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Hayden White, International History and Questions Too Seldom Posed

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Lisa: Perhaps there is no moral to this story?

Homer: Exactly! Just a bunch of stuff that happened

The Simpsons, *Blood Feud*

It might be thought a wilfully puckish act of *lèse-majesté* to begin a piece authored for a celebratory assessment of Hayden White by observing that he remains for most historians a decidedly marginal figure. Any sense of impropriety is, however, tempered by the knowledge that this is a highly unoriginal observation: in a collection commemorating the twenty fifth anniversary of the publication of *Metahistory* (White 1973), Richard Vann reached the same conclusion on the basis of a forensic analysis of citations and reviews of White's *oeuvre* (Vann 1998). Moreover, White himself appears entirely undiscomfited by the misinterpretation and denunciation which his views have usually aroused from this audience. With characteristic grace, he has declared that:

my attitude about the books and articles I have written is that you write them, you send them out and if people can use the stuff, that's fine. If they want to use it in a distorted form, if they want to adapt it, let them do it ...; if they don't like it, let them reject it, do it better. (Jenkins 1998: 82)

It must also be said that if mainstream practitioners have not found much of relevance in White's writing, it has been enormously influential amongst the minority of the profession that is inclined to indulge in explicit reflection on the theoretical and philosophical aspects of our work. There is no reason to dissent from Dan Stone's observation that White has made 'the most important contribution to philosophy of history of the last three decades' (Stone 1997: 268), except in so far as we might now stretch the figure to four.

The reasons for historians' relative antipathy to White (albeit often manifesting itself as indifference) do not need to be exhaustively rehearsed here. In some respects, it is a question of generic resistance to philosophising, of defending the distinctive methods and virtues of a practical, robustly empirical discipline against the speculative abstractions of theory. As Hans Kellner has noted in this regard, 'the anxiety of finding oneself on trial in a court that, rather pointedly, uses a foreign language leads often enough to dismissal: "not historical"' (Kellner 1980: 12). It is not, of course, uncommon, even in our current putatively interdisciplinary age, for academic disciplines to engage in forms of border patrol to preserve their integrity and autonomy. Yet Frank Ankersmit has also diagnosed peculiarly acute 'professional inferiority complexes' at work in this case: 'deep in their hearts historians know that, despite their emphasis on the necessity of accurate investigation of sources and on prudent and responsible interpretation, history ranks lowest in scientific status of all the disciplines taught at a university' (Ankersmit 1998: 183).

This verdict may be unduly polemical, but it is not surprising that White's particular vision should have raised the ire of those with professional investments in historical study, combining as it does a potent epistemological critique with an indictment of the unacknowledged political purposes of disciplined history *per se*. Since he accuses narrativising historians simultaneously of being mere crafters of 'verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found*' (White 1978: 82, emphasis in original), and complicit in a repressive ideological project, necessarily 'removed from any connection with a visionary politics and consigned to a service that will always be antiutopian in nature' (White 1987: 73), it is easy to see why his message is unpalatable. Historians usually find White's scepticism entirely counter-intuitive intellectually and emotionally. It simply fails to chime with their lived experience of fruitful archival toil and the progressive refinement of interpretations through rational scholarly discourse (Trachtenberg 2006: 11). (Nancy Partner has insightfully observed that even when we make choices about employment, it 'feels like discovery', like 'a recognition' (Partner 1997: 108, 107)). Moreover, for most it is in fact White's alleged relativism that is politically pernicious, since it threatens to debilitate us in the face of Holocaust denial or license 'the instrumentalization of historical memory by nationalist elites in their sometimes genocidal struggles with their opponents' (Moses 2005: 311).

Is the best White can hope for, then, the kind of back handed compliment that he typically receives from 'practical realists' like Richard Evans, in which his 'diffuse' contribution to inculcating 'a growing awareness on the part of historians of the literary and narrative elements in their own work' is acknowledged, prior to a rejection of the essence of his critique (Evans 1997: 126)? In this article I want to present a somewhat more optimistic argument, through a case study analysis of some recent writing by historians of international politics. This will explore how far it is possible to discern any form of what we might term a Whitean sensibility amongst contemporary practitioners. Granted, since White is not really in the business of offering historians a methodology which can simply be applied, and since there are other theoretical resources in circulation which share his concerns, it is difficult to speak with confidence of his direct influence over this or other scholarship unless his inspiration is explicitly invoked. Equally, this endeavour involves making a judgement about what might actually constitute his core concerns, which is not uncomplicated given the prodigious volume of his writings and the nuancing and re-nuancing of his arguments over four decades (Kansteiner 1993; Vann 1998).

On my reading, however, White's challenge entails three key elements, though these inter-relate and overlap. First, there is an attentiveness to the textuality of history, and the concomitant need to put questions to texts that are not limited to their empirical basis and the specificities of the events with which they deal. Second, proceeding from the understanding that 'stories are not lived' (White 1999: 9) and that the historical record therefore does not determine them, there is an awareness that emplotment entails fundamental aesthetic and political choices. Third, there is a sensitivity to the broader ideological work that professional, disciplined, historical accounts perform. Pursuing these three points provides different ways of responding to White's recent injunction that we should above all 'consider the political and ethical implications of different modes of interpreting history' (White 2000: 402). An audit of contemporary practice reveals a good deal of work which is frankly disappointing by the yardstick of White, some which reflects at least a degree of sensitivity to his concerns, and some which demonstrates both his clear stimulus and hopeful portents for the fruitful future application of his ideas.

