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The Historian as Author

Es wird hier epistemisch-skeptisch argumentiert, dass die akademische Geschichtsschreibung dem ontologischen Status fiktiver Erzählung unterliegt. Ein solches skeptisches Argument verlangt von Historikern, sich mit der Unterscheidung zwischen Geschichte und Vergangenheit auseinander zu setzen und impliziert zudem, dass sich Geschichtsschreiber ebenso sehr mit den Formen ihrer Vermittlung befassen sollten, wie sie dies mit geschichtlichen Inhalten zu tun gewöhnt sind. Kurz, Historiker sollten sich ihrer narrativen Entscheidungsprozesse in der Gestaltung von „Vergangenheit als Geschichte“ bewusst sein. Zu den wichtigsten narrativen Aspekten gehören a) *fabula*, b) Diskurs, c) Erzählung, d) Raum, e) Stimme und Fokalisierung, f) Zeitstruktur und g) die fiktionale Konstruktion von Akteuren, Intentionalität, Charakterisierung und Handlung.

Introduction

My analysis of the historian as an author is predicated on the ontological assumption that history has the status of a narratological act. This premise requires me to move beyond the epistemological understanding that the vast majority of historians have concerning the efficacy of the belief in representationalism. My sceptical judgement, therefore, is that the creation of a past-present relationship should be understood primarily through the act of fashioning a narrative. This does not in any way imply or suggest a denial of the epistemologically construed status of single statements of justified belief and appropriately drawn inferences. But if we follow the logic of narrative making, it means historians as a group of practitioners must become more attentive to how they write “the-past-as-history.”

So this leads me to examine the practical consequences of the ontological distinction between “the past” and “history.”¹ Conventionally, historians accept without comment that they can produce “representational historical narratives” and that this is both sufficient and necessary *post hoc* proof that they can “have knowledge of the past and what it most probably means.” But I would suggest that such “archival” or source based knowledge is *wholly* interpretational, and that central to that interpretational process are the complex processes involved in authoring the-past-as-history.

If this argument is accepted, it means that historians as a professional group need to *begin* their activities with how they write histories rather than with the content they write about. This is, of course, hardly a new idea and a full treatment can be found in the work of a variety of theorists but not least, and most famously in the work of Hayden White, Michel de Certeau and Paul Ricœur, but also Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and

1 Cf. Alun Munslow, *The Future of History*, 3-4 passim.

Michel Foucault, and in addition Wayne Booth, Gerald Prince, Frank Ankersmit, Mieke Bal, Monika Fludernik, David Herman, Gerard Genette, and Seymour Chatman.² As this list suggests, it is the disciplinary exclusivity of historians that allows them to think and work within what are traditionally very narrow disciplinary boundaries. Hence, in this paper I propose to examine the “historian as author” by reference to several well-known narrative making concepts. These are (a) story, (b) discourse (c) narration, (d) the story space, (e) voice and focalisation, (f) the timing of the text (mimesis, order, duration, and frequency) and (g) the fictive creation of agent intentionality, characterisation and action.³

For most historians, considering the concept of authorship unnecessarily takes them beyond “the unearthing, detection or discovery of the past” that is certified and endorsed by their customary history training. This I shall describe as “history of a particular kind.”⁴ Paired to its essentials, what I propose requires recognising the *fictive* narrative construction of history by the author-historian. One of the main reasons historians of a particular kind refuse to pursue this notion is the alarm that such considerations are not merely irrelevant to the main concerns they have in “getting the data straight” and therefore “getting the story straight.” If this “data-story”-relationship is questioned, then the consequences for their objectivity, truth seeking, and “lessons from history” beliefs are imperilled. But it is my argument that where there is no authored narrative, there is no history.

