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Deconstructing History

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In the year I began teaching - 22 years ago in 1974 Hayden White published in *Clio* his article "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact." Drawing on much of the material in the Introduction to *Metahistory* published a year earlier, White posed his now famous question, why do historians persist in failing to consider historical narratives

as what they most manifestly are - verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in science. [1]

Thanks to this article in particular, the succeeding 22 years has seen a revivifying of interest in the narrative basis of history as a discipline - the list of philosophers of history who have engaged in this debate as well as the practitioners is too long to note here Gallie, Danto, Mink, Ankersmit, Ricoeur, Polkinghorne, Furet, Dray, Carrard, Joyce, Jenkins, Lemon, Berkhofer, Stone, Stanford, McCullagh - but for most historians the past 22 years' of debate on narrative has been a side show - something a few oddities have engaged in while they get on with the business - a view expressed most forcefully of course by the back to basics school of Marwick, Elton, Himmelfarb, Tosh, Hexter, etc. A few moderates, like Appleby, Hunt and Jacob are willing to engage in the debate.

There is a debate to be found in history today, viz., the extent to which history as a discipline, can accurately recover and represent the content of the past, through the form of the narrative, or literary structure of its written texts - both primary and secondary - this is the debate stimulated by White. Put at its most basic White maintains historical narrative cannot carry the reality of the past because its story form is not discovered, but imposed by the historian. I would like to revisit this issue. In doing this I will argue that the genuine nature of history can only be understood when it is viewed not as an objectivised empiricist enterprise, but rather as a literary project which must self-reflexively take account of the imposition by historians of a particular narrative form on the past. White's challenge to narrative as a distinct form of historical understanding poses the question most recently addressed by Robert Berkhofer, do historians re-tell *the* story of the past, or impose *a* story on it? [2]

This raises several key questions.

Some Basic Questions About the Nature of History

Questions that flow from White's argument that history not as it is lived but as written is as much structured by its form as its content. Although we can distinguish these questions for the purpose of listing, in practice it is very difficult to keep them separate. The four issues inspired by White's narratological model of historical understanding are posed as questions:

- can empiricism legitimately constitute history as a separate epistemology?
- what is the character of historical evidence and what function does it perform?
- what is the role of the historian, social theory, and the construction of explanatory frameworks in historical understanding?
- how significant to historical explanation is its narrative form?

I will speak very briefly to each in turn.

Can empiricism legitimately constitute history as a separate epistemology?

This first question confronts White's basic concern about history as a form of knowledge. The fundamental function of the historian is to understand, and explain, in writing, the connections between events and occurrences in the past - working out a relationship between knowledge and explanation, and as White points out explain that relationship in the form of a narrative.

One way to explain that relationship would be to imitate the natural sciences, and although there has always been a substantial following among historians (especially among those with a positivist or social science training) for this form of flattery, it has never achieved a dominant methodological status. The lapsed Marxist E.H. Carr famously argued over forty years ago history cannot claim to be straightforwardly scientific in the sense we understand the physical sciences to be: it does not share the protocol of hypothesis-testing, does not employ deductive reasoning, nor is it an experimental and objective process producing incontrovertible facts. [3] The historian selects data because of her interest in a unique event or historical agent acting intentionally in response to circumstances. Evidence is chosen for what it can tell us about that unique event or agent, rather than explain any and every event within a general category.

Question. What particular consequences flow from this for history as an epistemology? [4] Can we gain genuine and "truthful" historical descriptions by simply following the historians literary narrative - her or his invented story? This is certainly the opinion of the pronarrative (but anti- deconstructionist) British philosopher-historian M.C. Lemon, who in his recent book on history and narrative *The Discipline of History and the History of Thought* considers that the "...very logic" of history as a discipline revolves "...around the rationale of the narrative structure." [5] The special character of narrative which makes it so useful to historians is, as Lemon points out, its "this happened and *then* that" structure which is the essence of historical change. It is a process that also saturates our lived experience.