Prima facie, it might appear that the prospects are staggeringly unpropitious for fruitful dialogue between White and historians of international politics. (The field bears various designations. Originating as 'diplomatic history', it is now more generally known as 'international history', reflecting the much more expansive view of what constitutes 'international relations' dominant amongst contemporary practitioners; however, some still advocate the older term, or others such as 'foreign relations history' (Finney 2005b: 1-2).) On the one hand, White seems to partake of a disdain for the field that is not uncommon across the discipline as a whole, and indeed he seems only dimly aware that it still exists. Noting its role in the nineteenth century as helping to provide a genealogy for the very same nation states that founded the modern discipline, he identified it in 1997 as one of the forms of history which had begun 'to decline as the nation state itself loses its power as an organising principle of western society. ... I mean does any department teach diplomatic history any more? It used to be a staple in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. There may still be a bit around ...' (Jenkins 1998: 76). Although practitioners are themselves inclined to fret about the relative secular decline in prestige and popularity of their sub-discipline, they would find this dismissal offensive, as betraying ignorance of the continued resilience of traditional forms of state-centric diplomatic history. Moreover, White's view also understates the current vibrancy of the field as a consequence of the cultural and transnational turns taken by a minority of international historians, in part precisely in response to the challenges posed by the perceived changes in the fabric of power structures in international politics to which he alludes. (For the current state of the field, see Gienow-Hecht and Schumacher 2003; Hogan and Paterson 2004; Finney 2005a.)

On the other hand, perusal of some important statements on history and theory by eminent international historians demonstrates that they have similarly little regard for White. John Lewis Gaddis recently offered some not un insightful reflections on 'how historians map the past', expressly avowing that 'historians have no choice but to engage in ... manipulations of time, space and scale – these departures from literal representation – because a truly literal representation of any entity could only be the entity itself, and that would be impractical'. Yet he dismissed 'postmodernist insights about the relative character of all historical judgements' on the grounds that 'we've known this all along'. Similarly, if he

accepted White's contention about the distinction between a chronicle of events and 'a story with a discrete beginning, middle, and end', he also damned his analysis 'beyond this point' as 'jargon-laden'. While insisting that 'at the heart of what we mean by representation ... is ... the rearrangement of reality to suit our purposes', he tellingly supported the argument with a reference not to White, but to Geoffrey Elton (Gaddis 2002: 26, 9 – 10, 19 – 20). In a landmark recent text on methodology in international history, Marc Trachtenberg offered a more extensive critical discussion of White's thinking, lamenting that he had contributed to a climate in which 'the old ideal of historical objectivity ... fell into disrepute'. While admitting that White's scepticism was not susceptible to philosophical refutation, Trachtenberg argued that it was nonetheless possible to bracket the problem entirely: 'the basic epistemological problem is recognized, but the normal assumptions – about the existence of reality and the possibility of knowledge – are made, and we just move on from there'. After all, 'reality is what it is; the past was what it was; and what is being studied can be studied on its own terms'. Little wonder, then, that the bulk of Trachtenberg's text deals with relentlessly practical nuts and bolts issues, with documentary exegesis looming far larger than poetic acts (Trachtenberg 2006: quotes at 11, 14, 23). Even Geoff Roberts, the international historian who has done more than any other recently to raise the profile of narrative in our discourse, cleaves to a variant of narrativism that owes far more to the assumptions of David Carr, in which stories are indeed lived as well as told, than those of White (Roberts 1996, 2001).

Is there any good reason, then, to pursue this endeavour, beyond the purely pragmatic one that this happens to be my main sub-field of expertise? Without wishing to slight the intelligence or conceptual sophistication of its practitioners, international history remains in numerous ways a rather traditional realm of inquiry. Despite the vigour and diversity of current practice, it does not particularly valorise theoretical reflection, continues to cleave to bluntly realist epistemologies and staunchly empiricist methodologies, and retains a prime focus upon elite decision-makers and nation-states. (While this point should not be pushed too far, some international historians would still not demur from the contention – derived from White glossing Leopold von Ranke – that 'national groups constituted the sole viable units of historical investigation' (White 1973: 175).) However, the very fact that

international history thus constitutes a 'hard case' justifies the exercise, since if we can locate hopeful portents here then they will be that much more significant.

Moreover, there are also grounds to suggest that this field is particularly ripe for an investigation concerned above all with the political entailments of representations of the past. On one level, this is because the kinds of stories that international historians produce about the causes and natures of particular wars – about responsibility and justification – have real world implications, especially when past conflicts are deployed rhetorically and analogically by contemporary policy-makers seeking to mobilise support. The ubiquitous invocation of 'Munich' and the Second World War in discourse around the 'War on Terror' is but the most recent example of this: as Mariana Torgovnick has reminded us, 'World War II or, more precisely, different versions of World War II, can make things happen' (Torgovnick 2005: x). On another level, critical scholars in International Relations (IR) have urged practitioners to attend to 'the moral and political ramifications of their scholarship', arising from its location within 'a set of social forces toward which it is either supportive (either explicitly or implicitly) or opposed'. On this view, the decision to centre analysis on the sovereign state rather than, say, 'humanity as a whole or the individual' is neither necessary nor neutral and actually reifies it, ineluctably reinforcing its political and epistemological claims. Equally, privileging war as the focus of inquiry, even though 'by far the most violence on the planet is economic in origin', similarly helps to construct a vision of international relations that fits the interests and policy concerns of dominant states (Smith 2004: quotes at 504, 506). Such claims are not explicitly directed at international historians, but they too might profitably reflect on how 'conceptions of history and identity are not descriptive but constitutive of a terrain of possibility through which events are framed and responses debated' (Campbell 1999: 321).

