

An Old Question Raised Again: Is Historiography Art or Science? (Response to Iggers)

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I thank Georg Iggers for his thoughtful and courteous critique of *Metahistory* and my work in historiographical theory since its appearance in 1973. That was a book of a certain, 'structuralist' moment, and if I were writing it today, I would do it differently. Nonetheless, I think that it still offers a contribution to a comprehensive theory of historical writing, because it takes seriously historiography's status as a *written* discourse as well as its status as a scholarly discipline among the human sciences. Most historical treatments of historiography presume that with history's scientization in the Nineteenth century, historical studies purged themselves of their millennial connections with rhetoric and literary writing. But historical studies remain both rhetorical and literary insofar as they continue to use ordinary educated speech and writing as the preferred media for conveying their findings about the past. As long as historians continue to use ordinary educated speech and writing, both their representations of the phenomena of the past and their thought about these will remain 'literary' – 'poetic' and 'rhetorical' – in a manner different from anything recognizable as a distinctly 'scientific' discourse.

I believe that the most profitable approach to the study of historical writing must take its literary aspect more seriously than the vague and undertheorized notion of 'style' permits. In that branch of linguistic, literary, and semiotic theory named tropology, understood as a theory of figuration and discursive emplotment, we have an instrument for relating the two dimensions of denotative and connotative signification by which historians endow past events, not only with factuality but with meaning as well. So Iggers is right in his assertion that the topological theory of discourse – derived from Vico and modern discourse analysts such as Kenneth Burke, Northrop Frye, Barthes, Perelman, Foucault, Greimas, and many others – remains central to my thought about historiography and its relation to literary and scientific discourse, on the one side, and to myth, ideology, and science, on the other. It is my commitment to tropology as an instrument for analysing the various dimensions of historical discourse – ontological and epistemological, ethical and ideological, aesthetic and formal – that causes our differences over such distinctions as those between fact and fiction, description and narrativization, text and context, ideology and science, and so on.

I surmise from his critique of my work that Iggers continues to honour what are merely conventional and for the most part antiquated conceptions

of the nature of discourse and the kind of knowledge that historical thinking is capable of producing. In a word, he continues to use the very categories that underwrote history's establishment as an ideology passing for a science in the Nineteenth century. A theory of historiography capable of identifying the ideological elements in traditional historical writing must problematize, rather than simply reassert the timeless utility of traditional historiography's claims to realism in representation and scientificity in its thought about history in general.

Written history – ancient, medieval, modern, and postmodern – utilizes different idioms, methods, protocols, and kinds of discourses for the constitution of its objects of study and the endowment of them with meaning. He speaks of modern historiography as having attained to a higher kind of critical self-consciousness than its predecessors. Does he really think that Ranke was more self-critical than Livy, or were they equally self-critical though in different ways? Modern – what Iggers calls 'critical' – historiography wishes to be strictly referential: to tell the truth and nothing but the truth about real persons, things and events which are past and no longer subject to direct perception. Or at least – as Roger Chartier says – expose lies and dispell myths about the past. But as a discourse about things no longer perceptible, historiography must *construct*, by which I mean imagine and conceptualize, its objects of interest before it can proceed to bring to bear upon them the kinds of procedures it wishes to use to 'explain' or 'understand' them. Historical discourse thus features a *double representation*: of the object of its interest and of the historian's thought about this object. Consequently, it cannot *not* operate the other functions which modern linguistics identifies as the different functions of the speech event: expressive (of author's values and interests), conative (of audiences' emotions, interests, prejudices), metalinguistic (seeking to clarify and justify its own terminology and explanatory procedures), phatic (establishing communication channels with specific and possible audiences), and poetic (by which structure is transformed into sequence).

The relationships among these functions in a given historiographical performance I take to be tropological, by which I mean characterized by the kinds of techniques of 'figuration' and patterns of association more like those found in poetical-rhetorical than in scientific-logical discourse. There are very good reasons why history has never been turned into a science – without losing its identity as history. It is because figures and discursive turns (tropes), more imaginal than conceptual, are necessary to the constitution of history's objects of interest as possible subjects of a specifically historiographical representation. This imaginative element cannot be excised from historical writing without depriving the past of its charm and pathos, which is to say, its 'pastness'.

Tropology is the theoretical understanding of imaginative discourse, of all

the ways by which various kinds of figurations (such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) produce the kinds of images and connections among images capable of serving as tokens of a reality that can only be imagined rather than directly perceived. The discursive connections among figurations (of persons, events, processes) in a discourse are not logical connections or deductively entailed one with the others, but metaphorical in a general sense, i.e., based on the poetic techniques of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and revision. Which is why any assessment of a specific historical discourse which ignores the tropological dimension will inevitably fail to apprehend how it can possibly ‘make sense’ of the past in spite of the misinformation it may contain and the logical contradictions that may mar its arguments.

