

## ***Time, Desire and Narrative Meaning***<sup>1</sup>

William Mathews S.J.

Milltown Institute

In the last decade of the present millennium time and narrative stand out as two of the great and major themes in which the human community of scholars, and I use that term widely, have become interested. Our awareness of time has expanded unimaginably in relation to earlier perspectives and the present literature on the topic is enormous. Narrative, whose history lies largely outside of the mainstream of philosophy, has in recent times begun to attract the philosophical attention it deserves as a central human category, especially from the viewpoint of human temporality. There is currently a certain excitement in their study. There is a sense that some new windows have sprung open, surprising us with the vastness of the views to be explored. Against that background the present essay will put forward a suggestion about a possible relation between time and narrative. The aim will be to see if a plausible case can be made for the suggestion that, in certain respects, human desire in time is a narrative or story form.

### I

Time, the primitive experience of duration, of the duration of our experience and the duration of what we experience, of the inescapable slipping of the present into the past and the future into the present, seems to be an irreducible quality or attribute of everything in our world. As such it shares in the mysteriousness of everything that is. Whether there is a pure form of time is an interesting question. But different entities, stones, plants, animals, humans, history, the universe, have different forms in time. The paper will focus on what might be significant about the human experience and form of time and equally, of the human way of relating to time. Some brief remarks on cosmic, cultural and psychological time - the time of our souls will set the stage.

Firstly, there is our awareness of cosmic time. In 1650, in response to a question about the age of the universe which troubled some minds among those who did not consider it to be eternal, James Ussher, the Archbishop of Armagh came up with an answer. Based entirely on the numerology of the Old Testament, the creation, he concluded, had taken place in 4004 B.C. Later Dr John Lightfoot of St Catherine's College, Cambridge, refined the calculations. According to him the universe began at exactly nine o'clock on the morning of October 23rd, 4004 B.C.<sup>2</sup> The Creator had in his wisdom arranged that the origin of the universe

coincided with the beginning of the academic year. All of this despite the fact that time calculations of the Mayas, worked out long before the 17th century, involved figures of the order of 64 million and of half a billion years.<sup>3</sup>

In the 18th century geological analysis began to pose seriously the question as to the formation and age of the earth and very soon it became clear that it was much older than estimates based on the genealogies in the Bible. The accumulation of that research tradition found its major expression in 1830 in Leyell's *Principles of Geology*, which in turn prepared the way for Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. After Darwin an interesting theory known as recapitulation was influential for a time in the field of embryology. It was concerned with the relation between the evolutionary origins of a species and the developmental stages in the growth of a present-day embryo. It is a good illustration of the question of the presence of the past in the present of a biological organism. Eventually embryologists came to realize that a modern embryo in its growth does not imitate exactly the evolutionary stages involved in its formation. In some sense it restructures them so that it can develop much more rapidly. So they did not find a study of the evolutionary processes helpful for embryology. But although the modern organism does not imitate the evolutionary processes directly, their outcome is still present in it. In this sense it sums up those processes so there is still a point to the question. And it challenges us to ask, in what sense are our bodies recapitulations of the story of the emergence of life in the universe as a whole, from its origins in an initial single cell through all the processes of differentiation and complexification that have occurred up to the emergence of humans. Our own development, from conception to adulthood, does not directly imitate them. But we still compactly summarise them. How is this achieved?

In the 20th century our expanding awareness of time has accelerated. Stephen Hawkins *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* has been on the UK top ten bestsellers list for the past three years.<sup>4</sup> The book presents, in a quite brilliant fashion, a summary of the quest of astronomers in the 20th century to make sense of the history of the Universe. One does not have to read far into Hawkins narrative in order to grasp that since Ussher an enormous and startling revolution in the human perspective of time and on the age of the universe has taken place.

Hawkins charts the story of the movement by means of which the evidence of the rate of expansion of the universe led to the theory of the big bang. A fascinating insight was that General Relativity Theory could not account for the history of the universe right from the start. It only holds after the Universe is  $10^{-43}$  seconds old, at which time, presumably the Gravitational forces begin to come into play. Before that Quantum Theory is used. So there was a movement to quantum theory to deal with the time it takes for light, a photon, to traverse a proton,  $10^{-45}$  of a second. Out of

this there emerged various theories of origins including Alan Guth's recent one, the inflationary theory.<sup>5</sup> Hawkins himself has changed his mind a number of times on the question, initially affirming an initial big bang singularity but now seems to hold that space and time have no boundaries and might be eternal.<sup>6</sup>

The result of all of this is that our present perspective on the time of the Universe has changed radically. The age of the Universe is now estimated at 15 billion years and of the sun and planet earth, which was formed from the debris of the sun, 4.6 billion years. It is also acknowledged that our sun has a further 1.5 billion years to go. The future is inevitably present in the past and present. We recognize the human species as a very late arrival on the scene. Lucy, our ancestor, is dated at 3 million years, modern humans as recent as 140,000 years in some estimates.

As we contemplate the vast time scales which characterize our universe questions arise about them. Why are they so vast? Need they be so vast? Does every point of time in the history of the universe have its own unique significant place in the whole? Is it the case that at every time in the universe, something of significance for its meaning as a whole is taking place? Can we apply the hermeneutical circle, the study of the relation between the parts and the whole, to time and the universe as a whole? Is it the case that precisely 15 billion years is needed to get us to the present point and that there is no way of shortcutting that amazingly long process? Some proponents of the anthropic principle hold that the emergence of humans was present in the very initial conditions of the universe.<sup>7</sup> They are chosen for a particular story, plot, outcome. In the beginning is the ending.