One possible point of departure for assessing whether White's concerns are reflected in contemporary practice in international history is to look for signs of formal innovation. As is well known, one perennial theme in his work is the advocacy of new forms of representation which might avoid the epistemological and political pitfalls of disciplined linear narrativisations. Early on, he called for 'a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before', possibly using 'impressionistic, expressionistic, surrealist, and (perhaps) even actionist modes of representation', as a way to escape 'the burden of history' (White 1978: 50, 47).

Later, in relation to the representation of the Holocaust, he drew on Roland Barthes' notion of 'intransitive writing' to moot the idea of writing in the 'middle voice' (White 1999: 27 – 42). More broadly he has also suggested that 'the kinds of antinarrative nonstories produced by literary modernism' offer the least 'fetishizing' and therefore most appropriate means to represent the holocaustal events characteristic of late modernity (White 1999: 81 – 82). Here White is in tune with a broader sensibility that sees the proliferation of experimental, fractured, overtly positioned, polyvocal, self-reflexive and open-ended representations as the most appropriate response to the postmodern challenge (Berkhofer 1995: 243 – 283; Jenkins and Munslow 2004: 115 – 239; Munslow and Rosenstone 2004). The virtue of such texts lies in how they 'resist mimesis, homogeneity, and the temptation to "wrap up" the past in historicist fashion' (Stone 1997: 273), and their potential has perhaps been most fully explored in relation to the limit event of the Holocaust (Young 1997; Stone 2003).

International historians have not been prominent amongst those experimenting with such forms of writing. Emily Rosenberg, one of the most accomplished and insightful exponents of the new culturalist international history, has observed that foreign relations historians still generally employ:

a style that is the history-writing equivalent of what James Scott has called "imperial knowledge" or "seeing like a state" – that is, the habit of mind that seeks to impose an overarching, centralized, view-from-above upon the object of study. "Synthesis" and "comprehensive views" are often still terms of aspiration and approbation, rather than triggers for critique. (Rosenberg 2004: 191 – 192)

There are some isolated examples of work in which reflexive discussion of authorial positioning and interpretive choices has been pleasingly prominent, built into the whole text rather than simply despatched in a brief preface (e.g. Young 1996¹), and others in which the possibility of multiple competing paradigms existing side by side is admitted as a virtue – wherein 'multiplicity and partiality, rather than single stories and comprehensive synthesis, provide the basis for solid historical work' – rather than a vice (Rosenberg 2004: 192, referring to Westad 2000). The main changes to substantive practice over the last couple of decades have, however, seen shifts in the content far more than the form of inquiry and exposition. Hence there has been a continued expansion of the field's thematic concerns, with some

scholars moving further away from the terrain of politics and diplomacy to explore processes of cultural transfer and transnational exchange, the roles of non-state actors, environmental issues and human rights. By the same token, and in the most direct response to theoretical stimuli, a whole cluster of work has been exploring how national identity, ideology, race, class, gender, ethnicity and linguistic resources shaped policy-making processes and thus the exercise of political and military power. Yet while this work can be extremely sophisticated in its tracking of the discursive construction of policy, and poses some significant challenges to traditional conceptions of causation and explanation, it is not necessarily formally innovative. Hence the verdict of two leading scholars that 'as a practical matter, this "constructivist" approach has not resulted, and need not result, in drastic changes in writing history' (Costigliola and Paterson 2004: 22).

There is cause to question, however, what we may legitimately conclude from this state of affairs, either about White's influence or international historians' relative theoretical sophistication. On the one hand, White never really elucidates in much detail how precisely historians should go about producing these alternative forms of historical representation (e.g. Jenkins 1998: 77 – 80). Hence, it is perhaps not surprising if this should be one of the cues in his work which they have been slower to take up. Moreover, and on the other hand, there are powerful reasons why this form of experimentation has in general been preached about much more extensively than it has been practised. As Robert Rosenstone has observed:

like any discipline, History comprises an interlocking structure of incentives and awards – journal articles, book contracts, professorial positions, fellowships, grants – and there have been virtually no outlets or rewards for writing the past in ways that abandon traditional models and adapt to the sensibility of the contemporary moment. (Rosenstone 2004: 2)

So it is scarcely fair to castigate international historians for their deficiencies here when their attitude is hardly unique. Indeed, in a survey of the impact of the narrative turn upon the writing of cultural history, Karen Halttunen has identified a very similar pattern of response, in which 'postmodern narrative theory has exerted a greater impact on what we study than on how we write about what we study', tracing a 'process of intellectual deflection or displacement' in which the narrative practices of past historical actors have become a prime

focus of scrutiny, much as culturalist international historians are now exploring the culturally constructed worldviews of past policy-makers (Halttunen 1999: quotes at 178, 169).