The debates of the past half century over the relationship between “the past” and “history” defined as an authored narrative *about* the past centre on one fundamental issue. It is the ontological status of history as a narrative substitution for the absent past. By this I mean its “aboutness.” That a small minority of practitioner-historians do acknowledge that there is always a “poetic element” in history simply will not do anymore. Such a (usually reluctant) concession is an inadequate response to what historians actually do as authors. It is not a reasonable response because what is almost invariably then

2 See also Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*; Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*; Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*; Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”; Michel Foucault, “What Is An Author?”; Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*; Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*; Frank Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language*, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor*, *Historical Representation* (2001), and, most recently, *Sublime Historical Experience*; Mieke Bal, “The Narrating and the Focalizing: A Theory of the Agents in Narrative,” *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, and “New Wine in Old Bottles? Voice, Focalisation and New Writing”; Monika Fludernik, *Towards “Natural” Narratology*, which examines narrative structures from oral storytelling to the realist novel; and, especially, David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. Herman’s breakthrough is to argue lucidly that narrative is a cognitive style, a genre of discourse, and a resource for writing. However, I believe historians would do well – as I argue below – initially to address Gerard Genette’s “Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative,” *Figures, Narrative Discourse*, and *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, as well as Seymour Chatman’s *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*.

3 See also Alun Munslow (2007), *Narrative and History*.

4 See also Munslow, *Future of History*.

declared is that by virtue of such acknowledgments and allowances there remains no change in the fundamental epistemic character and functioning of history.

All that such a claim does is to sustain the perception that “the past” and “history” are not ontologically dissonant. In suggesting that history is a narrative interpretation the historian is required to follow the central insight of Hayden White that they must think as much about how they imagine the past as a narrative that they have fictively created, than just as they “find it” in the sources, and then write it up with the appropriate referential scaffolding and inferential élan. Historians of the epistemic inclination respond to this radical sceptical argument in a twofold way. They insist that being too engaged with narratively self-reflexivity (a) just gets in the way of doing history “properly” and (b) must produce a hazardous authorial narcissism that obscures “the knowable reality” of the past. It also imperils the verities of “truth” and “objectivity.”

No matter how such historians endeavor to avoid the fact and its consequences, what they write has the epistemic and ontological status of a narrative expression. I think the logic of this situation requires that history can only ever be regarded as a figuratively inspired narrative at every deictic level. Thus, a history text about the mass migration of Irish immigrants to the United States after the mid-1840s potato famine (which I believe describes a series of events that did actually happen given all the empirical evidence) exemplifies those (appropriately attested) events by reference to statements of justified belief. Moreover, the historian can legitimately deploy inference as a means for trying to judge what it all might mean. But this mechanism cannot exist “outside” a manufactured discourse (Zuidervaart 2004, 147–51).

So epistemically, ontologically, and semantically, the vast majority of “proper historians” are trained to accept that the history generated through epistemology is not meant to be “authorial” (let alone authorially self-conscious). This belief is instilled from their schooldays. The essential ancillary to this view is that confirming history’s ontological status as a narrative must produce a descent into a kind of post-structuralist theoretical self-absorption at worst, and analytical torpor or inactivity at best. If this belief and argument is to be rejected, it must be explained how the historical narrative operates legitimately as an authorial activity, and historians need to know how they author their history narratives *about* the absent past (Goodman 1978). So, I return to the indispensable assumption made so long ago by White, which is that historians must start by addressing the content of the form of history. For me this means probing the nature and epistemic functioning of story and discourse in creating “the-past-as-history” (Munslow [1992] 2009).

Story and Discourse

First, I will define written history as possessing two distinct but plainly related elements. These are (a) “*what* happened” in the story as told, and (b) “*how* it is narrated.”⁵ Most

5 See Gerard Genette, “Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative,” *Figures, Narrative Discourse*, and *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. See also Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*.

historians (of an epistemological kind) adhere to (a) but generally pay no practical attention to (b). This is particularly unfortunate, since this “what happened and how it is narrated” or “story-discourse duality” is central to any understanding of history as a narrative form of knowledge.⁶ Now, as a discourse committed to both perceiving and understanding the past, it was Michel Foucault (1984) who first noted that history is produced via the processes of fabrication and selection the precise and the most basic function of which is to control the epistemic nature of our engagement with the past. It can hardly be radical to argue that until the past is constituted as that discourse we call history, it will remain sublime, inaccessible, and can have no meaning for us. It is my argument, therefore, that in talking/discoursing about the past, what is missing is the sense and existence of the historian-*as*-author whose purpose is to produce *a* narrative that distinguishes between what happened (content) and how it is told (form). This process hinges on differentiating *story* from *discourse* and both from *narration*.