What is interesting here is that physicists have found themselves stuck with the category, history, in addition to that of theory. It occurs in the title of Hawkins' book. Theories are abstract and as such do not refer directly to history. Concrete places and times and the contingencies that so fascinate Stephen Gould do not enter into them. They might contain trends but they do not contain plots with their inevitable contingencies. But there might be a plot in the history of the universe. Plots, unlike theories, cannot be inferred from a part of the total cosmic experience. For the meaning of a plot is only present in the totality of its parts.

As well as our awareness of cosmic time there is also that of cultural time. A calendar, with its repetitive chronology and festivals partially expresses the way in which a culture perceives and relates to time. Anthony Aveni's *Empires of Time, Calendars, Clocks and Cultures* compares our Western calendar with those of the Mayas, Aztecs and Incas.<sup>8</sup> That comparison poses questions as to why our Western cultural sense of time is so out of touch with cosmic time. Nothing in our calendar, for instance, celebrates the birth of the earth or the birth of life on our planet. Numbering the present year as 1993 it creates a mind set that

assumes time began about 2,000 years. Yet even that is far too long ago for many modern economists, industrialists and news-editors who live and work as though time began about ten years ago and will continue for another fifteen years at the most.

Given the immensity of cosmic time, why are our cultural time horizons, the spans of time into the past and into the future which are significant for us from the viewpoint of economics, politics and news, so minute? Why do we always seem to live as though the present generation was the last or as though the world was soon to end? Can humankind in the 21st century rise to the viewpoint that human history proper has hardly begun? Do we appreciate the healing function of time?

Philosophers have largely concentrated on psychological time. Augustine is one of the founders of the tradition which runs through Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger and Ricoeur. As there was, in the 19th century, the question of biological recapitulation, so also in Hegel there emerged the question of cultural recapitulation. The human spirit is such that at later stages it traverses in broad detail the shapes of spirit which earlier were worked out tediously. To take a simple illustration; all modern children learn the alphabet and the addition tables. Alphabets emerged in response to the question of correlating written with spoken language. But alphabets were formed tediously between 1,500 and 750 BC, the Phoenicians articulating the consonants, the Greeks the vowels. When we learn the alphabet or the number system we recapitulate culture. And so it is that in *Orlando* Virginia Woolf suggests that a modern writer might be recapitulating three or four hundred years of family and literary history in his or her present writing projects.

Heidegger, in his explorations of human temporality influenced by the thought of Augustine further underlines its place on the philosophical agenda. He came to appreciate that all human existence is a being-towards. Whether we like it or not the pull of the future is present inevitably and irrepressibly in the present. Our future death is always and unavoidably present in our present suggesting that in some very significant sense our future destiny is present in our present. True, there are contingent choices which we can make and which will give the future its unique landscape. But the living out of those choices takes place on a stage over which we have no control and we cannot choose that it would be different.

To be human is to be bounded by time, to be finite. Although our horizon on time has enlarged beyond all expectation, the human fact still remains that there was a point in time when I did not exist and there will come a point in time when I will cease to exist in time. To be human is to be stretched out "between" a beginning and an ending in time. Heidegger clearly poses the question, what unifies the life of *Dasein* as it journeys along the in-between. His answer is that care is the unifying principle. But

there is also a suggestion that it could also unite times before and after our own life time with times within our lifetime. After Heidegger, Ricoeur's massive three volume work, *Time and Narrative*, puts the question of narrative identity in time on the agenda.<sup>9</sup>

Much modern psychology has been exploring in immense detail the human time span, the wholeness of the human lifetime, and the way we relate to it. At one end of the time span we begin as pure future, born into a specific and unique historical community, yet without any personal history, as of yet. The life of the child is totally before it. At the other end of the time span we find ourselves with no future in the world and only with memories of the world. Proffitt and the biographers find themselves in the position of contemplating the now of an individual as we move along the timespan of their lives and grasping the different series of relations with which they stand in relation to their between, their beginning and ending in time.<sup>10</sup> So there arises the possibility of being able to contemplate, almost in an instant, the whole succession of 'nows' in an individual's life, giving us an almost eternal perspective on its temporal unfolding. This perspective has in turn posed the question, what goes on in the between? These reflections can be shifted from an individual to the whole human race. As human history unfolds between a beginning and an ending we can begin to appreciate the different series of relations with which the human race stands in relation to its beginning and its ending.

## II

In response to this question of the between it is now commonly acknowledged that to be human is to be in a story. Stephen Crites, Paul Ricoeur, McIntyre, Charles and Mark Taylor, among others with varying degrees of conviction intimate that the human form in time is story. In that unique story is to be found our irreducible personal identity. As Peter Brooks puts it in his imaginative work, *Reading for the Plot*: 'Narrative is one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality, specifically in the case of narrative, with the problem of temporality.'<sup>11</sup> For Ricoeur in his *Time and Narrative*: 'Time becomes human 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 existence.'<sup>12</sup> For him it is in the plot that is disclosed in a narrative that those features are portrayed. Stephen Crites puts it in his 'The Narrative Quality of Experience'

Consciousness has a form of its own, without which no coherent experience would be possible. .. I want further to propose that the form of active consciousness, i.e., the form of its experiencing, is in at least some rudimentary sense narrative. .. A square peg would not fit into a round hole. The stories give qualitative substance to the form of

experience because it is itself an incipient story.<sup>13</sup>

Autobiographies are stories because they reflect the narrative form of consciousness.