Iggers says that my tropological method imposed a ‘false consistency’ on the thought of the historical thinkers I analysed in *Metahistory*. His approach would have been to try to identify logical contradictions in their work so as to assess the extent to which they had succumbed to ‘ideology’. My response to this charge is that, first, I do not think that my notion of discourse as featuring a dominant trope for its mode of grasping reality in language – of which mode of emplotment, of argument, and of ideological implication are possible extensions – leads to the imposition of a ‘false’ consistency on the thought contained in the discourse. There are different kinds of discursive consistency, for which a logic of identity and non-contradiction provides only one criterion of assessment. Not only are there different ‘logics’ that one can apply to the argument of a discourse, e.g., the adjunctive logic of the Stoics’ *sorites*, which might be more applicable to the analysis of narrative discourse than a logic of identity; but there are other kinds of ‘consistency’ than those posited by Aristotelian logic and the figures of the syllogism, e.g., figurative, poetic, and stylistic consistency, of the kind met with in ‘literature’, whether fictional or non-fictional.

That historiography contains an ineluctable poetic-rhetorical component is indicated by the traditional idea that a specifically historical representation of specifically historical processes must take the form of a narrativization. Since no field of happening apprehended as a set or series of discrete events can be realistically described as possessing the structure of a story, I take the process by which a set of events is narrativized to be more tropological than logical in kind. The operations by which a set of events is transformed into a series, this series into a sequence, this sequence into a chronicle, and the chronicle into a narrativization, these operations, I maintain, are more profitably understood as of a tropological rather than of a logico-deductive in kind. Moreover, I take the relationship between the story fashioned out of events and whatever formal arguments may be advanced to explain those events, to be made of a combination of logico-deductive and tropologico-figurative

elements. Thus, a topological approach to the study of historical discourses seems eminently justified if not required by the differences between historical and scientific discourses, on the one side, and the similarities between historical and literary writing, on the other.

Iggers appears to think that this topological notion of historical discourse leads to 'linguistic determinism'. I do not think that I am a linguistic determinist, but I do hold that any analysis of any kind of *writing* must take account of the ways in which the use of various codes, of which language itself is a paradigm, both enable and set limits on what can be said about the world. If this puts me in the camp of Barthes, Greimas, Foucault, and Derrida, it's alright with me; but none of these is a 'linguistic determinist' and neither am I.

I have always been interested in how figurative language can be used to create images of objects no longer perceptible and endow them with the aura of a kind of 'reality' and in such a way as to render them susceptible to the techniques of explanation and interpretation *chosen* by a given historian for their explication. Thus, Marx's characterizations of the French bourgeoisie and the working classes during the 1848 uprisings in Paris prepares them for the application of the dialectical-materialist analysis he used to explain their behaviour during the events that followed. The consistency obtaining between the original characterizations and the explanations which follow in Marx's discourse is a modal consistency, not a logical one. It is not a matter of a 'false consistency' masking a 'real inconsistency' but of a narrativization of the events that displays changes in groups and transformations of relationships among them over the course of time. One cannot depict a real sequence of events as displaying the meaning of 'comic' without figuring the agents and processes involved therein as the kinds of phenomena one might recognize as 'comic' types. Discursive consistency, in which different levels of representation are related analogically one to the others, is quite different from logical consistency, in which one level is treated as being deducible from another. The failure of recent efforts to elaborate a coherent doctrine of historical causation indicates the inadequacy of the scientific 'nomological-deductive' paradigm as an organon of historical explanation.

Historians typically, I would argue, seek to explain historical events by representing them as having the form and substance of a narrative process. They may supplement this representation with a formal argument laying claim to logical consistency as token and indicator of its rationality. But just as there are many different modes of representation, so too there are many different kinds of rationality. There is very little that is 'irrational' in Flaubert's depiction of the events of 1848 in *L'Education sentimentale*, even though there is much that is 'imaginary' and a great deal that is 'fictional'. Flaubert is famous for having tried to fashion a kind of style of representation in which the

'interpretation' of (real or imaginary) events would be indistinguishable from their 'description'. I think this has always been true of the great narrative historians – from Herodotus and Thucydides through Livy and Tacitus down to Ranke, Michelet, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt. Here 'style' must be understood, in the way Michel Foucault spoke of it: as a certain constant manner of language use by which both to represent the world and endow it with meaning.