Despite the substantial work done by a range of narrative theorists in the past forty or so years, I would suggest that for historians, Gerard Genette’s two key texts, *Narrative Discourse* ([1972] 1986) and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* ([1983] 1990), constitute the most accessible and clear exposition of the basics of the theory of narrative available (Chatman 1978).⁷ Historians who wish to consider the notion of their acts of authorship would benefit from an initial acquaintance with Genette before moving on. Genette starts by indicating the nature of the problem of differentiating *story* from *discourse* and both from *narration*.

It is axiomatic for epistemically guided historians that the most probable “story” (which they epistemically assume must be “back there”) contains *content* and that it is their function to distinguish wheat from chaff in interpreting what the story back there most probably means. This “history content” is the evidential material back there that *refer* to things, physical locations, or contexts as well as the actions brought about by the decisions of agents. So we have the idea that history is exclusively about “the things that happened to people at certain times in certain places.” But for the vast majority of practitioner-historians, what is not grasped or accepted is that the “content-story” unavoidably spills over into the *telling* or discourse.⁸ It is this situation that is not acknowledged. The consequence is that epistemic assumptions about the almost universally accepted “proper way” to do history are never addressed.

However, historians still have to decide which content to include (and leave out) in order to (re)create a story about the time before now. Thus, historians are required to make judgments about “the gaps” there may be in the evidence (although it is hard to see “the gaps” until they have already selected the data). Now, some author-historians will

6 For a more detailed analysis of the historical narrative understood as a discursive exercise, see Munslow, *Narrative and History*, 16–63. See also Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 6.

7 This is certainly not to deny the contribution of other narrative theorists, especially Monika Fludernik (1996) in her *Towards a “Natural” Narratology* and David Herman’s (2002) *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*.

8 All historians have are sentences (and artifacts) about a place, person, or event in the past. We cannot have the place, person, or event *from* the past. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 105.

make “fair” and “reasonable” archival/data selections, while others will make “unfair” or “unreasonable” ones – or so it seems to those other historians who review and disagree with their research. Similarly, some historians will draw conclusions that are “fair” and “reasonable.” And again other historians will not do so in the view of their colleagues. Some historians will claim importance for certain events, while others will argue that those events were insignificant. It is in such ways that capital H History is defended as an exercise in the (objective and truth seeking) interpretation of the data of the past. But this concept of interpretation(al truth) is tailored by deploying “judgments of the most significant cause” and is controlled by the making of “sensible historical generalizations” as well as many “on balance” choices and “arguments” that range from figurative “analogy” to “arguments from statistical inference.”⁹ This form of inquiry is what historians of a particular kind believe they have to do. So it is what they do.

Despite the rumbling Whitean “metahistorical insurgency” of the past half century, the vast majority of practitioner-historians are still required by their professional training to ignore the operation of discourse – their *telling* of *the* story. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that only via this logic is it possible for contradictory notions like “telling the truth about history” (an oxymoron) to be sustained.¹⁰ Now, and by way of simple example, for a reviewer to claim that a history written by a particular historian is a polemic is hardly an advance in thinking about intrusive authorship. Polemical historying (Marxist, neo-con, feminist, republican, or whatever) can still be the product of the epistemic choice that entirely ignores the authoring decisions that connect content, story, and discourse. It is for these sorts of reasons that I think practitioner historians (of a particular kind) should endeavor to acquaint themselves with what being an author entails. So what is historical authorship?

Historical Authorship

Historians obtrude in the history text because they always write themselves into their histories. It is unavoidable if we define history as a means of explanation and meaning that is the consequence of the unavoidable connection between *content/story* (the past) *narrating/narration* (what the historian as an author does) and the *mode of expression* medium (which is that of representation). Instead of the history narrative being understood as a matter of “interpretational report,” it should be regarded as that complex discursive/aesthetic act of turning “the before now” into “the-past-as-history.”

It is for those historians who wish to understand how they author “the-past-as-history” to rethink the ontological status of history as moving well beyond the scientific and positivist inspired interpretational writing up of archival discovery. Historying is not a realist empirical-analytical act of meaning discovery (or recovery) that is consequent upon something “found.” Rather, historians generally must acknowledge that ontologi-

9 For the most lucid defense of conventional historying, see C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*.

10 See, for example, the defense of “proper history” by J. Appleby, L. Hunt and M. Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 1.

cally, history is a creative narrative act. And then, consequent upon this decision, its precise nature or form as an experimental history, film script, re-enactment, play, blog, or whatever is a legitimate consequence of the epistemic, ontological, and semantically sceptical choices they elect to make. White (in)famously argued that history is as much imagined as found. I would say history understood as a discourse created by the historian is just imagined.