For Crites the ability continuously to integrate a past with a present and a future, rather than living a sort of chronicle, is of the essence of narrative. In another essay he says:

A man's sense of his own identity seems largely determined by the kind of story which he understands himself to have been enacting through the events of his career, the story of his life. That is why the possibilities of self-deception are so awesome.<sup>14</sup>

Crites refers to David and Nathan as a case of self deception, and Augustine as someone who changed his story. But is not this a change within the overall story rather than a breaking out of story itself? In fact from the viewpoint of narratives of desire Augustine's conversion is a chapter in his unfolding desire for wisdom. What is meant by the breakdown of a story, as for instance would happen through brain damage or memory loss, is a puzzling issue. Perhaps narrative is a human ideal rather than an inevitable reality. Can we transcend story in our lives, reach some higher or alternative way of living, of realizing our identity?

The present exploration will presuppose rather than justify the position that story is of the essence of the person. It will go on to consider some questions which that presupposition raises. In what consists our narrative identity in time? What makes an individual's story uniquely their's rather than someone else's, unique? What makes it one and the same story? An image from biology relating to a similar question will constitute a helpful introduction.

It used to be observed that the human body changes its cells almost totally every seven years. The inconvenient fact that there is a small number of stubborn permanent cells, the basic nerve cells, was glossed over in arguing that every seven years we have a different biological identity. But biologists have now discovered that there is in every cell in every biological organism what is known as the homeo box, a group of homeotic genes. These genes have the function of managing, directing, organizing the growth of the body from conception through to death.<sup>15</sup> They are distinguished from what are called ordinary housekeeping genes which manage, for instance, on a daily basis the flow of the blood cells and hair cells. In each organism it is now being recognised the homeo box is the gene structure that biologically makes a fish a fish, a bird a bird, a frog a frog and a human a human. There is a single biological organizing principle which controls the development and growth of one and the same body

from conception through all its intermediate stages to death, involving making sure, for instance, that both arms grow to the same length. Uniqueness is guaranteed on the level of genes which are unique to every individual with the inevitable exception of identical twins, triplets and above. As biologists ask what makes a fish a fish so we can ask what makes a story a story?

From the viewpoint of the chronicle of our psycho-history I would not have too many problems with the suggestion that as on the biological level, nothing appeared to remain of our identity every seven years, so also on the psychological. I could envisage a person who changed jobs and friends, whose spouse and children died or who divorced and remarried every couple of years so that after a certain time-span nothing of the previous chapter of his or her life seemed to remain in the present. In her *Testament of Youth* Vera Brittain describes how after the war almost all the connections of her previous life were wiped out.<sup>16</sup> She had to begin again. The principles of narrative identity must be able to deal with materials even more complex over time than those involved on the biological level of management. It follows that what initially, in human conscious living might seem extremely disparate, might also, despite all the odds, with hindsight, have a principle of organization. Does it make sense to wonder if desire might be analogous to the master genes on the psychological level and unify in time experiences which otherwise might seem extremely diverse and unconnected?

Different authors stress different elements which might make up our narrative identity. Schopenhauer emphasizes fate, Proffoff the Steppingstones or marker events of the life, Heidegger care and historicity, Crites and Liebowitz emphasize style, Ricoeur plot, Brooks desire, the existentialists freedom. To what extent does my historicity, my fate, style, plot, desire, freedom make me what I am rather than what you are, explain my uniqueness? How, within their framework, do I remain one and the same person in one and the same story?

Firstly, our narrative identity is tied up with historicity and fate. As Stephen Crites puts it:

The way a people speak, dance, build, dream, embellish, is to be sure always culturally particular; it bears the imprint of a time and a place. A people speaks a particular language, not the same as that spoken in another land nor quite the same as that spoken by their fathers, and each person adapts it with some originality to his own use.<sup>17</sup>

Our historicity can radically stamp our lives for good or ill. We can be born Kurds or untouchables or Palestinians or into Royalty, the ruling caste, the oil barons empire. It can make life miserable or easy for us and raise very

disturbing questions about why some people have things so easy because of the circumstances of their birth and others have things so difficult. Is there, in an absolute sense, such a thing as good luck and bad luck?

Just as none of us has the freedom to choose our biological parents, equally we do not have the freedom to choose our historicity. In a most detailed way history prepares the stage on which every unique life is lived, right down to the minutest of details. In that sense one could argue that history, the past, is a preparation for every human life. There is a unique stage of intellectual and cultural development, or disintegration, which creates or destroys a horizon of possible interests for the new generation. Crick and Watson arrived on the scene just at the right time to crack the problem of DNA. A whole historical process had prepared the way in which the research programme hoping to discover the key to genes in proteins was seen to be a blind alley. The problem was up for grabs. It is of such details that narrative identity is constituted. As the fish is in the water and the water is in the fish, so we are in history and past history is in us. Historicity is a very comprehensive notion, and in most instances very difficult to objectify, much more difficult than, for instance, our family origins and dynamic as happens in psychoanalysis. Like Buber, we need to become free in relation to our historicity, not to be imprisoned by it or attempt to erase it from our lives, but to live out of it freely. This is not a simple task.

If historicity involves the manner in which the past prepared us for our unique life, as that life unfolds fate or fortune or destiny contributes much to our unique narrative identity. Many of us tend to shy away from the question of fate, our interest being in the matter of freedom.<sup>18</sup> That freedom is an important element in our narrative identity goes without saying. But there is a need to examine it more in the context of having a personal history than has been the case.

