to change.

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