Although historians are not trained in narratology, and despite the postmodern and poststructuralist insurrection, the epistemic choice remains a powerful intellectual rationalisation of what most historians do. But once historians abandon effortless and unproblematic epistemic notions of representationalism founded on the idea of history as an objective re-presentation of the most likely meaning of the past, then sustaining the ascendancy of form (history) over content (the past) becomes crucial to changing historical practice. It is for this reason that a history cannot have any fixed shape or structure.

That this argument is regarded as profane by “historians of a particular kind” is due to their belief that there is such a “thing” as *the* logic of history that is “built on” several fundamental epistemic principles. These principles are reference defined as statements of justified belief and the denotation of what those descriptions most likely mean through inference and the application of appropriate adductive/inferential theory. That these descriptions legitimised as “findings/interpretations” can be defined as “the history,” it must be written/textual in its form of expression as academic books, learned journal articles, “web-pages” or similar textualist forms.

But if we view what the historian actually does as an act of narrative making, then “the history” becomes a matter of deciding how as authors historians bond (a) *story* (reference to certain selected actions and events of the past), to (b) their preferred act of *narrating* (authored explanation/meaning), then (c) create their *narrative* (the history), and finally (d) select their preferred mode of *expression* (form or forms of representation) for the history. Then it becomes reasonable to view “history” as “historizing.” When so judged, what becomes important is that epistemically construed concepts such as correspondence, coherence, consensus and correlation theories of truth, explanation, meaning as well as ethics and of course ideology, henceforth have been thought of as being defined and functioning *within* and as a consequence of the authorial narrative making activity. As a result, it becomes obligatory for historians to be attentive (i.e., trained from school onwards) to how story, narrating, narrative and expression supply and comprise the story space for their engagement with that which no longer exists – the past.

Now, the sticking point for historians of a particular kind is that all of the above demands that apart from the single statement of justified belief, the only definition of truth they can have concerning the past is a truth that cannot be taken out of or removed from the procedures of narrative making. In this situation historians are required to accept that truth is not, as epistemology demands, the exclusive preserve of referentiality, social science positivism, or hypothesised probability. The historian can make empirical claims about what happened in the past – that war was declared on a certain date, that someone died under particular circumstances, or that Jacob Burckhardt published *Judgements on History and Historians* in 1959. But the truth of the single statement if justified belief is

simply inadequate a foundation for the wider claims made for the narrative construction called history. The upshot is that history understood as the product of aesthetics and authorship cannot offer itself as a “historical reconstruction” of the past. It is at best a narrative construction with the perpetual possibility of deconstruction as much as an epistemic-inspired “historical re-vision.”

The existence of reference to the past cannot side-step the ontological issue of the estrangement or disengagement that has to be overcome (but which cannot be overcome?) between an unreachable past reality (whatever it was “in reality”) and what we say about it *as* history. The reason should by now be fairly clear. It is that the explanatory nature/structure of a history is consequent upon the authorial connections between *story*, *narrating*, *narrative* and *expression* fashioned by the historian. But these connections are made in the story-space of the history, which remains a concept of which most historians know nothing.

Story Space

This is the author’s understanding or “model” of what, how, when, why, and to whom things happened in the past. The reader or consumer enters into the story space when he/she experience “the-past-as-history” (as in a book, film, play, or whatever). Each story space is created from authorial choices that range from preferred arguments and ideological inflections to hypotheses and data selection. Defining history as a story space allows historians both to understand how they narrate and thereby to create meaning. Because of its ontology as a story space, the historical narrative cannot be considered as a recording instrument for understanding derived entirely by non-narrative means.

When considering history as a story space, we need to understand three things. The first is that *the* history does not pre-exist in *the* past (or even if it does we cannot know what it “really was”). The second is that the events and existents that are referred to have to be *turned* into an emplotted (hi)story by the historian-author. And third, because history can be expressed in as many ways as the historian can imagine, we need to be very clear that each “historical expression” results from the specific epistemic and ontological choices of the historian. I feel obliged to repeat that in none of these do we do away with archival research and the drawing of smart inferences. But the epistemic exclusivity of most historians that regards any consideration other than the empirical-analytical understanding as being of secondary importance can no longer be accepted or sustained.