Machiavelli encourages us to turn on fate and not let it turn on us. More recently Christopher Nuyten has made two brilliant TV documentaries on Tchaikovsky.<sup>19</sup> The first was called Tchaikovsky's Women and followed his life up to his disastrous marriage, he being a homosexual. The second was entitled Tachikovsky's fate. Quite by accident just after the break-up of his marriage he met Madame von Mecke. She became his sponsor. Only meeting once they had a most creative correspondence in which he discussed the themes of the fourth symphony. The themes of the first movement of that symphony are fate and the dream. Our lives, for him, are an interplay between the harshness of fate and the flight into the dream. Fate inevitably stamps our identity. Schopenhauer, who repeated many times the proverb "Fate leads the willing but drags along the unwilling" had a more sympathetic perspective on fate. In his provocative essay, "Transcendent Speculation on the Apparent Deliberateness in the Fate of the Individual" he puts forward the view that

the fateful events which happen to us throughout our lives are not as blind as they seem at the time. As they happen they might seem very strange. But viewed from a much later perspective within a life they might appear differently. Retrospectively a unique pattern might be discerned in the otherwise random dance of fate. This leads to his conclusion: 'often becoming a conviction, that the course of an individual's life, however confused it may be, is a complete whole, in harmony with itself and having a definite tendency and didactic meaning, as profoundly conceived as the finest epic.'<sup>20</sup>

It is largely fate that arranges, for instance, the precise cast of persons which we will encounter in the unfolding of our lifetimes, the timing with which they enter and the role and meaning that they play in it. Some of those persons we will have the freedom to choose. Others will shape our identity in certain situations by entering our lives quite against our wishes. As well as the cast there are also those peculiar events which Progoff calls Steppingstones, the eleven or twelve marker events through which the thread of a life runs.<sup>21</sup> In Martin Buber's life there is the quite unplanned series of meetings and mismetings, beginning with the departure of his mother when he was three, with the grandparents, the horse, the man looking for advice, the Rabbi, his wife, out of which the ground plan for his *I and Thou* was formed.<sup>22</sup> If historicity and fate, as experienced, seem largely random or synchronous, both Schopenhauer and Progoff are firmly of the conviction that, in retrospect, in them a pattern can be more or less clearly identified. The pattern contains a clue as to our unique identity, the shape of our story.

As well as historicity and fate there is also personal style.

For Crites:

We speak of the things we do as having a particular style. There is a style in the way a person writes and speaks. An artist paints in a certain style. A farmer exhibits a style in the way he ploughs his field; a dealer, in the way he keeps his store and arranges his wares.<sup>23</sup>

For Herbert Liebowitz: 'The self reveals itself through style. ....style is a dye introduced into the body of a life to uncover what lies beneath the surface... A reader stumbles upon the self hiding in a secret fold of syntax...'<sup>24</sup> Where Liebowitz singles out style Ricoeur singles out the related category of character and it is in character that he finds the key to both self-identity and plot.<sup>25</sup> It is because of the narrative significance of style and character that biographies have to be artistic rather than merely factual or technical.

So there is the style of Wittgenstein, of Heidegger, of Kant, Hopkins, of Kierkegaard, Joyce, Einstein, of Jacqueline du Pre. Wittgenstein painted his philosophical landscape in very small dots so that it

is only with the accumulation of a very large number of them that the features of the landscape become clear. The manner in which personal style is related to the specific works of the authors is an interesting question.

Plot, which shapes the story line, is for Peter Brooks the central narrative category: 'Plot is the design and intention of narrative. What shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning'.<sup>26</sup> Narrative deals with man's timeboundedness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality:

And plot is the principle ordering force of those meanings that we try to wrest from human temporality. Plot is so basic to our experience of reading, and indeed to our very articulation of experience in general, that criticism has often passed over it in silence, as too obvious to bear discussion. Yet the obvious can often be the most interesting as well as the most difficult to talk about.<sup>27</sup>

So we can have quest stories and the quest could be for adventure, for a new life, or for a new truth; or love stories, revenge stories, tragic stories and comic stories. One significant point about plot is that it is in some sense present, not in a part of the life or story, but in the totality. It is only through a familiarity with the totality that plot will disclose itself.<sup>28</sup> It relates to historicity, fate, style, desire and freedom as its variables.

Ricoeur asserts the need to enlarge the concept of plot quite beyond that of Aristotle, and in so doing raises questions about its limits.<sup>29</sup> Peter Brooks strongly affirms the centrality of plot. He is attracted by the concept of a master plot which he finds in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.<sup>30</sup> In it, he holds, Freud lays out most fully a total scheme of how life proceeds from beginning to end, and how each individual life in its own manner repeats the master plot and confronts the question of whether the closure of an individual life is contingent or necessary.<sup>31</sup> It is a viewpoint that would greatly alarm Lyotard who is critical of masterplots and suspicious of narratives of legitimation, Heidegger's narrative of race being a specific instance. But Lyotard does not distinguish between narratives of deception and narratives of legitimation and his conclusion seems to remove history from the equation.<sup>32</sup> Still, there are those who for good reasons are suspicious of plots and uneasy about their apparent arbitrariness. Despite these cautions there is a valid question here. When Aristotle viewed the mind as being a form of forms rather than a specific form he had a point. Might the suggestion that desire in time is a form of narrative forms rather than a specific narrative form also have a point? All the specific narratives we encounter in particular lives are different expressions of the desire in time. In this way an exploration of the relation between desire and narrative could contribute to Ricoeur's efforts to enlarge the concept of plot.