What is the epistemological relationship then of history to its closest neighbour, literature? The bottom line seems to be one of referentiality. By this I mean the accuracy and veracity with which the narrative relates what actually happened in the past. While literature is not devoid of referentiality it is not referential in the same way as the history text. It follows that, like literature, "the past and *written history* are not the same thing." Not recognising this permits us to forget the difficulties involved in recreating the past - something after all which does not exist apart from a few traces and the historian's imagination. Because we cannot directly encounter the past, we employ narrative as the medium of exchange in our transactions with it. Indeed, we ought to be open - as White is - to the sublime- the possible meaninglessness of the past. As I have already suggested, given there cannot be any unmediated correspondence between language and the world again we must ask whether history unfolded as a particular kind of narrative the first time around or are we, as White would have it, selecting and imposing an emplotment or story line derived from our own present? Are stories lived or just told? Do we explain our lives to ourselves like the unfolding of

ory?

Just as it is impossible to have a narrative without a narrator we cannot have a history without a historian. What is the role of the historian in recreating the past? Every history contains ideas or theories about the nature of change and continuity held by historians. [6] Epistemologically, for White the discipline of history is best viewed as a literary artifact producing knowledge as much by aesthetic as by any other criteria. While we acknowledge history's literariness and fabricated character, we are not forbidden from addressing the past as *a* narrative as well as our capacity to describe it *in* narrative

What is the character of historical evidence and what function does it perform?

It should be clear by now that I endorse White's view that our understanding of the past is viewed as much the product of *how* as well as *what* the historian writes. Because we cannot escape the formative structures of language when we write history, the so called raw "facts" of history are likewise always processed in a written or literary form. If we as students of history, were asked to give an example of a historical "fact" the normal response is to quote an incontrovertible event or description that every recognised (published?) historian agrees upon. That slavery was the ultimate cause of the American Civil War is clearly not such a "fact" it is a complex interpretation based on the relating of disparate occurrences, events and human intentions translated as actions involving outcomes. But if we say the American President James Madison was short, slight, bald with a squeaky voice, does this incline us toward an interpretation that he was weak, could not therefore hold his cabinet together, and eventually became a dupe of Napoleon? [7] History is about the process of translating evidence into facts. The historian does this. Even when straight from the dusty archive, the evidence always preexists within narrative structures and is freighted with cultural meanings (who put the archive together, why, and what did they include or exclude?), "facts" then are never actually raw or brute without inherent meaning.

The historian invests evidence with meaning by correlating and placing it within a context (sometimes called the process of colligation or as William Dray calls it configuration) which then leads her to generate the "facts." [8] This process of contextualisation is undertaken by the historian as part of her process of interpretation by relating masses of apparently unconnected data with a consequent constitution of meaning. The evidence of the past is processed through the mechanism of inference: historians construe meaning employing categories of analysis determined by the nature of the evidence. The traces of the past are still generally viewed as providing objects from which to mine *the* meaning, or as sources from which social theories of explanation can be constructed - or *the* story. We could, of course, always regard evidence as the signifier of something else. This positioning of the evidence is where the historian's own views, cultural situation, and intellectual preferences may emerge through the social theories selected for deployment, but most importantly because of the narrative structure assembled to facilitate explanation. This is not, then, merely a matter of subjectivity - it is rather the need to understand the role of traces and their representation or construal by the historian in the creation of historical knowledge via their organisation in the narrative form.

What is the role of the historian, social theory, and the construction of explanatory frameworks in historical understanding?

In order to escape impositionism hard core empiricists usually deny its legitimacy as a practice by suggesting the historian must be not only impartial and objective in her treatment of the evidence, but withal also reject the overt use of social theory or narrative models in interpreting the past [9] - notably White's fictive invention of the past.