In contrast, I assume that defining history as an authored story space will not only ensure that historians and consumers acknowledge the epistemic significance of authorialism (with its standpoint, subjectivisms, emotional and ethical commitments, etc.) but will reveal the impossibility of thinking that history understood in this way is just another fiction. However, as a fictive exercise, the visitor to the history story space is *told* who did and said what and who acted according to certain narratological levers and mechanisms. It is the historian-author who *explains* to the history-consumer why people in the past did what they did. Moreover, the author-historian indicates what agencies, structures, and events were consequential according to certain preferred *theories and argu-*

ments. Some *meanings* are supplied – but not others. Some kinds of *arguments* are preferred rather than others. What I am saying is that the history story space is the only means through which it is possible to locate ourselves in any kind of relation to the past.

The next and obvious question is whether there are predominant forms of history story space? Well, a history story space that is heavy on data and “the probability of meaning” and “most likely explanation” is predicated on the epistemic belief that *the* story of *the* past “tells itself,” and consequently the history brings “the” reality of the past back to life. We come across this realistic story space most often in both the high academic as well as the popular media rendition of history – bringing *the* stories of the past back to life.¹¹ This reconstructionist story space is an instance of Roland Barthes’ famous reality effect. What most historians today favour is a story space (even though they do not refer to it as such) that is regarded as a sophisticated projection/construction of their engaged and ethical programmes as tutored by their “reasonably construed” social theories and copiously studded with statements of “what actually happened.” There is also a strong sense of the social responsibility of professional historians to recover the “lost stories” of the past and from which we can all learn lessons.

This desire invariably generates what we might call a constructionist story space. This is one that invokes a lush referential environment in which theory and abstraction are necessarily deployed to summon up “what it all probably means.” However, by not acknowledging that it is what it is, the constructionist history story space creator continues to insist on the cognitive primacy of the reality of the past and thereby nurtures and expresses, reiterates, and sustains the epistemically improbable commitment.

This conclusion now leads me to a further claim. For the multi-sceptical, necessarily ironic and anti-epistemological “non-proper thinking historian,” his/her story space can become the locus for multiple content/story possibilities, “historical experiments,” and a variety of narrative expressions rather than representations. Such historians are as much concerned with the processes of historicizing as much as they may be engaged in trying in some way to understand what the now inaccessible past might have *really* meant. Hence they will address the possibilities for “understanding,” “explanation,” “truth,” and “meaning” available *for the past* through the *construction of the story space*. In this way historicizing in the future may dispense with the notion the possibility of the ontological alignment between the past and history. They will be self-consciously ironic about the purpose and point of the construction of their (hi)story space – an intellectual process that will take them well beyond the self-imposed epistemic and ontological limitations of reconstructing or constructing the past in a realist-representationalist fashion, and into the more culturally rewarding notion of “the-past-as-history.”

But there is still more to consider. While no complete understanding of discourse, narrating, and narration can ignore the analyses of the narrative theorist Gerard Genette ([1983] 1990), there are also the specific contributions of Roland Barthes (1995, 125–30)

11 See, for example, the website of the University of East Anglia and the appeal by history researchers for stories of soldiers from Lancashire who helped to build wartime defenses on Britain’s coastline. See <http://www.uea.ac.uk/mac/comm/media/press/2010/may/walberswicklancashire> (accessed 13.48, July 15, 2010).

to think about (Foucault 1979, 141–60). While Genette addresses the speaking function in narratives, Barthes considers the question of who is speaking. His declaration of the “death of the author” is consequent upon the author’s invariable failure to “fix” the meaning of what he/she writes (Dodge 2006, 345–68). So how does the “authorial history voice” work? To answer this question, we need to address focalisation.

Focalisation

My comments now concern the historical *discourse* – the “how” of writing history as opposed to the content-*story* of what happened. As already noted, the historian’s voice or point of view is heard as he/she constructs his/her narrative (Tonkin 1992). Take the question of diegesis. This what? I take to refer to the insertion of the authorial and paratextual in the history. Thus, when the American historian of the frontier experience, Frederick Jackson Turner, argued in his famous 1893 lecture to the American Historical Association that “[t]he existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development,” (Turner [1893] 1996, 1–38) it was not the past talking through him. It was Turner’s *authored* judgement to which his audience had access rather than the reality of the American frontier past.