Being introduced as readers to the start of a plot awakens a desire in us to follow it through. If the story breaks off our desire feels frustrated and we wonder how it progressed and ended. But might not the awakening of desire in a person be the awakening or beginning of a plot which he or she has to live through. And so it is that historicity, fate, style and plot constitute a perspective from which to approach and locate desire within a life. For a peculiarity of the human person is that our desires, unlike those of the animals, seem to be able to accommodate themselves uniquely to our historicity, fate, style and plot. So where Heidegger puts care as the heart of the human subject, the present suggestion is that it is desire. That the two notions overlap to some extent must be obvious.

Human desire is a most complex phenomenon. We can talk about Oedipal desire, about aesthetic desire, about intellectual and moral desires, about romantic desire, about what Jung terms the animus and anima desires, and about religious desire.<sup>33</sup> Acknowledging that complexity, the focus of the present study is on the form of desire in time. Reference to autobiographies and biographies brings home the fact that these different desires in different ways are an integral part of the story. It is a most illuminating pursuit to identify the awakening of a desire in a life and to follow the way it directs the interests of the person in its unfolding.

When she was five years old Jacqueline du Pre heard a 'cello being played on the radio.

I remember being in the kitchen at home, looking up at the old-fashioned wireless. I climbed onto the ironing board, switched it on, and heard an introduction to the instruments of the orchestra. It must have been a BBC *Children's Hour*. It didn't make much of an impression on me until they got to the cello, and then... I fell in love with it straightaway. Something within the instrument spoke to me, and it's been my friend ever since." She told her mother, "I want to make that sound."<sup>34</sup>

It awakened something in her that much later would flower in her career as a musician.

Before his sixth birthday C.S. Lewis' brother brought into his room a toy garden on top of a biscuit tin.<sup>35</sup> In the then drab environment in which he lived, it awakened in Lewis a longing - *sehnsucht*, for the beautiful, and related to it a profoundly stirring joyfulness. The whole of his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, is the story of the moves of that desire in his life. It is almost a pure narrative of desire.

During his third year Freud's Oedipal desire was awakened by the

sight of his mother naked. In 1897, when he was 41, the memory of the event came back to him when he was involved in his own self analysis.<sup>36</sup> So in Freud we see a two-fold awakening. Firstly there is the awakening of the Oedipal and other psychological desires and experiences. Secondly there is the later awakening of the intellectual desire concerned with understanding the former other desires.

Einstein when he was a young boy was presented with a compass by his father. The fact that he could not figure out why it had a mind of its own and always pointed in a particular way awakened his intellectual desire.<sup>37</sup> By the time he was 15 that initial interest had focused on the problem of the foundations of mechanics. For the following ten years his desire worked on them until he made the breakthrough into special relativity theory. Later general relativity theory took about 9 years to puzzle out. These are chapters in his intellectual history.

Shortly before he went to school for the first time at the age of 13, Collingwood read a translation of Kant's *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of the Morals*. He did not understand a word in it but it awakened a desire in him. He recognized that his future was in some way connected with this book. He came to recognize that his vocation was to think, although he did not have any clue at all as to what he was to think about. His *Autobiography* is again the story of the awakening of his intellectual desire and its unfolding towards the point when he recognized that the philosophy of history was his vocation.<sup>38</sup>

The story of the awakening of Darwin's intellectual desire and its unfolding, or of the awakening of romantic desires as told in *Tristram and Isolde* could be recounted. Autobiographical literature is full of accounts of this awakening of human desire in some of its aspects. In the period before the awakening something is obviously taking shape in the individual's consciousness so that when the external stimulus fatefully arrives they match each other almost perfectly. What seems clear is that in some sense in those moments of awakening the story is beginning and can be sensed by a reader as beginning. This does not mean that the subject necessarily has a clear grasp at the time of the significance of what it is that is happening. Beginnings imply journeying and destinations, endings.

When you narrate, you appear to start with a beginning. You say, "It was a fine autumn evening in 1922. I was a notary clerk in Marommes. But as Roquenten says, In reality you have started at the end. It is there, invisible and present, it is what gives these few words the pomp and value of a beginning."<sup>39</sup>

The same seems to be true about the experience of the awakening of desire. It is a beginning. But is the beginning the beginning of a journey, or of an

ending? As it becomes active, pauses, resumes, many times throughout a life, is there involved a backward forward movement, backward in relation to the story of its awakening, and forward in relation to some destination in the future.

Does it make sense to suggest that this one and the same desire, which is experienced as awakening at such a moment can direct the thread of a life through the complexities of historicity, fate, style and plot. Might it not be a key element in the life plot? Is it something we can go against or change? When she was 17 Jacqueline du Pre tried to give up the cello, break out of that particular story but was brought back to it. Does it know where it is trying to go in our lives? Does it make sense to think about Einstein changing his intellectual desire? Is it something we fabricate for ourselves or is it something there, in us? Most of us are interested in journeying towards the destination of desire rather than in the desire itself. The true and profound nature of human desire can consequently remain anonymous.