In spite of the doubts of Marwick and Elton, since the 1920's social and cultural history has been popular precisely because it has demanded the construction of explanations of how post-industrial society has been able/unable to cope with the massive social changes which have occurred in the train of capitalist industrialisation. The modernisation process is inexplicable without recourse to a utilitarian kind of history in which historians do actually play quite an active role in its construction. They play this role either by empathically re-thinking the thoughts of past historical actors, or by constructing explanations (hypotheses?) based on the facts rather than just waiting for them to suggest themselves. It is difficult for such empiricists to accept what has now become a commonplace, that historical knowledge is not objective but is grounded either in a whole series of originating subjects or, from a postmodern perspective, has no author at all!

Questioning the past by sociological and anthropological constructionism in the second half of the twentieth century has become transmuted into what has become known since the late 1980's as the New Cultural History. As a variant of constructionism New Cultural History works on principles derived not only from anthropology but also the broader intellectual movement of post-structuralism which as we know itself emerged from literary critical theory in the 1970's. The modernist notion that understanding emanates from a centre - the independent knowledge-centred individual subject which we designate variously as Man, the author, or the evidence - is in crisis because of the objection that meaning may be generated by socially encoded and constructed discursive practices. This situation is compounded when language is considered as recalcitrant and a subversion of meaning rather than a pure medium of representation. Is it any longer possible to write history when not only are we looking at it through our constructed categories of analysis, but the narrative medium of exchange itself confounds the realist and empiricist dependence upon the correspondence between history as narrative and "the past" as it once existed?

White's formalistic construction of history with its emphasis on the literary artifice of interpretative narrative rather than either objective empiricism or social theorising means writing history requires the employment of the past not just according to the evidence, but taking into account the rhetorical, metaphorical and ideological strategies of explanation also employed by historians. [10] It is to this I now turn.

How significant to historical explanation is its narrative form?

Given the central role played in writing the past by historians, history, to be viewed accurately, must be understood to be a cultural product existing *within* history, rather than an objective methodology *outside* history. This places the truth claims of historical knowledge under the most searching inquiry and brings us to the fourth key question - posed by White along with Collingwood, and more recently Louis Mink, Arthur Danto, and William Dray - what is the peculiar significance of narrative in generating historical knowledge, and what is its relationship to the previous three questions posed? The modernist empiricist historical method insists the explanation of what actually happened in the past emerges in a naturalistic fashion from the archival raw data, its meaning *discovered* and offered as interpretation in the form of *the* story related explicitly, impersonally, transparently, and without resort to any of the tricks and bookish devices used by writers of literary narratives. Style is thus deliberately expunged as an issue, or relegated to the level of a minor problem of presentation.

For most analytical philosophers of history the essence of historical understanding is the ability to recognise, construct and follow a narrative-story based upon the available evidence. A historical narrative is a factual version of "this happened *then* that" i.e., an intelligible sequence of individual statements about past events and/or the experiences of people or their actions, capable of being followed by a reader while he or she is pulled along by the author toward the known conclusion. All narratives possess the basic power to make over events and explain why they happened, but historical narratives are overlaid by the assumptions held the historian about the forces influencing the nature of causality.

The common-sense version of the general empiricist and reconstructionist position on the utility of narrative is well described by pro-narrative philosopher W.B. Gallie

orical understanding is the exercise of the capacity to follow a story, where the story is known to be based on evidence and it put forward as a sincere effort
at *the* story... [11]

Gallie is suggesting here that the *actual* events as they *really* occurred in *the* story of the past have a striking resemblance to the shape of *the* narrative eventually produced by the so called narrative historian - the narrative is found (discovered?) by the historian in the events themselves. That narrative is reproduced through the process of referentiality. In a view rejected by Hayden White (and Keith Jenkins, Louis Mink, and Paul Ricoeur) that we do not live stories, but only recount our lived experience in the story form, the American philosopher of history David Carr holds there is a basic continuity or correspondence between history as it is lived (the past) and history as it is written (narrated). Narrative and history are homologous to each other. [12] Are we justified in claiming, like David Carr and in distinction to White, that because our lives are narrativised and written history is a text, then surely the past itself conforms to the structure of narrative? White's alternative to this view, while still emphasising the importance of narrative in historical understanding, reverses the argument - *the* narrative does not preexist but a narrative is invented and provided by the historian. Consequently, there are many different stories to be told about the same events, the same past. While still constrained by what actually happened (historians do not invent events, people or processes) as the French historian Paul Veyne suggests, the meaning of history as a story comes from a plot, which is imposed, or as Hayden White insists invented, as much as found by the historian. [13]