So while historians may intend to reference past reality in a representationalist fashion, it is diegesis at work. History writing is not a resurrectionist activity. I suspect it is only the most authorially self-conscious historian who is able to recognize that it is *he/she* who is telling *a* story about the past. History – but only as such historians understand – is plainly a “narrative substance,” as Frank Ankersmit famously argued. So style(s) in history are just authorial voices. For me the Turner example is an instance of the voicing the American past-*as-the-history* of the frontier experience, and it suggests that an awareness of how the past is trans-formed, re-presented, and constituted requires addressing the voicing principle of focalisation.

Focalisation is that necessary authorial mechanism that must be employed in order to control the amount and flow of referential data in the story space. This control is exercised by the historian who must “imagine” situations and events from a precise historical agent’s “point of view.” Thus, the fundamental issue in creating the history story space is the authoring process of determining “who speaks” (the narrator) and his/her focalisation decisions. By that I mean it is the choice of the “historian-*as*-author” as to “who sees” in the history text.

As is all too well known, there are a number of diegetic choices available to historians. They can permit the “historical character” to tell their story in the first person with internal focalisation (autobiographically). Or agents can be created as witnesses by historians who are seemingly telling the(ir) (hi)story in the first person. Or the historian can inform the reader about what happened without examining the thinking of the historical agent and without his/her own “historical commentary.” Or the historian can record what happened, and “try to get inside” the mind of the character, and by means of examples offer interpretations of the “most likely” meanings of what the agent was thinking. This is the usual choice made by historians. It bears repeating that these decisions are authorial

preferences and are not dictated by the nature of the past. This simple authorial mechanism immediately leads to the question of how historians as authors understand, compose, and fabricate time in their histories.

Timing: Mimesis, Order, Duration, and Frequency

It is reasonable to say that most historians view time as either (a) continuity as seen in the persistence of steady change (evolutionary and small-scale “change-over-time”) or (b) a variety of forms of swift and sporadic change (turmoil, cataclysm and/or upheaval). Historians also possess a nomenclature that contains temporal referents such as “ages” often narrated as “stage theories of history.” However, despite this apparent sophistication, the strong inclination among the vast majority of “proper historians” is to think of time as linear even if it is managed via “theme,” “problematic,” etc. The problem with time in *a* history is that historians generally ignore what should be acknowledged to be the unavoidable situation that they have to stage-manage time as a matter of textual control.

Despite being a defender of epistemology, Paul Ricœur is forced to acknowledge that the epistemological *and* ontological structure through which history *and* fiction realise their aims refigure time in the same way. For Ricœur, history is about (a) imagining the past as it most likely was, but nevertheless (b) this requires historians to “manage it,” (c) by putting memories of the past into a narrative and (d) necessarily re-figuring “real time” in the process. All this constitutes, as Ricœur argues, a “fiction effect” that makes history seem more realistic. Once again, this is the process of mimesis at work.

So even if historians think of time as a given, they are forced to “time the-past-as-history” by the logic of their narrative making. To judge how historians assemble the concepts of *timing* required by their act of narrative making, whether they realise it or not, they are considering the narrative concepts of *order*, *duration*, and *frequency*. The narrative theorist Seymour Chatman, like Ricœur, acknowledges that timing is at its most obvious in the simple devices of beginning, middle, and end.¹² However, such literary devices cannot convincingly organise the past. The reason is that “the real” is incapable of “knowing” where it has been, where it is now, or that it has ended. There is a profoundly important cultural consequence of this.

This issue of organising time raises a much wider and crucial point about history. Philosophically it makes no sense to believe we can learn from either history or the past. To learn from the past, we have to assume that (a) we have unmediated access to it and that (b) it has finished. But there is no end to the past as there is to a play, book, film, or re-enactment *about* it. Despite this situation, the vast majority of historians continue to believe that their interpretations are based on a realistic understanding of time. This mistake is made despite the situation that time in history is an invention based on a mimetic/metonymic notion of continuity and contiguity. Only by paying no attention to

12 Surprisingly, perhaps, a recent analysis of the history of time in the work of historians managed to completely ignore the functioning of narrative in the “timing” of history. See Dan Smail, “In the Grip of Sacred History.”

this dilemma can historians pursue the illogicality of “the lessons of history” and even more oddly have “conclusions” to their books where the most likely meaning of “what happened” is tidied up and explained (at least until the next time it is “revised”). Presumably, this situation is why instead of abandoning epistemology, historians prefer the fig leaf of revisions.