The truth of meaning is not the same thing as the meaning of truth. One can imagine, as Nietzsche put it, a perfectly truthful account of a series of past events that still contained not one iota of a specifically historical understanding of them. Historiography adds something to a merely factual account of the past. This something added may be a pseudo-scientific explanation of why events happened as they did, but the recognized classics of Western historiography – which is what we are discussing – always add something else. And I think that it is 'literarity' which they add, for which the great modern novelists provide better models than the pseudo-scientists of society.

One point I tried to make in *Metahistory* was that, because language offers a variety of ways of construing an object and fixing it in an image or concept, historians have a choice in the modalities of figuration they can use to emplot series of events as manifesting different meanings. There is nothing deterministic about this. The modes of figuration and of explanation may be limited, but their combinations in a given discourse are virtually unlimited. This is because there are no criteria provided by language itself by which to distinguish between 'proper' (or literal) and 'improper' (or figurative) language use. The words, grammar, and syntax of any language obey no clear rule for distinguishing between the denotative and connotative dimensions of a given utterance. Poets know this and gain the peculiarly illuminating effect of their work by playing upon this ambiguity. This is true of the great narrativizers of historical reality as well. And the great historians of our tradition knew it too, until historiography became indentured to an impossible ideal of clarity, literalness, and a consistency only logical in kind during the Nineteenth century. The impossibility of this ideal was manifested in the failure of professional historians in our own time to make of historical studies a science. The recent 'return to narrative' manifests the recognition among historians that a writing more 'literary' than 'scientific' is required for a specifically historiographical treatment of historical phenomena. This means a return to metaphor, figuration, and emplotment, in place of the rule of literalness, conceptualization, and argument, as components of a properly historiographical discourse.

Most histories of historiography feature summaries of different historians' ideas about history, historical thought, historical research, and the relation of historical thinking to other disciplines of the human and social sciences. But

as Iggers points out, few of these histories seek to determine what I have called ‘the deep structural content’ shared by different ‘historical’ ways of studying the past. In part this has been because mainstream professional historians tend to be chary of both theory and philosophy of history as sources of ‘ideological’ distortion in the reconstruction of the past, so that a history of historical writing that does not take the current doxa of the historical profession as the standard for determining what proper historical writing ought to be, is regarded as ‘unhistorical’. The only ‘theory of historiography’ admitted by professional historians are the rules for writing history in general honoured by the historiographical establishment at a given time and place. Anyone trying to conceptualize a history of these rules, their varieties, and the changes they have undergone in time in a language other than that sanctioned by these rules themselves is immediately characterized as doing theory or practicing the despised ‘philosophy of history’. In other words, professional historiography purports to use an object-language (for representation of its objects of study) that is its own meta-language (for characterizing its representations of its objects of study *as* a particular kind of representation). Accordingly, a proper history of historical writing can only be conceptualized using the very terms that have to be problematized if one is going to constitute history-writing as a possible object of historical interest.

Iggers objects to *Metahistory* because, among other things, I use a particular kind of meta-language to characterize what historians do when they represent (identify, describe, and classify) their objects of study (the French Revolution, the Revolution of 1848, the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, the Renaissance, etc., etc.). I do not argue that certain kinds of events, persons, processes, groups, institutions, and so on, roughly corresponding to the terms used by historians to refer to and describe them, did not exist in the past. I argued, instead, that historiographical debate often revolves around the questions of what we are to call these phenomena, how we are to classify them, and what kinds of explanation we are to offer of them. And I argued that historiographical debates are often resolved by the elimination or revision of a certain way of naming historical phenomena and the substitution of a new way. But I also argued that a critical approach to the history of historical writing should distinguish between the phenomena of the past, on the one hand, and representations of those phenomena in a historical narrative (or for that matter, a document or oral testimony), on the other.

The representation of a thing is not the thing itself. Much happens between the historian’s apprehension that ‘something happened’ in some region of the past and her depiction of ‘what happened’ in her narrativized account of it. And among other things that happen in this process are not only perception, conceptualization, and thought but also language, figuration, and discourse. In their research, historians typically try to determine

not only ‘what happened’, but the ‘meaning’ of this happening, not only for past agents of historical events but also for subsequent ones. And the principal way meaning is imposed on historical events is by narrativization. Historical writing is a process of meaning-production. It is a delusion to think that historians wish only to tell the truth about the past. They also want, whether they know it or not, but in any case should want, I would insist, to endow the past with meaning.