Given the overall tenor of his arguments, it is probably more profitable to look for signs of receptivity to White in those texts where international historians explicitly engage historiographical issues. Once more, however, we need to be careful here about the yardstick that we employ, and specifically we should not necessarily expect to find efforts to replicate the expansive formal tropological analysis that White undertook in *Metahistory*. Wulf Kansteiner has argued that 'few scholars have imitated White' in this way, since his 'original and idiosyncratic methodology defies imitation'. The sheer scale of the exercise and the daunting complexity of penetrating through the surface of texts to divine the modes of argument, emplotments, ideologies and tropes animating them are certainly pertinent here. Yet there are also intellectual objections to the underpinning assumptions and formalist rigidity of his precise method within *Metahistory*, the force of which he has implicitly conceded through nuancing his arguments in subsequent work (Kansteiner 1993: quote at 288; Kellner 1980; Vann 1998). While he still in general defends the approach taken in his landmark work, he nonetheless stresses that it 'was a book of a certain, "structuralist" moment, and if I were writing it today, I would do it differently' (White 2000: 391). In the light of this, it is quite understandable that attempts to adapt White's tropological analysis to other bodies of work have been relatively rare.

Hence in seeking to discern a Whitean sensibility in historiographical work, we need to define it in a more catholic and flexible manner. Robert Berkhofer has offered an extensive discussion of the various approaches that comprise what he terms 'the new rhetoric, poetics and criticism' (Berkhofer 1995: 76 – 105). He calls on readers to move beyond 'the explicit arguments and narratives of histories' and to investigate their 'inner workings', 'how a text goes about constructing itself as a history'. This entails, *inter alia*, showing how 'a history is a multilayered text of evidential interpretation, argument, narrative, and Great Story', explicating 'stylistic figuration' and 'tropological prefiguration', exposing 'how discursive practices have both enabled the textualization and suppressed other representations', and uncovering 'implicit politicization as well as explicit politics' (Berkhofer 1995: 281). Emily Rosenberg

expresses a similar sentiment in slightly more practical terms, when she urges historians to pose fresh historiographical questions:

Who gets to tell the story of the past? What are the implications of where the story starts and stops; which characters and topics are included and excluded; what 'voice' is adopted; what metaphors provide structure? What dynamic relationship does each of us bring to the process of meaning and representation? Conscious or unconscious decisions about form, voice, and metaphor shape the content of historical stories, and many interpretive differences in historiography (especially in the international field) arise from this 'content of the form' and from inescapable issues of subjectivity and partiality. (Rosenberg 2004: 192)

There may sometimes be tensions between the contextualist and textualist elements in this agenda, but 'historiography must be seen as a mutual dependence of text and context. The study of both is imperative in order to understand the production of historiographical meaning, and its changes' (Stone 2003: 18 – 19). In any event, the posing of these kinds of questions – which can be roughly correlated with the concerns of textuality, the implications of emplotment choice, and the broader politics of intellectual activity - is arguably what demarcates a critical historiographical practice.

Much historiographical writing in international history remains stuck in a mode pithily characterised by Michael Bentley as 'like theology': 'the study of error' (Bentley 1997: xiii). This tends to be excessively descriptive, narrowly focused on archival and empirical matters, and somewhat impatient with interpretive pluralism, often viewed as an aberration to be eradicated by closure around a single best explanation. As examples, we can consider two studies of the historiography of the British policy of appeasement in the 1930s. This is a subject ripe for critical analysis since the field has been marked by fierce contestation, often overt politicisation, and swings of opinion from predominantly hostile verdicts on British policymakers to largely sympathetic ones and back again. A particularly interesting point in the story is the 1960s, when post-war denunciations of the folly of the appeasers gave way to more positive readings, attentive to the limitations of British capabilities and the manifold structural constraints under which policy-makers laboured. This shift is typically attributed to the opening of the British archives on the 1930s, but it can easily be argued that this merely

accelerated a shift already underway whereby an emplotment that had always been possible began to seem more plausible, in the light of the discipline's turn to structuralist analyses and the waning of Britain's global power (Finney 2000).

Robert J. Caputi's *Neville Chamberlain and Appeasement* is a classic of the descriptive type, offering a compendious recapitulation of the countless arguments advanced by scholars over several decades, but explicitly eschewing any probing of the extra-empirical factors that shaped them. Announcing that he does not propose to discuss 'all of the multifarious economic, political, and social forces of the 1960s and 1970s that led historians to revise their perceptions on appeasement', he draws a sharp distinction between 'a review of the relevant historiography' and 'discussion of the postwar historical zeitgeist'. Accordingly, the shift in the 1960s is characterised as a process whereby 'the overbearing polemicism and self-righteous condemnation of an earlier age was ... supplanted by a more carefully analytical and documented scholarship, based on empiricism rather than emotion'. Little wonder that the whole exercise has a rather sterile air (Caputi 2000: quotes at 234, 115). David Dutton's *Neville Chamberlain* is much more sophisticated, alive to the influence of historians' 'generation, perspective, preoccupations and prejudices' and the fact that 'precisely the same documentation' can be 'used as the basis of radically different analyses'. Yet it is also fraught with tension, since it simultaneously indulges in an untenable idealisation of 'objective scholarly analysis' – asserting its discreteness from political polemic, self-serving memoir and otherwise interested writing – that the material considered cannot actually support. Thus a chapter exploring the revisionist turn of the 1960s is entitled 'the importance of evidence', and avers that the more sympathetic view 'emerged from the archives'. Moreover, although Dutton notes how historical reputations tend 'to be constantly remoulded to serve the needs and preoccupations of each succeeding generation', the logic of the text is clear as it concludes with a chapter offering the author's own privileged interpretation (Dutton 2001: quotes at 185, 75, 155, 177, 190).

