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### Rethinking Metahistory: The Historical imagination in nineteenth century Europe

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## Rethinking *Metahistory*: The Historical imagination in nineteenth century Europe

Alun Munslow\*

Editor: UK Rethinking History

Deploying the autobiographical form in this essay, Alun Munslow addresses both a reading of the nature of the text *Metahistory* and offers a personal contextualised history of his reading and deployment of the text in his own work.

**Keywords:** Hayden White; *Metahistory*; representation; epistemology; narrative

When I first read Hayden White's now (in)famous book it was in the context of initial thinking about and eventually creating a new – and radically – interdisciplinary undergraduate degree for literature and history students. The context was the merger of my institution with another. To avoid potential redundancies among history and literature staff, we needed a new degree course to soak up surplus teaching staff. But joint honours degrees in history and literature were common. So we needed a plan to maximise potential student recruitment. But what sort of plan? After much debate between colleagues in literature and history in both institutions, the idea emerged of abandoning the conventional joint honours degree in literature and history by challenging the notion of literature and history as entirely separate disciplines. I have to admit that at the time I really had no idea what they had in common except that both were fairly obviously narrative generating undertakings. So, my recognition that they were both written and storied activities was no major insight. But then a collaborator in literature pointed me and my history colleagues to a book that had been published a few years earlier, in 1973. This was called *Metahistory*, written by Hayden White. Hayden who? He sounded Welsh like me.

The colleague who pointed the historians toward White's *Metahistory* said that while the book was fat and fairly indigestible, it might just have something useful to say about how we could prise open the nature of the epistemic connections between literature and history, beyond what was the rather obvious

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notion that both were in the business of telling stories. So, we set up a series of staff seminars on the book (and we also pursued White's references/sources; all texts of which I had zero knowledge). Plainly this had to be done to tease out what utility White's text might have in helping us create our 'interdisciplinary degree'. In the culture of British university-level education, disciplines were separate but could be studied in tandem by students and so such 'joint honours' courses were common. But we thought we needed something different. These staff seminars were challenging for the historians if less so for our literature colleagues. The historians felt uneasy because pretty quickly they were presented with the argument that history could be legitimately regarded as a literary form!

What was very uncomfortable was the glee with which our friends in literature pointed out that, without any doubt, history was epistemologically subject to the strictures of writing a narrative. Yes, the content was about evidenced past reality, but otherwise history was 'obviously' a literary form. For a number of historians – and rather quickly – the pursuit of 'interdisciplinarity' seemed to be rapidly turning into a witch hunt of naïve historians. I have to admit that as a self-confessed and hard core social science historian who was near to submitting a typically high-end-theory PhD packed with regression equations and coefficients of elasticity, I was more than a little worried.

Moreover, I did not realise that I had been trained to think 'common sensically' that history was the senior discipline precisely because it was the pursuit of the literal at the expense of the literary. Figures of thought? What was that about? Indeed, the avoidance of the figurative, whether it be allegorical, ironic, symbolic, metaphoric or whatever, was simply a basic rule for social science historians. I recalled the 1950s TV programme *Dragnet*, in which Sgt. Joe Friday and his partners meticulously and painstakingly investigated crime in Los Angeles. 'The facts ma'am, just the facts' and 'The story you are about to see is true' were phrases that became so popular in my youth as to inspire much parody. But, surely, it was palpable common sense for a historian (a) to sort out the facts, (b) infer their most probable meaning, (c) offer an appropriate interpretational report, and (d) be as objective as you can in the process. Hence regression equations seemed entirely appropriate and literary artifice was unwelcome. Equations always trump narratives? The notion of the literal translation of 'the history of the past' was not just an aim, it was the basic function of the job. Any notions of 'the lisible' and/or 'the scriptible' were not in my intellectual tool box. And bizarre notions such as *jouissance* were simply ridiculous. And concepts such as 'logocentrism' and 'différence' made me reach for my equations and coefficients of elasticity!

I was trained to believe that history deals with discovering the most likely truth of our past-present existence (based on sound probability theory and smart inference) and is quite unlike literature, which is plainly inferior to history as a form of knowledge. Now, as I sit here in front of my laptop creating this 'history narrative', I seem to recall that it was around this time that I first became a member of the American Historical Association (1975). It was by one of those

coincidences that seem to be essential for producing narratives of this kind that I read a short review of *Metahistory* in the *American Historical Review*. This was in early 1976 (Ermarth and White 1975). I make no apology for the extensive quotations I now intend to offer from that review. It was and for me remains one of the best introductions to the book I have ever read. I did not read *Metahistory* immediately after reading the review, but probably a couple of years after I ‘found’ it again by means of the serendipity of ‘browsing past issues’. So, the concatenation of debates on the connections between literature and history were infused with and informed by my reading of this review. In the first paragraph the reviewer, Michael Ermarth, said:

This is a daring, ingenious, and sometimes be-wildering tour de force. White has produced a profoundly original “critique of historical reason,” based not upon the usual fare of idealist metaphysics or the logic of predictive science but upon linguistics – a discipline that may be-come the *novum organon* of the twentieth century. The author presents a unified field theory of history, which takes its departure from the linguistic structures and figurative language implicit in the historical writing of the great practitioners – Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt – and theorists – Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Croce – of the “classical age” of history.