So the “fictive” real time of the past is “known” as it is discoursed and storied not as it once was. Unsurprisingly, narrative theorists Ricœur and Genette both address at some length the association created between the time *of the narrative* and the narrated time *in the narrative*. For Genette, real time in a narrative has the three features I just noted of *order* as in “when” (chronology), *duration* (“how long”), and *frequency* (“how often it occurs”). Given that history is a narrative analogue (the-past-as-history), it must of course distort the reality of time as experienced in the past. The “discourse time of history” is located in words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, or how long it takes to read. This condition creates a separation between the sequence in which past events took place (content-story), and the order in which events are written (discoursed).

The chronology of events may be imitated in the discourse, but *order* requires anachronological variance to facilitate the creation of “historical meaning.” The most obvious example is *analepsis*, or the flashback. To historians, it seems obvious that history has to be done like this. How can this device possibly have the status of literary artifice? But history does not have to be done this way (Munslow and Rosenstone 2004; Rosenstone 2007, 11–18). Another figure historians use is *prolepsis* or narrating ahead of events. This is the flash forward. This is again figurative artifice. The use of both figures is not just for rhetorical effect. It is the only way to give a *meaning* to the history.

But take the example of *duration*. Time can only be engaged with when historians work with the distortion of time as they narrate. This distortion is particularly apparent when the historian speeds up/slow down the flow of time within the narrative as he/she relates events. This distortion is managed *by* narrative, not simply reported *in* narrative. Time is inflexible. It is only changed in histories. Genette suggests five kinds of duration for the management of time: *ellipsis*, *pause*, *summary*, *scene*, and *stretch*. There is also the matter of *frequency*.

Ellipsis is the omission of reference to speed up the narrative – often thought of as the pruning of “irrelevant material.” This pruning may be defined as legitimate meaning creation and explanation, but they are functions of narrative-making. *Pauses* are moments of reflection, recapitulation and digestion. *Summary* is the authorial decision to speed up or compress the “real event(s).” *Scene* refers to the historian’s use of quotation. *Stretch* is the extension of “real time,” as when historians muse on events (aka “interpretation”) that may have only taken a few seconds in “real time.” And, finally, *frequency* is repetition – the connection made by the historian between how often an event occurred and the number of times it is referred to in the text (Genette [1972] 1986, 113–60, Ricœur 1981).¹³ This has several forms: singulative, repetitive, iterative, and irregular. Thus, the singulative narrates once something that happened once or twice and is told once or twice, etc., etc. The repetitive is the re-telling of the same event several times and is often re-told from the perspective of different historical characters. The iterative is the

13 See, in addition, Paul Ricœur’s essential three volume *Time and Narrative*.

telling of an event once that in reality occurred a number of times. The irregular is the telling of something that happened several times but that is told in the narrative a different number of times.

So it is the narrative organisation rather than the existence of events in time and space that is central to the act of historying. Acknowledging history as a chronotope (or possibly a *chrono-trope*?) in which time and space are authored should make historians aware of its “as if” nature (Bakhtin 1981, 84–85). It is because the management of time and story space is basic to the discourse of history that we must recognise tense/timing as central to our construction of the assumed reality of the past. But what is all too often forgotten is that while all historians acknowledge that histories express distinct ideological and moral standpoints, the meaning produced is likely to be dramatically different because of and through their narrating decisions (Denith 1997). Finally, I need to address the relationship authored between the historical agents and the understanding of their power to act – agent intentionality.

Agent Intentionality: Characterisation and Action

In historical narratives the history consumer is often constituted by the historian-author as a “witness to the past.” This act is supposed to be because the history reader understands the past through cause and effect as offered through the description and explanation of (ir)rational agent intentionality. But here again this is a narrative effect. As I have just argued, in telling the-past-*as*-history the historian-author narrates by making choices about voice, focalisation, and timing (which may or may not be plain to the consumer of the history). In authoring the history narrative, the historian also reveals his/her own understanding of what constitutes agent intentionality, and this authorial decision is basic to how he/she views characterisation.