The path of the subsequent unfolding of that desire in any instance is anything but simple. Intellectual desire for instance can awaken, grow, partially understand something, stop, wait, remain dormant for several years, resume, and undergo a series of flowerings. It can be assaulted. The community in which an original thinker begins to question in many instances can respond by wishing to put the original questioning to death. It can survive, resume, the pattern repeating itself over and over. It can become obsessive, a crusade, a nightmare. When we follow the journey of that desire are we following a single performance which is interrupted and later resumes the same performance? Is it something like Heidegger's one *poema* out of which all other works or poems are fashioned? If so what has this to say to the question of narrative identity in time. Joseph Campbell has given us *one* way into it in terms of the journey of the hero. There is: The Call to Adventure (which can be accepted or refused); The Road of Trials; The Vision Quest; The Meeting with the Goddess; The Boon (the discovery etc); The Magic Flight; The Return Threshold - homecoming can be refused; The Master of Two Worlds.<sup>40</sup>

Interestingly the scheme does not at all envisage the confrontation with extinction in death, as Freud does. These episodes thread in and out of the myriad of other details in a person's life. There is something here of a search for a story of stories which is somehow analogous to a song of songs. Related to this I would like to suggest that desire might be something like a form of narrative form rather than directly a particular narrative form. It has total flexibility in relation to historicity and fate. It does not generate some one and the same story but rather in every life as it unfolds generates a uniquely distinct story. In each particular life intellectual desire is awakened by situations and events that are related to the particular interests of the particular person and no one else, and the story continues from there, or

tries to continue from there.

### III

Desire has been singled out as a significant element in narrative identity and meaning. Because of its complexity, its involvement with the beautiful, the true and the good, the considerations will now single out intellectual desire, the desire to understand. This desire expresses itself in the questions we pose and pursue. In a special but not exclusive way it energizes the philosophical and scientific and educational communities. Since Socrates the cultivation of that desire seems at least in part the hallmark of the philosopher. For Plato it was the desire that made the human person the measure of all things, although he acknowledged that it existed with different strengths and intensities in different individuals. I would like to suggest that intellectual desire in us is an anonymous artist which produces our works of intellectual art but whose authorship remains anonymous in them. Authorship is a most puzzling, even mysterious notion, one that most of us take for granted. Only when the narrative of intellectual desire is remembered and narrated is the meaning of human authorship and its essential narrative nature in time opened up to the light. Some autobiographies and biographies glimpse the narrative of desire but do not quite expose it. Ellmann, who does not seem really to probe deeply the question of authorship in his biographies of Joyce and Wilde, would be a case in point.

Having said that it must also be acknowledged that there is one school of thought which resolutely asserts that the anonymous artist should remain anonymous. Only the works produced are important. So it is that Joseph Campbell shied away from celebrity status and the prying eyes of biographers. 'What is important is not me but the myths which my work make known.' Outside of a few in-depth interviews he instinctively lived out what the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke referred to when he wrote about the creative life: "True art comes from the anonymous self."<sup>41</sup>

Only then is it a true pursuit of art and never of personal fame. Related is the significant observation for me that nowhere in his massive *Time and Narrative* does Ricoeur give any intimations of the personal quest of which it is an expression. His authorship, his creativity and his intellectual desire, remain anonymous in the text. The same is true of very many texts in philosophy, the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* and almost all in science, although surprisingly an element of the personal quest is present in Hawkins's *A Brief History of Time*. Crick and Watson's account of the discovery of the Double Helix is a further illustration.

The problem with insisting on keeping the anonymous self

anonymous is that it exiles the question of authorship. We end up worshipping the work of art but remain totally in the dark about the source of creativity in ourselves, in our anonymous desire. There results an attitude that the works of art are more important or more interesting or profound than the activity of authorship itself. There is no doubt that Joyce's *Ulysses* and Einstein's General Relativity Theory are profoundly interesting. But does this mean to say that an understanding of the power in Joyce or Einstein which enabled them to be authors of their works is not equally profound and interesting? To analyse that power in us is to analyse the conditions of possibility of authoring such works. To overlook it is to overlook something essential to what it means to be a human being. Works of art, be they literary or scientific are only reflections of the work of art that is the life of the author.

Campbells' position has been challenged as early as in the time of Leibnitz and Vico. Leibnitz was irritated by Descartes's habit of covering the tracks of his own development, especially where he might have revealed his debt to the works of others. He thought it a good idea:

"to study the discoveries of others in a way that discloses to us the sources of inventions and renders them in a sort of our own. And I wish that authors would give us the history of their discoveries and the steps by which they arrived at them. When they neglect to do so, we must try to divine these steps, in order to profit the more from their works. If the critics would do this for us in reviewing books, they would render a great service to the public." It is of interest that the great philosopher felt the urge to understand men's thoughts in terms of their gradual development, and not simply as the finished product on the printed page.

Leibnitz's casually dropped suggestion became the indirect cause for Vico's autobiographical sketch.<sup>42</sup>

Vico in his autobiography began the process of disclosing himself, of redeeming the anonymous artist from obscurity. This poses the question, to what extent do you need to understand the life of a philosopher in order to understand their works. Brian Mc Guinness when writing about the *Tractatus* remarked that "On any showing it was a *tour de force* to combine in the book all the problems of his philosophic life." up to that point, those problems including logic from Frege, mathematics from Russell and mysticism from his First World War experience.<sup>43</sup> But the book does not explain how, the life does. This would seem to suggest that some understanding of the life is essential.

Supporting this proposal Paul Trainor has recently written about autobiography as argument.<sup>44</sup> He examines the autobiographical writings of

three philosophers, Socrates, Descartes and Collingwood. Each of them, he maintains, went through a period of confusion which involved shifting from one philosophical method and paradigm to another. So the early Socrates had a passion to understand the natural world. He expected to find in the writings of Anaxagoras an explanation of the statement that the mind is the measure, but was disappointed. In the autobiographical passage in the *Phaedo*(100a) he gives an 'argument' as to why he adopted his new position.