There is no denying, of course, that these kinds of text serve a useful function in mapping the terrain of debate and identifying schools of thought, their preoccupations and underpinning assumptions. Yet there is something very limited about a mode of writing in which the author of one classic text on *American Diplomatic History* – a work supposedly

intended to show how the literature 'reflected the major foreign policy crises experienced by each generation of diplomatic historians' – feels it necessary to apologise for 'emphasizing the theses of books rather than their factual content', on the grounds that 'the information historians provide is more important than the theses they propound' (Combs 1983: x – xi). Almost universally, such works contain a ritualistic 'practical realist' acknowledgement of the mutability, pluralism and tentativeness of historical interpretation – 'an ongoing search for enlightenment that more often leads to a muddying of the waters than any irrefutable answers' (Caputi 2000: 12) – yet these sentiments are often belied by the 'intentions of the text' (White 2000: 406).² Thus an article proposing to deal with 'American and European narratives and the end of the Cold War', and more specifically to explore how some historians have been complicit in the project of American hegemony by reinscribing 'the central importance of the United States in world affairs', might initially pique our interest. Yet on closer reading the critical argument remains sorely undeveloped, and the thrust of the text is merely to offer a corrective, rectifying the bias of American narratives by rendering a version of how things really were in which European actors enjoy a larger role in the momentous story of 1989 – 1991 (Cox 2007: quote at 128). A similar point can be made from observation of historiographical debates on internet discussion lists, where ideology or other extra-empirical factors are too often only invoked to account for an antagonist's lamentable or wilful failure to derive the 'correct' meaning from the archival record (Finney 2001: 300).

Questions that might even in the very loosest sense be termed narratological are rarely broached here. International historians for the most part are little inclined to look beyond the details of conflicting interpretations and to ask about the kinds of stories that are being told, their roots in a broader cultural repertoire of narrative resources and the politics of their promulgation at particular conjunctures. Philip Bell perhaps goes as far as any mainstream practitioner in this direction in his best-selling synthesis of *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe*. In a commendably extensive historiographical section, he argues that the field has always been structured around certain sets of interpretive dichotomies (that could perhaps be correlated to classic narrative archetypes), such as the thesis of an inevitable war versus that of an unnecessary war or arguments stressing ideology and intention against those emphasising power politics and structural determinants. He briefly

canvases these positions, asserting that they have all 'flourished during the whole period since the 1930s' even though they have not 'all been continuously and equally prominent'; but he is not especially interested in probing their deeper roots either in particular national cultures or the interpretive traditions of the sub-discipline, or in exploring precisely how, when and why particular arguments 'have come and gone, flared up and faded' (Bell 2007: quotes at 45).

Fortunately, these slightly depressing examples are but one part of international historians' historiographical discourse. Elsewhere we can discern other interventions, not directly inspired by White or even particularly sympathetic to postmodernist concerns, yet nonetheless evincing greater sensitivity to the kinds of questions that he wishes to ask of historical writing. In some cases, this entails greater attentiveness to how texts are constructed as texts. For example, Steven Hurst's recent analysis of the historiography of US Cold War foreign policy is concerned to shift the locus of explanation away from documentary factors; instead, he analyses how the key interpretive paradigms are the product of combinations of choices about level of analysis (from individual to state to system) and key explanatory factors (such as politics, economics, ideology, or culture). Ultimately, he contends, the 'argument about US foreign policy is an argument about which combination of actors, levels and fields provides us with the best explanation of that policy'. Hurst is certainly no postmodernist partisan - his judgement on the explanatory power of culturalist and poststructuralist approaches is quite severe – and he draws upon a conventional political science literature to frame his analysis. Yet nonetheless the focus on strategic interpretive preferences as the root cause of divergent accounts and the openness (albeit slightly circumscribed) to pluralism is extremely refreshing (Hurst 2005: quote at 5).