The argument runs therefore just as there are no grounds for believing that an empiricist methodology can guarantee an understanding of the past as it actually was, neither is there a discoverable *original* narrative emplotment. Put plainly, White holds that we cannot replace the foundationalism of empiricism with a narrative equivalent. However, the deconstructively selfreflexive and self-conscious historian may, while accepting it is she who authors the past, may feel it is possible to legitimately offer an interpretation that although it does not claim to *the* true narrative is nevertheless a plausible rendering of it. As White himself points out, the range of emplotments upon which the historian draws though wide, because of the combinations possible, is formally limited to the four main kinds - romance, tragedy, satire and comedy - and is in this respect no different to that of other narrators who operate in the realm of fiction. Of course of equal significance to the narrative emplotment is the dimension of figurative description - the role of metaphor, trope, style, etc. [14] All this suggests something of a return to Aristotle's view of a continuity between observer and observed, mind and knowledge, rather than accepting the modernist Kantian notion of a gap between them and the real possibility of truthful knowledge. [15] Narrative may be regarded as explanatory only to the degree one sees its function as fixing the past *as it actually happened* or what is *tellable* about it?

Conclusion

White has spent 22 years labouring to persuade us that our access to the past is always constituted textually as when, for example, historians create a context within their text in order to develop an interpretation. Our sources are not the same as *the* past. The sources' meaning is arbitrary because of the lack of absolute meanings and the opaque character of language, and the arbitrary and socially provided relationship between the signifying word and the concept it signifies. Language cannot generate absolute correspondences between things and their description.

Hayden White follows other historians interested in the cognitive role of narrative, like Louis Mink, D.G. Polkinghorne, W.B. Gallie and Paul Ricoeur among many others, and like them he questions the cognitive function of narrative. [16] Written history is more than merely innocent storytelling. He claims the act of organising historical data into a narrative constitutes the illusion of reality and coherence, and in lending a spurious tidiness to the process ultimately may serve as a mechanism for the exercise of power within contemporary society. As White suggests, even when acknowledging and describing the messiness of the past, the very act of narration imposes an unavoidable "...continuity, wholeness, closure and individuality that every 'civilised' society wishes to see itself as incarnating..." [17] All historical narrative for White is thus subject to the demands of ideology, and in its turn gives effect to it.

Viewing history as literary artifact is not a debilitating nor less a terminal complaint. Rather, recognising the importance of narrative explanation in our lives as well as in the study of the past could liberate historians as we acknowledge and try to narrate the disruptive discontinuity and chaos of the past for and in the present. This desire is, in itself, a product of our own age's pre-occupation with understanding the nature of our seemingly chaotic lives. History is itself historical - its methods and concepts as well as the debates about its nature are the products of historical time periods. The rediscovery in the past 22 years of the importance of narrative as an access to the tellable worlds of the past is very much, I would suggest, the result of White's purposeful and formalistic rhetorical constructionism.