The opening autobiographical passages of Descartes *Discourse* tell of his rejection of the scholastic tradition and method of the time. As a result of this he abandoned the study of letters, and resolved not to seek after any science but what might be found within himself and in the great book of the world. Because of this Trainor points out that some commentators acknowledge that the unity of the *Discourse* resides less in the philosophical or scientific aims contained therein than in its autobiographical structure. The autobiographical passages in the *Discourse* are presented as a kind of argument for accepting a new philosophical method.<sup>45</sup> Likewise:

Collingwood's autobiography is a narrative of his slow recognition of the intellectual and moral bankruptcy to which justificationism leads and of his discovery of the "historical method" as the method of philosophy. Like Socrates and Descartes' autobiography, Collingwood's narration of his life is an account of how he came to give up one philosophical method for another for the sake of progress in philosophy. And Collingwood's didactic point is unmistakable: if you wish to grow intellectually and morally, do as I did, give up justificationism for an historical way of thinking.<sup>46</sup>

Similar observations could be made about Sartre and Augustine.

The interesting thing here is that narrative arguments seems to come into play precisely when paradigms are breaking down and the individual sees the need to legitimate the transition that is taking place from one paradigm to another. The reasons for the shift could not be communicated logically within either paradigm. This in turn begins to pose the interesting question, in what consists the truth about philosophy or science or whatever, in the products, the treatises or in the life itself. Well the answer must be that the truth exists in both but in quite different ways. A strong argument can be made that the works are embedded in the life, in the narrative of the desire and its growth points. If those growth points are not signalled in the work then it will be very difficult to understand them.

Acknowledging the problem of self-deception and self glorification,

philosophical autobiographies can narrate significant turning points in the history of the philosopher by means of which he or she came to adopt a foundational stance out of which the works emerged. They explain to us the premises, so to speak, out of which the philosopher is writing or arguing, premises which are not necessarily critically grounded within the work. But notice that they can only be written after the works. Interestingly, students can be introduced to them before they study the works. And so it is that Trainor concludes:

The locus of the persuasive power of an autobiography used as a philosophical argument is the connection made between the narrator's personal growth and the way in which he thinks.<sup>47</sup>

In all of this there is a move to bring the anonymous author out of the dark and into the light. But it is only a beginning.

In order really to enter into this we have to put it to the test in the laboratory of our own lives. As well as our philosophical interests and activities and writings and the lectures we give, our works, there is our unfolding personal story as philosophers. Desire is the author of our works. Within my own personal history I can identify a story line which has brought me from an initial mistaken orientation in engineering, which I found insufficiently mysterious, to my present interest in the manner in which desire operates in lives. Part of that story is a surprising intersection of two lines of work, a first on the human mind and heart, and a second on autobiography and biography. In it I can identify the story of my own unfolding intellectual desire interacting with my historicity and fate and forming my own narrative identity. I don't think I'm so unusual as to expect that no one else ever experienced something similar. Where Trainor sees this as a means towards clarifying philosophical writings, I see it as a task whose end is to clarify human meaning.

So I am interested in it as an end in itself, an end which lights a candle in an otherwise dark human zone. My expectation is that as we become more and more familiar with the narratives of desire which are the story of our authorship will we come to understand narrative, and particularly narratives of desire as the fundamental vehicle of human meaning proper. In those narratives we understand in ourselves the nature of authorship and artistry. In them we understand the conditions of possibility in us of philosophy and science and literature and whatever. And this is why Robert Coles in his recent book, *The Call of Stories* has recognized that human meaning resides fundamentally in our stories.<sup>48</sup> Narrative meaning resides in the totality of the story and thus contrasts with the meaning as analyzed in logical systems. It is in remembering and sharing them that we cease to be anonymous. It follows that a real human need for therapy is within our stories when they go wrong, get stuck, get lost, or

when we are radically disconnected from them.

#### IV

Finally, the question arises, how does our personal narrative of desire fit into and relate to cosmic time, times before and after our own lifetime. In order to address this interesting question we must move from desire as narrative to the object or world of desire. What then is the object or world of intellectual desire?

A first observation comes from Hawkins *A Brief History of Time* which makes the point that the object or world of intellectual desire stretches right back to the beginning of the universe. The desire of modern physicists is to arrive at as complete an understanding as possible of the history of the universe, right back to its origins. The same holds true for anthropologists in relation to the question of the origin of the human race. Equally philosophical questioning addresses the total historical past of philosophy and ideally desires to understand it as completely as possible.

Questions now arise - how precisely do we now stand in relation to the beginning of the universe when we try now to make sense of the big bang singularity? Equally, when now we try to make sense of Lucy, the Neanderthals and the Cro-magnons. When you or I read and try to understand Plato, are we really *now* related to the life of Plato in the past or is it simply all something in the present? When a physicist such as Guth has an insight into the inflationary origins of the universe is he now understanding something about a time 15 billion years ago? When I understand what Plato meant by justice do I now understand his thought of over 2,000 years ago? Is it the case that intellectual desire, which is never operative except at some point in a human life time, potentially, through its ability to seek an understanding of the past can stand in an immediate relationship with all moments in the past through that understanding?

There is also the question about the relation of our intellectual desire to the present and the future. Intellectual desire is a quest for understanding. But the point about understanding is that it is always future orientated. Following Wittgenstein we know that the understanding enables us now to go on with our future, with our lives. Without the understanding we are blocked and cannot go on with our future except blindly. If an individual makes a major breakthrough in genetics or psychology, for instance, that breakthrough expresses the present realization of an aspiration in the research tradition of the past. But in the achievement, be it in the insights of Freud into the Oedipal complex, or of Crick and Watson into DNA, the future is taking shape in the present. Once the understanding has emerged then the possibilities of new ways of going on with the future have emerged with it. The understanding is a source of new ways of going on with the future. In some mysterious sense elements of all our futures is

present in our understanding and our intellectual desire to which it is a response.