It was this process of meaning-production that I sought to analyse in *Metahistory*. To be sure, I recognized – as everyone does – that historians can endow the past with meaning by advancing arguments purporting to explain this past ‘scientifically’ or to interpret it ‘hermeneutically’. But I was more interested in the ways by which historians *constituted* a past as a subject that could serve as a possible object of scientific investigation or hermeneutical investment and, more importantly, as a subject of a narrativization. I knew that ‘the Roman Empire’, ‘the Papacy’, ‘the Renaissance’, ‘feudalism’, ‘the Third Estate’, ‘the Puritans’, ‘Oliver Cromwell’, ‘Napoleon’, ‘Ben Franklin’, ‘the French Revolution’, and so on – or at least entities to which these terms referred – pre-existed any given historian’s interest in them. But to believe that an entity once existed is one thing, to constitute it as a possible object of a specific kind of knowledge is something else altogether. This constitutive activity is, I believe, a matter as much of imagination as it is of cognition, which is why I characterized my project as an effort to conceptualize a ‘poetics’ of historical writing rather than a ‘philosophy’ of history.

Poetics points to the artistic aspect of historical writing conceived not as ‘style’ in the sense of decoration, adornment, or aesthetic supplement, but rather as a certain constant mode of language-use by which to transform an object of study into a subject of a discourse. During the research phase of a historian’s inquiry into the past, she is interested in constructing an accurate description of her object of interest and of the changes it undergoes in time, based on the documentary record, out of the contents of which she produces a set of facts. I say ‘produces’ a set of facts because I distinguish between an event (as an *occurrence* happening in worldly time and space) and a *fact* (a statement about an event in the form of a predication). Events happen and are attested more or less adequately by the documentary records and monumetary traces; facts are constructed conceptually in thought and/or figuratively in imagination and have an existence only in thought, language, or discourse.

To say that one ‘discovers’ facts makes no sense unless by this assertion we refer to statements found in the documentary record attesting to the occurrence of a specific kind of event at a particular time and place. But in this case we are also speaking about a linguistic event, i.e., the *statement* that event x of type 2 occurred at time A and in space III. This is what I intended to suggest

by choosing Barthes' statement about 'a fact having only a linguistic existence' as the epigraph of *Tropics of Discourse*. I did not mean that 'events' have only a linguistic existence. I wanted to stress that, in my view, historical facts are invented – on the basis of the study of documents, to be sure – but invented nonetheless: they do not come 'given' or as 'data' already packaged as 'facts' in the documentary record (cf. Collingwood).

So, facts must be constituted as such on the basis of the record of past events in order to serve as the basis of the description of a complex historical phenomenon ('the French Revolution', 'feudalism', 'Innocent III', etc.) that may in turn serve as an object of explanation and interpretation. In other words, if a historical explanation or interpretation is a construction, conceptual and/or imaginative as the case may be, so too is the object on which these explicatory techniques are brought to bear. When it comes to historical phenomena, it is construction all the way down.

How could it be otherwise? Insofar as historical entities by definition belong to the past, descriptions of them are not subject to verification or falsification by direct (controlled) observation. What can be studied by direct observation, of course, are the documents that attest to the nature of the past object of the historian's interest. But this record requires interpretation if it is to yield up the facts on the basis of which a plausible initial description of the object as a possible subject of investigation is to be posited. This leads me to conclude that historical knowledge is always second-order knowledge, which is to say, it is based on hypothetical constructions of possible objects of investigation which require a treatment by imaginative processes that have more in common with 'literature' than they have with any science.

By imaginative processes I mean those that feature the kind of thinking in images and figurative modes of association characteristic of poetic speech, literary writing, and, yes, mythical thought. Does the presence in a historical discourse of 'literary' elements vitiate its claim to truth-telling and procedures of verification and falsification? Only if one equates literary writing with lying or falsification and denies to literature any interest in representing reality realistically. This permits us to line up history with modern science insofar as the latter has been said to be less interested in determining the truth about the world than, rather, determining its 'reality'.