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Notes

- Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978), pp. 81-100.
- Robert F. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (1995)
- E.H. Carr, *What Is History?* (1980 Edn. First published 1961) *passim*//; Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (1970), p. 21.
- A lucid though unsympathetic introduction to this issue is to be found in Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (1995), Introduction, pp. 2-4. See also Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (1991), pp. 1013.
- M.C. Lemon, *The Discipline of History and the History of Thought* (1995), p. 131.
- Lemon, *Ibid.* p. 133. See also Philip Stewart, "This is Not a Book Review: On Historical Uses of Literature," *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 66, No. 3, September 1994, pp. 521-538.
- This description is to be found in Thomas A. Bailey and David M. Kennedy, *The American Pageant* (Tenth Edition, 1994), p 225.
- William H. Walsh, "Colligatory Concepts in History," in Patrick Gardiner (Ed.) *The Philosophy of History* (1974), p. 136. William Dray, *Philosophy of History* (1993 Second Edn.), pp. 89-113.
- R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946, Revised Edition 1994), pp. 302, 395-395.
- The term used by the philosopher of history Michael E. Hobart to describe this attention to the role of narrative in writing history is rhetorical constructionism, while White describes it variously as the "metahistorical" or "...essentially poetic act" in which the historian "...prefigures the historical field." See Hobart, "The Paradox of Historical Constructionism," *History and Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1989, pp. 43-58 and Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (1973), pp. ix. The main engagements with White in Europe have been Gregor McLennan, "History and Theory: Contemporary Debates and Directions," *Literature and History* Vol. 10, No. 2, Autumn 1984, pp. 139-164; Jenkins, *ReThinking History*, op. it. and *On "What is History?"* (1995); Wulf Kansteiner, "Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History," *History and Theory*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 1993, pp. 273-295; Paul A. Roth, "Hayden White and the Aesthetics of Historiography," *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 5, 1992, pp. 17-35; A. Marwick, "Two Approaches to Historical Study: The Metaphysical (Including Postmodernism) and the Historical," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 30, No. 1, January 1995, pp. 5-36. The only full application

critique of White's methodology of history is to be found in Alun Munslow, *Discourse and Culture: The Creation of America, 1870-1920* (1992). The most recent assessment of the role of narrative in writing the past and other issues concerning the postmodern condition of history is to be found in Robert F. Berkhofer, op cit.

11. W.B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (1964), p. 105, author's italics. See also Louis Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in R. Canary and H. Kozicki (Eds.), *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (1978), pp. 129-149.
12. David Carr, "Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity," *History and Theory*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1986, pp. 117-131.
13. Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essays on Epistemology* (1984); Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978), p. 82.
14. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), p. 81. F.R. Ankersmit, "The Dilemma of Contemporary AngloSaxon Philosophy of History," *History and Theory, Beiheft*, 25 (1986).
15. F.R. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and fall of Metaphor* (1994), pp. 25-28.
16. Louis Mink, "Narrative Form", op cit.; Gallie, op cit.; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (3 Vols., 1984, 1985, 1988); D.G. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (1988).
17. White, *Content of the Form*, op cit., p. 87. History, op it. and *On "What is History?"* op cit.; Wulf Kansteiner, "Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History," *History and Theory*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 1993, pp. 273-295; Paul A. Roth, "Hayden White and the Aesthetics of Historiography," *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 5, 1992, pp. 17-35; A. Marwick, "Two Approaches to Historical Study: The Metaphysical (Including Postmodernism) and the Historical," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 30, No. 1, January 1995, pp. 5-36. The only full application and critique of White's methodology of history is to be found in Alun Munslow, *Discourse and Culture: The Creation of America, 1870-1920* (1992). The most recent assessment of the role of narrative in writing the past and other issues concerning the postmodern condition of history is to be found in Robert F. Berkhofer, op cit. 13 W.B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (1964), p. 105, author's italics. See also Louis Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in R. Canary and H. Kozicki (Eds.), *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (1978), pp. 129-149. 14 David Carr, "Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity," *History and Theory*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1986, pp. 117-131. 15 Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essays on Epistemology* (1984); Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978), p. 82. 16 Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), p. 81. F.R. Ankersmit, "The Dilemma of Contemporary AngloSaxon Philosophy of History," *History and Theory, Beiheft*, 25 (1986). 17 F.R. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and fall of Metaphor* (1994), pp. 25-28. 18 Louis Mink, "Narrative Form", op cit.; Gallie, op cit.; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (3 Vols., 1984, 1985, 1988); D.G. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (1988). 19 White, *Content of the Form*, op cit., p. 87.

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