The issue of narrative is broached more squarely in my colleague Peter Jackson's stimulating work on the historiography of French strategy and diplomacy before the Second World War. Interpretations of this subject were for decades dominated by the paradigm of *décadence*, which posited that France's defeat in 1940 was the product of a profound political, economic and social malaise in the Third Republic, rather than of short term contingencies. Jackson seeks to shift the terrain of the debate away from the irresolvable question of whether France actually was decadent in the 1930s by asking instead why

generations of commentators and historians from 1940 onwards should have come to frame events in this way. To this end, he notes how narratives of decline, fall and renewal have been endemic in French political culture since the eighteenth century, and then demonstrates how the deployment of *décadence* suited the strategic political purposes of both the Vichy regime and its post-war successors 'as a means of claiming political legitimacy ... and prescribing new political solutions for the restoration of France'. French scholars had little incentive to demur from this dominant sentiment in collective memory, and many foreign historians also subscribed since it chimed with their stereotypical views of the French as 'an unscrupulous, excitable, and unstable people who cannot be relied upon'. Jackson's analysis of the subsequent evolution of the historiography is acute and sophisticated, and he performs a signal service in focusing attention on the antecedents and politics of the *décadence* paradigm. That said, he has far less to say about the political implication of more recent historiography – beyond some pertinent comments on the influence of the Cold War – which conveys an impression of the field progressing towards a more purely scholarly realm. Equally, his own prescription for a new approach to the subject that will 'better reflect the reality of the policy-making process' betrays a lingering attachment to 'practical realist' assumptions (Jackson 2006: quotes at 875, 876, 892).³

Jackson's work demonstrates how concern with textuality and narrative shades into consideration of the political implications of emplotment choices. Annika Mombauer's thoughtful survey of the literature on the origins of the First World War offers a much more extensive treatment of the political contexts informing conflicting interpretations and the implications of different modes of argument than any comparable text (where these generally figure but marginally). Insightfully cataloguing the manifold determinants of interpretation, she avows that history 'is not an objective factual account of events as they occurred', but only ever 'the interpretation of events, formulated against the background of political agendas'. Accordingly she offers extensive treatment of the ways in which politics and scholarship were imbricated in consideration of this conflict, especially through discussion of the inter-war 'war guilt' controversy, the overtly politicised character of German scholarship from the Fischer debate through to the post-unification period, and the manifold and subtle ways in which the Cold War shaped historians' concerns and arguments. Mombauer is also far less inclined

than many other international historians to attribute decisive agency to the evidence in explaining historiographical shifts: it is important to realise, she avers, that 'it is indeed possible, with selective use of available evidence, to make a case for any of the major powers being responsible for war in 1914'. Yet here, too, there are limitations. Mombauer's approach does not owe any overt debt to theory, and there is a discernible inconsistency in its conceptualisation of history and politics. If at times she implies their mutual permeability, at others she seems to fall back on a more conventional opposition. Thus we are told that the inter-war German 'revisionists' 'turned the historical question of the responsibility for the outbreak of war into a political issue' and later that Pierre Renouvin 'rather than be affected by political considerations, ... based his work on scholarly research'. Similarly, she implies that since the issue of the origins of the war 'seems at last to have lost its link with many contemporary political concerns' – in international politics, or debates over German national identity – then it can be said to have become depoliticised, 'to reside now wholly in the realm of history'. This is too attenuated an understanding of the politics of historical representation (Mombauer 2002: quotes at 223, 52, 47, 104, 222).⁴

The cluster of concerns related to the broader politics of academic scholarship and its ideological import are those perhaps least likely to be reflected in works that are not grounded in some sort of explicit engagement with postmodern theory. Yet even here, we can find historiographical work that does speak to these issues. David Reynolds is a leading British international historian who is well attuned to the intersections between politics and history – witness his study of the political origins of the designation 'Second World War' (Reynolds 2006: 9 – 22) – though he remains in the 'practical realist' camp and sceptical about the wider claims of culturalism (Reynolds 2006: 331 – 351). His exhaustive study of the fashioning of Winston Churchill's history of the Second World War is not cast in the vocabulary of Whitean narrativism – it takes its inspirations rather from 'genetic criticism' and the 'Cambridge school' of the history of political thought – and to a certain extent it is just a straightforward, if fascinating, publishing history. Beyond this, however, it tracks not only how Churchill's arguments were forged against the context of the nascent Cold War and battles with other memoirists to secure his reputation for posterity, but also how they both drew upon and

decisively influenced the national myths about the war that dominated British collective memory for decades (Reynolds 2004).

Even in historiographical collections which generally consist of narrowly descriptive treatments (Hogan 1995), it is possible to find individual essays which range more widely and productively. Thus Bruce Cumings has offered a scathing and coruscating analysis of American scholarship on the Cold War which enlivens an otherwise somewhat pedestrian volume on the historiography of modern American foreign relations. Cumings eschews the designation 'postmodernist' and much of his own historical writing rather draws productively on critical political economy and world systems theory; yet he is sympathetic to postmodernism's critical intellectual and political intent and liberally invokes Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault in his critique which combines theoretical acuity with close textual analysis (in fact of the 'rhetorical inversions' and 'sleight of hand' evident in Jerald Combs' work cited above). Cumings is especially insightful about the internal politics of the discipline, specifically the political valences of naming practices and the ways in which powerful gatekeepers shape the boundaries of legitimacy. Moreover, he is fully conscious of the manner in which writers on American foreign relations risk becoming complicit with American power: 'its subject – America's role in a non-American world – remains the most vulnerable to conflating objective truth with patriotic homily' (Cumings 1995: quotes at 32, 62).