It is true that I have spoken of histories as products of a process of invention more literary or poetic than scientific and conceptual; and I have spoken of histories as fictionalizations of fact and of past reality. But, to be quite frank, I intended the notion of fiction to be understood in its modern Benthamite and Vaihingerian sense, i.e., as a hypothetical construct and an 'as if' consideration of a reality which, because it was no longer present to perception, could only be imagined rather than simply referred to or posited. I was also inspired by Owen Barfield's famous essay, 'Poetic Diction and Legal

Fiction', which pointed out that the 'personhood' ascribed in law to corporations is nonetheless 'real' for being a 'fiction'. As indicated above, I have always regarded 'fact' as construction, what Danto called 'an event under a description', hence a linguistic or discursive fiction – in the etymological sense of 'fictio', i.e. as something made or crafted. Certainly, this is the way I would view the representation of reality in the modern novel, which manifestly advances truth-claims for its depictions of social reality every bit as strong as those made by any narrativizing historian. The point is that the narrativization of reality is a fictionalization insofar as narrativization imposes upon reality the form and substance of the kind of meaning met with only in stories. And as long as history involves story-telling, it involves fictionalization of the facts that it has turned up in the research phase of its operations.

Iggers does not distinguish between *narration*, a mode of speaking about the world that is different from the mode characterized as description, and *narrativization*, a way of representing the world and its processes as if they possessed the structure and meaning of a story. Thus, when he criticizes me for failing to analyse Burckhardt's 'narrative' of European history, he misses what I had intended to suggest: namely, that while Burckhardt may very well have *narrated* the 'culture of the Italian Renaissance' or the 'Age of Constantine', he did not *narrativize* them. Which is to say, he resisted emplotting them as stories and giving them the kind of coherence with which a well-made story, with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end, endows the events that comprise its manifest content. When I said that I would try to deal with historical texts as what they most manifestly are, namely, verbal artifacts cast in the mode of a narrative, it was their aspects as 'verbal artifacts' that interested me, not their status as 'narratives'. I wanted to show how, by narrativizing a given portion of the past, the great Nineteenth century historians endowed it with a value and a meaning of the kind found in story and myth. It was this value and meaning which, I contended, could not be dispelled by any appeal to simple or plain fact.

Iggers finds untenable my view 'that every historical account, provided it does not violate fidelity to the facts, possesses equal truth value'. Did I say that? Maybe. Actually, I wanted to say something like this: that when it is a matter of trying to assess contending representations and interpretations of the *meaning* of the same event proffered by historians of roughly equal erudition and wisdom, the facts cannot be invoked to decide the matter. First, because what is at issue in contending interpretations is not only, what are the facts?, but also, what is to count as a fact and what is not. And secondly, because, when it is a matter of contending interpretations, what counts is not the truth of fact so much as the meaning that is to be ascribed to the events under discussion.

I find this to be the issue in Iggers' discussion of conflicting interpretations

of the French Revolution. He says, against my contention, that there are ‘extra-ideological’ grounds for arbitrating ‘among conflicting conceptions of the historical process and of historical ideology appealed to by different ideologies’. He cites the appeal to ‘the documents’ by Lefebvre to invalidate the Marxist interpretation of the Revolution as a ‘class conflict’ in which ‘the bourgeoisie’ played a key role. And Iggers then makes the astounding statement that the documents can be invoked to show that ‘the concept of class’ was itself ‘hardly applicable’. With all of the respect I have always had for George Iggers’ thought on such matters, I cannot forbear saying that I find this statement absurd. Maybe he did not mean what he said; perhaps he was speaking metaphorically or figuratively. For in my view, ‘the concept of class’ has proven eminently ‘applicable’ to those who were interested in interpreting the Revolution as a class conflict. Lefebvre may have questioned the ‘key role’ that the bourgeoisie was supposed to have played, but the reality of the role of the middle class in revolutionary events beginning and following upon that of 1789 is hardly questionable. If this is an example of how ‘rational standards’ can be applied and communication is made possible because ‘continuous dialogue’ can go on, as Iggers maintains, then I confess that I despair that historical scholarship can ever, as he puts, help to ‘achieve consensus on substantial issues’ and ‘can contribute to the dismantling of historical myths’. If the European bourgeoisie is a myth invented by Marxists, then everything else in the historian’s armoury of categories is similarly so.

Iggers says that, ‘notwithstanding the role of the imagination in the construction of scholarly accounts’, such accounts are not purely or primarily ‘imaginative’, but ‘presuppose hard research, the methods and conclusions of which are subject to scrutiny among a community of scholars’. I do not deny that scholarly accounts presuppose ‘hard research’ or that methods and conclusions of such research are subject to scrutiny among a community of scholars. But this says nothing about the ‘the role of the imagination in the construction of scholarly accounts’. In my view (and here I would cite Collingwood again), the role of the imagination is primary in the construction of a historical account of anything whatsoever and no matter how ‘hard’ the research involved. For the facts are, as it were, the raw materials out of which a properly historical account has to be fashioned. And this is the case whether the account is conceived in the mode of a description of a relatively stable state of affairs or in the mode of a narrativized account of changes occurring over the course of a life cycle.