I fully accept that how historians constitute a historical character and *infer* their “historical significance” is of course directly influenced by empiricism and analysis. But the notion of “historical significance” can be *made* only by the weight the historian-author ascribes to concepts such as agency as understood within envelope concepts like the social, the political, the economic, race, and/or gender and what he/she understands by and believes to be knowable agent intentionality.

Along with the historian’s decisions on voice, focalisation, and the narrative pre-figuration of time, characterisation reveals a fundamental irony of historying – that it is historians who choose historical agents or races, classes, dynasties, or whatever, and then “characterise” them even if and when they are *apparently* “allowed” to speak for themselves. The irony here emerges through the two main models of author-historian characterisation: the mimetic and non-mimetic. In the mimetic model, historical characters are allowed and presumed to speak for themselves. Mimesis assumes there is no guidance on the part of the historian. However, the impossibility of no guidance is demonstrated by only the briefest of acquaintances with the basic forms of mimetic characterization – *semantic* and *cognitive*.

A *semantic* characterisation is realist inspired in the sense that historical agents/characters are initially located in space and time by name. It is usually regarded as

a simple referential description. But it is also basic to a belief in human nature. The epistemic assumption is that because people in the past were like us, they can be understood in the same terms that we deploy in understanding each other. So certain historical agents represent human traits. Plainly, this decision enables the claim to truth through some kind of uniformity (correspondence?) in human nature over time.

Although widespread and not just among historians, this claim is a naive judgement because of its basic assumption that understanding, passion, and morals are essentially unchangeable. From Plato to the present, the debate has raged on whether there is an essential human nature or whether it is constructed either by circumstances or human choice (Wilson 1978; MacIntyre 1981). I think the authorially aware and experimental historian might prefer the notion that human nature is constituted first by the individual and then re-imagined by the observer. And then re-thought and narrated by each historian.

Accompanying the epistemic semantic characterisation is a *cognitive* claim that assumes that the agent had a sense of himself/herself and his/her situation that is either “strong or weak,” or “reasonable or inadequate.” Clearly, there will often be great disagreement among historians on such matters. So what were the intentions of Abraham Lincoln toward slavery and how can the historian characterise his/her legacy? Although it seems that the historical agent self-characterises himself/herself as evidenced in his/her own actions and words as well as what others said about him/her, it remains for the historian to deploy the two forms of the mimetic with the non-mimetic act of characterisation.

Now, non-mimetic characterisation is awkward for historians. However, I suggest that given my argument thus far, the “historical character” is plainly also the narrative product of the historian. (In a non-mimetic sense, a historical agent may be defined as *personifying* a property or idea such as ignorance, languor, bravery, or even possess a distinctive vision of society. He/she may also be identified as representing revulsion, apprehension, or charm. A historical agent can also be elemental to an emplotment so as to represent failure, or to constitute change, or he/she may be constituted as an archetype. The question is not always what did the agent do in the past, but what does the historian want his/her agent to do in his/her history? So reference to past reality is never the decisive constituent in characterisation, despite being empirically verified. Most historians would call it historical interpretation. I would call it creating a narrative explanation. I think to argue otherwise is to accept that the past tells us its meaning. But I would submit that the meanings we derive from the past are those that we produce and that we want.

Conclusion

In this essay I have examined the historian’s creation of the historical narrative through the variety of authorial decisions available to her/him. It is my judgment that the primary responsibility of the historian as author is to understand the choices that he/she makes in narrating “the-past-as-history.” While empiricism, inference, and source-based attested and verified data remain significant in creating historical meaning and explanation, historians must also understand how they author the story space, content/story, and how they attend to the basics of narration.

So it is my judgment that the problem that most historians have is that they remain wedded to the epistemic (empirical-analytical) philosophical choice to the exclusion of any understanding of how they create their historical narratives. Historians, I suggest, would benefit by rethinking the priority of content over form and by starting to think about how they author “the-past-as-history.” This not to say that empirical-analytical history should no longer to be taught or undertaken and must be disposed of as some kind of epistemic irrelevance. But I do suggest that it is necessary to consider the implications for historical thinking and practice of the “historian as author” understood as a creator of narratives about the past.

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