So it will come about that as present generations learn their alphabet and recapitulate the Phoenicians and Greeks, so future generations will learn their DNA and recapitulate the 20th century. As in our present we can be connected potentially with all past achievements of the understanding, so there seems no reason in principle why people at all times in the future cannot be connected with our present achievements. That relation between past, present and future could exist at all points in human history. So it seems that the future is profoundly present in present intellectual desire and its search for new understanding on the basis of which new ways of going on with things in the future will emerge.

There results a much stronger version of the anthropic principle than that enunciated by Barrow and Tipler. The fact that the universe has to be very finely tuned in order for human life as we know it - and they tend to consider it organically - to emerge posed for them the question, is there a deliberate link between the initial conditions and the emergence of human life? The fact that the human mind, human intellectual desire is such that it can measure the universe and relate to it, past, present and future, poses the further question, how do we explain this unusual appropriateness? Is it an accident, or is it a deliberate part of the plot?

To conclude, the focus of the explorations had to do with the manner in which desire might unite different times within our lifetimes, on the one hand, and times before and after our lifetimes on the other. The tone has been speculative. It is not presenting a view that in every respect is critically grounded. Further relevant questions and critical comments are to be welcomed.

#### NOTES

1. The present article is an edited version of a paper read at the Royal Irish Academy Conference on Time on May 2nd, 1991 in Dublin.
2. R. Leaky, *Origins*, (New York: Dutton, 1979) 17.
3. Aveni, *Empires of Time*, (London: Tauris, 1990) 218.
4. S. Hawkins, *A Brief History of Time; From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (London: Bantam Press, 1988).
5. see *National Geographic*, 163.6(1983) 740-741.
6. Hawkins, (n. 4) 141.
7. J.D. Barrow and F.J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 15-22.
8. Aveni, (n.3).
9. P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-88).
10. I. Progoff, *At a Journal Workshop* (New York: Dialogue House, 1975) Chapter 11
11. P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot, Design and Intention in Narrative*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) xi.

12. Paul Ricoeur, (n.9) 1: 3 and 52.
13. S. Crites, 'The Narrative Quality of Experience,' *American Academy of Religion*, 1971, p 297.
14. S. Crites, 'Myth, Story and History,' *Parable, Myth and Language*, a symposium (published by The Church Society for College Works, Cambridge, Mass 1971) 68-9.
15. E.M. De Robertis, O and C Wright, 'Homeobox Genes and the Vertebrate Body Plan,' *The Scientific American* 263(1990) 26-32.
16. V. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, (Glasgow: Fontana, 1978) Chapter X, esp. p. 495.
17. Crites (n.13) 291.
18. See T. Busch, *The Power of Consciousness and the Force of Circumstances in the Philosophy of Sartre*, (Indiana: Bloomington, 1992) for a discussion of fate or destiny on the one hand, and freedom on the other.
19. London: Allegro Films 1989, for Channel Four, London.
20. A. Schopenhauer, 'Transcendent Speculation on the Apparent Deliberatens in the Fate of an Individual,' in *Parega and Parlipomena, Short Philosophical Essays*, trans. E.F. Payne, Volume 1, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) 1: 204.
21. Progoff (n.10) chap.8.
22. See M. Buber's 'Autobiographical Fragments', in P.A. Schilpp, (ed.,) *The Philosophy of Martin Buber* (Illinois: Open Court, 1967).
23. Crites (n.13) 292.
24. H. Liebowitz, *Fabricating Lives, Explorations in American Autobiography*, (New York: Knopf 1989) 4.
25. P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992) 119f., 143f.
26. Peter Brooks, (n.11) xi.
27. *ibid.*
28. The same is true about what I call narrative meaning, a certain type of meaning associated with words such as love, hate, friendship, alienation and so forth. The narrative meaning of those terms is only present in a whole narrative passage.
29. Ricoeur (n.9) 2: chp 1.
30. Brooks, (n.11) chap. 4.
31. Brooks (n.11) 96-97.
32. J.-F. Lyotard, *The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1989).
33. A. Stevans, *On Jung* (London: Routledge, 1990) 46-47.
34. C. Easton, *Jacqueline de Pre, A Biography*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898) 27.
35. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, (Glasgow: Collins, 1978) 12.
36. P. Gay, *Freud, A Life for Our Time*, (London: Dent, 1988) 10-11.
37. A. Einstein, *Autobiographical Notes*, published in P. Schilpp, *Albert Einstein, Philosopher - Scientist*, (Evanston: Illinois 1949) p 9.
38. R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 3-4, and Chapter VIII.
39. Brooks, (n.11)92-93.
40. There are the Chapter headings of J. Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990).
41. Campbell (n.40) xvii.
42. K. J. Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual, Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) 264.
43. B. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein, A Life: Young Ludwig 1889-1921*,

- (London: Duckworth, 1988) 313.
44. P. Trainor, 'Autobiography as Philosophical Argument; Socrates, Descartes and Collingwood,' *Thought*, 63(1988)378-395.
  45. Trainor (n.44) 380-1.
  46. Collingwood (n.38) 4, 77f. The autobiography is also his story of how his intellectual desire matured from an early stage when he knew it was his vocation to think, but not what he was to think about, to a later stage when he knew that the focus of his intellectual desire was the philosophy of history.
  47. Trainor (n.44) 382.
  48. R. Coles, *The Call of Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).