Iggers admits that historical studies, even in their most ‘scientific’ incarnations, have had difficulty purging themselves of ideological elements and escaping subordination to specific kinds of interests, statist, national, class, ethnic, gender, and so on. He thinks that Habermas’ theory of communication between ‘mature individuals’ who honour ‘standards of rational discourse’

can serve as a basis for a kind of historiographical ‘dialogue’ promoting ‘limited . . . consensus on substantive issues’ but sufficiently to help overcome many ‘ideological distortions’ and ‘dismantle . . . historical myths’.

I certainly do not advocate ‘irrational’, ‘standardless’, ‘immature’, and ‘monological’ notions of scholarship, science, or literature. But I would ask Iggers to be wary of the ideological nature of such notions as ‘the mature individual’, who is supposed to honour ‘standards’ of ‘rational discourse’, and ‘dialogue’ in the interest of achieving ‘consensus on substantive issues’ of historical truth and meaning. Maturity is differently figured in different cultures, as are such notions as ‘rationality’ and ‘consensus’, not to mention the notion of ‘substance’.

I do not mean to play the role of the village atheist who shows his sophistification by answering every assertion with a dumb scepticism. The point is that the whole force of the contemporary debate over modernism and the Enlightenment project of rationalizing the world turns upon the recognition that this project was and remains profoundly ‘ideological’, that it takes a certain Western idea of maturity, rationality, and knowledge as a universal standard before which every other culture must bow down and accept them as universal values and goals of human aspiration. Western historiography in its main line of development since the late Eighteenth century has served this ideology – as it has served the imperialism, racism, and statism justified by this ideology. I believe that other cultures, such as Japanese and Chinese, African and Middle Eastern, and so on, will not be well-served by the adoption of Western historiographical practices as if they were value-neutral techniques for finally discovering ‘the real truth’ about their respective pasts.

It is not a matter of the relative maturity, rationality, dialogue, and consensus on substantive issues of different cultures and social groups; it is a matter of recognizing that different cultures and different groups within the same culture not only have different pasts but different kinds of pasts and different ways of ‘using’ knowledge about these pasts for ‘public’ purposes. Surely Iggers would not wish to suggest that a Chinese historian who has notions of what constitutes maturity, rationality, dialogue, etc. different from his Western counterparts must be immature, irrational, monological, etc. Of course he would not. But if that is the case, then he might wish to considerate (sic) his projected history of historical writing less as the story of how certain Western notions of maturity, rationality, dialogue, and consensus evolved and progressed in Western historical thought from the Eighteenth century to the present and, rather, conceive it as a complex of discourses in which it was precisely these notions that were being contested by historians of different ideological stripe over the period marked by the rise and fall of the nation-state.

I myself follow Frank Ankersmit in his contention that a desirable aim of

historical representation might be the proliferation of interpretations of significant historical events rather than the construction of a monolithic interpretative ‘consensus’ which in its claims to ‘disinterestedness’ manifests its ‘interest’ in the maintenance of the social status quo. I do not think that American multi-national corporate and market capitalism is to be equated with democracy and is the end towards which the human race ought to have been striving since its emergence from the primeval ooze. And if historiography is to serve democratic rather than hegemonic goals or ends, it would do well to work for diversity of interpretation rather than towards ‘consensus’ on what is the best interpretation of the past by professional scholars implicated in the social system as they find it.

History is not and can never be a science in the current acceptation of this term. It would be better to recognize this and to consider the political and ethical implications of different modes of interpreting history than to hang on to a standard of objectivity and impartiality that has been more honoured in the breach than the observance throughout the history of historical writing.

And while I have the chance, I would like to respond to a remark made by Iggers about my attitude towards the problem of representing the Holocaust. Iggers quotes me as saying, in *Metahistory* (p. xii), that, ‘grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral’. He then goes on to say that my ‘turn to factualism in reference to the reality of the Holocaust appears in conflict with [my] stance throughout [my] writings from *Metahistory* to the interview with Ewa Domanska in 1993 that all historical writing is fiction’.