This leads us into a final tranche of work within the field which, on my reading, best realises the promise of White's work and points to the most fruitful ways forward in an ongoing engagement. In relation to textuality, we should note Emily Rosenberg's study of Pearl Harbor in American memory, which considers academic historiography alongside numerous other memory discourses, including popular history, political rhetoric, feature films, documentaries and memorials. Rosenberg – steeped in theory, including that of White, though she wears it lightly – explores the mutual interactions between these media, and how certain basic discursive traditions were established, reproduced and contested within them by the work of memory activists and intertextual repetition. For Rosenberg Pearl Harbor is 'a figurative site of contested meanings where power is exerted and challenged', and her aim is 'not to stabilize some truth about this iconic event but to investigate its instability and to see what can be learned from the terms of contestation'. She explores the persistence of two core

emplotments, the one depicting the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor as an act of 'infamy', and the other portraying it as an act of presidential deception, a means to engineer the United States into war in Europe via the 'back door'. Each was potent because it drew on familiar patterns and narrative structures already circulating in American culture: in the former case, other examples of alleged surprise attack, such as the sinking of the *Maine* in 1898, and in the latter a tradition of suspicion towards executive authority and penchant for conspiracy theories. Moreover, through changing circumstances, each served identifiable political purposes in sustaining notions of national identity and rationalising particular policy options at home and abroad (up to and including the vigorous prosecution of a War on Terror).

The potency of Rosenberg's analysis lies not only in its identification of the structures and roots of the competing narratives, but also in the vision it presents of history as but one amongst many memory discourses, distinct in its conventions and grammar but always thoroughly saturated with ideology and not necessarily privileged. History, she writes, is 'inevitably selective, mediated, and structured', arising 'situationally from particular times, places, and interpretive communities': 'empirical evidence is essential', 'but its selection and interpretation remain so contingent, so dependent upon questions asked and upon diverse narrative and metaphorical frames', that closure is an illusory goal. She understands both 'history and other forms of public memory not as avenues to "recover" some "authentic" version of the past but as ever-changing and inevitably mediated fields of contestation over how to structure the past's representation' (Rosenberg 2003: quotes at 6, 156, 3).

Commenting on this last point, and underlining the subversive implications of Rosenberg's treatment, a mainstream practitioner by no means entirely unsympathetic to the cultural turn has warned that

if turned into some kind of manifesto then it is an interpretation that I expect many international historians would find very difficult to accept. It may be appropriate to some subjects of historical study, but if taken as a general guide surely it threatens to turn all history into nothing more than historiography. (Best 2006: 489)

A logic similar to Rosenberg's underpins my own ongoing comparative study of the historiography of the Second World War in each of the major combatant powers. Rather than focusing on the empirical basis or specific details of different histories, this entails thinking

about the kinds of stories that they purvey and the relationship of these to broader currents of collective memory. For example, it is striking how in each of the defeated Axis states international historians generated interpretations which deflected responsibility for recent aggression - variously by presenting their dictatorial regimes as aberrations in national history, by displacing agency onto other powers, or by obfuscating it altogether through an emphasis on the impersonal and tragic machinations of geopolitics – in ways which were conducive to the conservative postwar reconstruction of national identity and in tune with the self-exculpatory tendencies dominating collective memory (Finney 2008). This, together with the fact that these narratives also often closely resembled the generic archetypes drawn upon more generally in the cultures of the defeated (Schivelbusch 2003), should surely give some pause for thought about the epistemological status of international history.

White's thinking on the politics of emplotment choice is put to productive use in IR scholar David Campbell's work on narratives of the Bosnian war (Campbell 1998a, 1998b, 1999). (Collectively, IR scholars have shown very little interest in the concept of narrative, despite the fact that they are generally more comfortable trafficking in theory than historians (Suganami 2007; cf. Roberts 2006).) Campbell subjects a number of texts on Bosnia to close scrutiny, with particular reference to the manner in which they explain the origins of the conflict there, and identifies two key narratives. 'One is the tale of a *civil war* in which antagonism between various groups emerges for a variety of reasons. The other is of *international conflict*, in which aggression from one state threatens another' (emphasis in original). He explores how the variants of these two narratives are constructed textually, looking at their points of departure, the subsequent events which they emphasise, the manner in which they attribute agency to various actors, and the explanatory factors which they invoke. "Civil war" accounts make greater reference to ethnicity, historical hatred and religion than do those which focus on "international conflict" by drawing attention to aggressive nationalism, economic and political developments, and the pursuit of genocide'. Campbell's careful reading reveals the interpretive choices that are necessary to enable narratives that respectively either distribute blame for the conflict between the parties (that is, insisting that the Bosnian Muslims must take some responsibility) or which put the Serbs in the dock for precipitating aggressive war, but he stresses the point that these 'contradictory conclusions'

are both grounded in the chronology of events and do not violate accepted scholarly procedures. Hence he concurs with White that 'a recourse to the historical record will not by itself resolve the issue of which is better or worse', and that ultimately political and moral criteria must be invoked (Campbell 1998a: quotes at 267, 279).