He is referring to an essay I wrote on ‘Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth’ for Saul Friedlander’s collection of essays on Holocaust historiography. Here I considered the question of whether one could endow the events of the Holocaust with all the meaning that the various modes of emplotment known to Western practices of narrativization provide. And I made two remarks. One had to do with the relation between facts and meanings. I said that when it comes to imputing *meaning* to a given set of historical events, the facts cannot be appealed to in the same manner they can be appealed to in order to determine the truth-value of specific statements made about specific events. I referred to *meaning*, not *truth*. The second remark had to do with the question of whether the Holocaust could be freely emplotted, using all of the plot structures found in the canon of Western literature, including those of comedy and farce. I did not say that the *facts* precluded the emplotment of the Holocaust as a farce; I said that it would be tasteless and offensive to most audiences to so emplot it. I invoked moral and aesthetic criteria, not facts, as determinative of the choice of the plot-structure to be used in the narrativization of the Holocaust.

Which leads us, I think, to the problem of the relation between history and

literature. Again, as with the fact–fiction distinction, Iggers sees the relation between history and literature as one of opposition – in the way that Ranke did when he opposed his own notion of history writing to the ‘romances’ of Sir Walter Scott. Iggers seem to identify all ‘literature’ with fiction, failing to recognize that there is much literary writing that is not fictional and much fictional writing that is not literary. Iggers – quite unhistorically – appears to think that ‘literature’ means ‘fictional’ writing. I think that Iggers would agree that there is a great deal of ‘literary writing’ whose aim is the ‘realistic representation of reality’ and to which the majority of the great classics of ‘Western’ historiography belong – from Herodotus and Thucydides through Livy and Tacitus to Eusebius and Procopius to Machiavelli and Guicciardini and beyond these to Voltaire, Gibbon, and, yes, even Ranke, Treitschke, Mommsen, Burckhardt, Huizinga, and a host of others.

But in calling these classical historians ‘literary writers’ I did not mean to suggest that they wrote in a ‘fine’ or ‘elevated’ style – that they were first of all ‘scholars’ and ‘researchers’ and only secondarily narrators and ‘writers’. On the contrary, I view their writing as only a later phase in a process of ‘composition’ which must have begun at the very moment of their identification of their subject: like the moment of Gibbon’s contemplation of the ruins of the Forum of Titus from the steps of a church which gave him his theme of ‘barbarism and religion’ in ‘the decline and fall of the Roman Empire’. From this moment of inspiration, Gibbon grasped the plot of the story he had to tell. The composition of this story was a continuation of the structure of this moment.

Was it a process of factualization or of fictionalization that was involved in the composition of Gibbon’s work? Well, factualization insofar as Gibbon tried to get the story straight, separate the truth from the distortions, falsifications, and lies contained in received accounts of the matter. But surely it was a matter of fictionalization insofar as Gibbon had to translate real persons, places, and events into the kind of ‘figures’ and ‘topoi’ that would allow his readers to follow the story he wished to tell as a story which explained its subject by ‘emplotting’ it as a story of a particular kind, the story of a ‘rise and fall’.

It is a commonplace of historical theory that the story made out of the facts is a condensation – a reduction of the time of the action to the time of the telling and a reduction of all the facts that are known about a given period of history to only those facts that are important – not only of the events occurring in a given time–space domain but also of the facts that might be known about those events. The translation of what Collingwood called the historian’s ‘thought about the events’ into written discourse (what he actually says or writes) operates all of those condensations and displacements peculiar to the use of figurative discourse. Historians may wish to speak literally

and tell nothing but the truth about their objects of study, but one cannot *narrativize* without recourse to figurative speech and a discourse more poetic (or rhetorical) than literalist in kind. A merely literalist account of ‘what happened’ in a given past could be used to produce only an annals or chronicle, not a ‘history’. Historiography is a discourse that typically aims towards the construction of a truthful narrativization of events, not a static description of a state of affairs.

If one is interested in conceptualizing a *history* of historical studies (or historical writing or historical thought or historical consciousness, for that matter), that is to say, if one is interested in accounting for changes that these undergo in time and the differences that they manifest in various places where ‘the past’ has become construed as a possible object of systematic and self-reflexive cognition, then one must assume a *metahistorical* perspective. That is to say, one cannot simply presuppose the adequacy of the conceptual armoury honored by the historians of one’s own time (or those of some other time and place) and use this circle of concepts as the goal towards which everything was straining more or less successfully to become ‘since the beginning’ of the discipline’s practice. For example, it makes little sense (and is profoundly unhistorical) to presume that what Ranke or Braudel understood by the terms ‘historical event’, ‘historical fact’, ‘historical narrative’, or ‘historical explanation’ – or for that matter, ‘literature’, ‘fiction’, ‘poetry’, ‘imitation’, ‘description’, ‘the past’, ‘the present’, and so on – was the same as what Herodotus or Thucydides might have understood by the Greek equivalents of these terms. This is why it makes little sense (and is profoundly unhistorical) to rank the recognized classics of Western historiography in terms of the extent to which they may seem to have approximated to or to have differed from the canon of contemporary historical discourse.