Campbell's underlying point is that since emplotment involves aesthetic and political choices, historians and others must accept the ethical responsibility that this entails. After all, 'the narrativisation of events into stories with moral purposes partake[s] in the constitution of realities that have political effects, even as those narratives claim the status of dispassionate and descriptive observer'. The most obvious proof of this point was the palpable influence that stories cast in the 'civil war' mode – in which the Balkans were a morass of intractable ancient ethnic hatreds, which held all its peoples equally under their sway – had in discouraging external powers from intervening decisively to counteract Serb aggression (Campbell 1999: 320 – 321). Yet it could also be argued on another level that all the accounts surveyed shared the flaw of taking ethnic identity as a foundational given, 'materializing an ethnically ordered Bosnia to the detriment of understandings which might have been more politicizing' (Campbell 1998a: 280); counternarratives which he goes on to develop in his book length treatment (Campbell 1998b). The Bosnian case is clearly a slightly extreme one, but Campbell's deployment of White to mount an effective political critique of narrative representation could easily be replicated with other bodies of historiography. Equally, international historians could take to heart Campbell's injunction that given the political nature of all narratives we should always aim at a pluralization of perspectives: 'continual contestation, rather than the aspirations of synthesis and totality, should be the aim of inquiry' (Campbell 1998a: 281).

Consideration of Campbell's work has already led us in to the issue of the broader ideological work that disciplined historical narratives perform. An exemplary and trenchant work here is Louis A. Pérez's study of the historiography of the 1898 war over Cuba. Pérez explores how US foreign relations historians adopted modes of explaining the conflict that originated in the political rhetoric of contemporary US policy-makers, and which served to rationalise decades of American domination over Cuba and sustain a self-serving image of national altruism and virtue. As he puts it, 'popular narratives and political pronouncements seemed possessed of the capacity to validate themselves and passed directly into the

collective memory and thereupon proceeded to inform the assumptions from which historical scholarship was derived'. Thus this literature 'assumed unabashedly self-congratulatory tones, as the dominant historiographical discourse commemorated selflessness and sacrifice, magnanimity of intention and generosity of purpose, as the source of US policy'. As with Rosenberg, Pérez's approach assumes the mutual imbrication of politics, history, memory and identity:

The telling of 1898 – in historical discourses both popular and professional, repeated and refined - has served as a means of self-affirmation of what the nation is, or perhaps more correctly what the nation thinks itself to be, as past and present have been conjoined in the service of self-revelation. Representations of 1898 were early invested with the ideals by which Americans wished to define and differentiate their place in the international system.

Yet Pérez's purpose is more specifically to launch an indictment. Through close textual analysis he shows how interpretations conveyed particular messages via their choice of explanatory factors, chronological framing, presences and absences, and attributions of motive and agency, and how once set in place the dominant discursive framework was almost impervious to revision. 'The literature has flourished primarily as the reworking and refining of old themes, mostly from old sources, reformulating old conclusions, restating old arguments. Advances have been more in the form of style than substance; new explanations have been more derivative than innovative'. But the failings here are not merely professional, since Pérez is also alive to the ideological functions that these interpretations performed within a series of domestic and international political contexts, working 'to form and inform notions of nation, to foster a sense of past and place congruent with the normative structures around which the nation defines itself'. International historians, for all their pretensions to scholarly objectivity, were complicit not only in the perpetuation of particular forms of power relations in the Caribbean but also in the longer term trajectory of twentieth century American imperialism (Pérez 1998: quotes at 39, 42, x, 109, 68). Pérez does not explicitly invoke White but his treatment calls to mind the observation that:

if historians were to recognize the fictive element in their narratives, this would not mean the degradation of historiography to the status of ideology or propaganda. In

fact, this recognition would serve as a potent antidote to the tendency of historians to become captive of ideological preconceptions which they do not recognize as such but honor as the 'correct' perception of 'the way things *really* are' (White 1978: 99 emphasis in original).

This article has sought to examine the extent to which the practice of international history today can be said to partake of a Whitean sensibility. True to the conventional wisdom about White's marginal impact upon practicing historians, many international historians continue to operate quite successfully in blithe ignorance of his critique and the challenges it poses to their work. Yet in surveying historiographical work in the field, it is also possible to detect echoes of his influence even amongst practitioners who profess no particular theoretical bent, suggesting that in combination with others he has effected at least some modest reconfiguration of sub-disciplinary common sense. Moreover, there is a vigorous minority – not limited to those figures explicitly discussed here – who have put his thinking to work in relation to our particular concerns in an extremely productive manner, approaching historiographical texts with a fresh perspective and putting to them questions that are too seldom posed. Whether this quite constitutes a fully fledged Whitean critical historiography by the lights of the man himself is not in my gift to know. But it can make an important contribution to the future development of international history as a properly critical practice, fully aware of its own political inspirations and entailments. Moreover, if we can detect promising portents such as this even in the stony soil of international history, it surely gives the lie to premature 'practical realist' efforts to effect a neutralising closure over the continued pertinence and potential utility of his critique. We have not yet finished with White.

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NOTES

¹ I discussed Young's book in an earlier piece in this journal (Finney 1997: 367 - 370).

Tellingly, I can think of very few examples of this type of approach that have been produced in the decade since, though I make no claim to have surveyed the totality of output in the sub-discipline.

² My appropriation of White here somewhat inverts his original point, that the realist intentions of authors cannot be securely realised in narrativising texts.

³ Not that Jackson is by any means a naïve empiricist: he advocates the use of Pierre Bourdieu's social theory to facilitate this new approach.

⁴ There are further stimulating thoughts on the historiography of this subject in Winter and Prost 2005.

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