Such is exactly the case in the study of ancient Greek, Roman, medieval, and early modern ‘science’ – not to mention various non-Western forms of ‘science’. Philosophers of science may very well presume that modern physicists’ conceptions of physical reality provide valid criteria for assessing equivalent notions in Aristotle, Galen, Pliny, Paracelsus, Agricola, Bruno, or Bacon; but modern history of science is properly concerned with the differences and discontinuities among successive notions of physical causality (and, for that matter, among different notions of ‘nature’ or ‘the physical’) that mark the global evolution of ‘science’ since, say, the Sixth century BCE. In other words, a proper *history* of science requires a distancing from and problematization of what passes for a ‘proper’ science in our own time, a bracketing of the idea that modern Western science constitutes the real science towards which all other notions of scientificity were striving or failing to strive since, say, Thales or Hippocrates. One must assume a metascientific position, a position outside the current scientific orthodoxy, if one wishes to

conceptualize a genuinely historical (by which I would mean, a genuinely *historicist*) conception of science.

And so too for a history of historical studies. The conceptualization of a history of historiography must begin with the deconstruction (dare I use the term?) of the enabling presuppositions of the current (which, in this case, will mean, the professional) orthodoxies of the field of historical studies. These cannot be taken as absolutely valid and as constituting the sole possible bases for the study of the past, its representation in a discourse, and a determination of its meaning. This is what I proposed some thirty years ago in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (1973) and have tried to elaborate in subsequent work since then.

But apparently Georg Iggers does not share my views. His criticism of my work proceeds on the presupposition that a proper historical method, theory, and practice are adequately represented by the metahistorical presuppositions of the current guild of Western professional historians. He says that he is interested in writing the history of (Western) historiography since the Eighteenth century, but why and how? In order to show how what is now the case came to be what it is and not other? Is this not to assume that what is meant by 'historical scholarship' is properly represented only by and in its modern Western incarnation? But if that is the case, why bother writing a 'history' of this mode of historical thinking at all; an 'annales' or 'chronicle' would suffice.

In any case, Iggers seems to think I have not understood that (modern) historians are interested in making true statements about 'the past' and 'history' (I make a distinction between the two), that they wish to deal in 'facts' and not 'fictions', that they are interested in finding facts and do not wish to invent them, and that their writing is intended to be a contribution to 'scholarship', and not to 'literature'. Thus, when I suggest that the representations of the past found in historians' writings – although they may very well be based on 'facts' – can be profitably considered as 'fictions', he rejects this idea because he thinks that historians *intend* to deal in facts rather than in fictions and that, therefore, to consider their work as fictional constitutes a category mistake. He does not perceive that my suggestion had to do with a desire to question the fact–fiction dichotomy that has sustained historians's fantasies about objectivity and impartiality since the time of Ranke. My point was that any representation of reality in the form of a narrativization necessarily fictionalizes its subject-matter, however much it may be based on facts. Narrativization transforms events, persons, places, processes, and so on, into 'figures' of the kind met with in other kinds of narrativization, whether manifestly 'fictional' or 'factual' or neither (as is the case with most 'modernist' writing).

So I do not take seriously Iggers' criticism of my efforts to collapse the fact–fiction dichotomy. He grants that historical narratives may contain

'elements of fiction'. Where we differ is in our conceptions of the discursive functions of these elements. He thinks they are decorative or matters of style. I think they are constitutive, not of reality, but of the meanings with which historians endow the facts of the past by narrativization. Nor do I take seriously the way Iggers construes the relationship between 'history' and 'literature'. Again, he simply accepts the conventional conceptualization of this relationship as given by Ranke, who wanted to distinguish his histories from the 'romances' of Sir Walter Scott.

I know that most modern historians do not want to be considered as writers of 'literature' where literature is understood as 'fiction'. I know that most modern historians think that both the facts and the stories they make out of these facts reside *in* history or at least in the historical record and are not to be considered as 'invented' by the researcher or 'constructed' out of whole cloth. I know that most modern historians do not want to be taken for 'poets' but for scholars and want their work to be taken as contributions to scholarship rather than to 'art'. I know all of this, and Georg Iggers knows that I know all of this. But I think that an analysis of the writings actually produced by the recognized masters of historiography in our tradition believes the realism of these intentions. Iggers says that I err in not considering historians' intentions. I suggest that when we are concerned with the history of historical *writing*, it is the intentions of the text that should interest us, not the intentions of the writer.