In the second paragraph, Ermarth said:

The novelty of the work lies not with its components but in their systematic combination and deft application to concrete issues. In fairness it must be said that White’s style of exegesis is almost impossible to recapitulate in abbreviated form; one must see it at work. He acknowledges his debt to structuralism, the typology of explanations of Stephen Pepper, the literary criticism of Kenneth Burke and Northrop Frye, Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, and above all, Vico’s “new science” and its vision of history as a cycle of consciousness rooted in poetic tropes and figures of speech. From this formidable arsenal White has fashioned a “poetic logic” of historical discourse that enables him to cut across (or below) the conventional categories and schools of historical thought.

In the third paragraph Ermarth said:

The method is uniformly and unabashedly formal: White asserts that the historian con-fronts his data in a manner akin to that by which a grammarian approaches a new language. The historical work consists of various manifest and latent “levels of engagement”: esthetic, epistemological, and ethical-but all patently linguistic in nature. The historian must employ a mode of emplotment – Romantic, Tragic, Comic, or Satirical; a mode of explanation – Formist, Mechanistic, Organicist, or Contextualist; and a mode of “ideological implication”? – Anarchist, Radical, Conservative, or Liberal. Internal affinities and homologies among these modes constitute the interpretive strategy or “style” of the work. The strategies can be reduced to four “linguistic protocols,” corresponding to Vico’s four master tropes of Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony. These tropes provide the “deep grammar” of the historical account.

And in the fourth paragraph Ermarth said:

History is not a realistic transcription “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist” but a linguistic construct (“verbal icon”) of figures of speech entailing vast but largely hidden

assumptions. History is not mimesis but poesis. White's thesis plumbs the paradox implicit in the two senses of "literal" conveyed in the notion of a literal past: we must perforce think "in terms of our terms" – a self-evident but highly unsettling observation (White cites Nietzsche: "Our science is still the dupe of linguistic habit"). In delineating four different styles of realism, White shows that their standard of objectivity is defined by internal relations among the levels of engagement: there is no historical *Ding an sich*. Ranke's history is no more objective than Croce's, any more than the German language is "truer" than French; they are simply and irreducibly different systems of discourse.

In a highly felicitous phrase, Ermarth presaged many later criticisms of *Metahistory* when he suggested that White had tried to avoid systematisation but had perhaps unavoidably succumbed to a certain 'hardening' of the 'categories', suggesting that the overall analysis tends often to over egg the pudding (my phrase this time, not Ermarth's). Ermarth eventually comes to his basic criticism of White – a criticism that has dogged the book ever since – that in his pursuit of formalism White had failed to acknowledge that history (aka historical discourse) does deal with a real one-time existence as well as possessing – *as* history – its own formal coherence. So, *Ding an sich*? History is the past in itself? No, it is an investment in some sort of literary/figurative metaphysics? Obviously I believe it is. But, of course, I do not know it is. I do not worry about this as I believe lots of things I cannot prove.

Ermarth noted what many other critics subsequently also did: that the book is framed in the 'ironic mode' that seems appropriate to an age (the 1970s) which had begun to lose its faith in history as, shall I say, conventionally understood. But Ermarth also acknowledged something that many antagonistic reviewers subsequently and still far too many historians today do not acknowledge: that the book offers a compelling vision and critical prod in its overall thesis. As is well understood, White insisted that most historians exist in a theoretical torpor and that there was a complacent intellectual consensus on what they do and how they do it. I leave it to you, dear reader, to decide for yourself how much has changed today.

Ermarth concluded his short review by engaging with what I take to be the central point of the book: that history is first, last and always a literary act, but it is a literary act that can recognise and try to deal with its nature as a figurative intellectual process. From my reading the only way to address the extreme fallibility and intellectual frailty of that form of history that I designate as being 'of a particular kind' is to destroy the innocence of the vast majority of historians concerning their status and functioning as authors. And this insight is why the journal you are now reading came into existence, of course. But I move too far and too soon in my narrative. As this is a narrative, of course I have a narrative arc in mind: exposition, complication, crisis/climax and resolution. Well, I am not sure about a resolution.

After reading the Ermarth review I returned to the Preface in *Metahistory* (which I had speed read already), but especially the last two paragraphs, and then I moved to the 40-odd-page Introduction and experienced what today might be

called 'information overload'. I was shocked and worried, inspired and elated, energised and enervated all at once. I was confused and bemused. I thought I had read something profound but was intellectually wholly ill-equipped to 'figure out' what it all might mean for me as a historian and for my historical practice. So I decided not to read the rest of the book immediately. Like my beloved dog Rosie, when in doubt the best policy is always to look the other way.

My reason was also practical, as I had bigger fish to fry. This was the approaching deadline for my PhD submission and defence. Anyway, I eventually did read *Metahistory* from start to finish, mainly because of the pressing need to say something useful in the staff seminars that were being held to plan the new interdisciplinary degree. And I was worried and nervous should anyone ask me a question about what White was saying about history. I could repeat the Ermarth book review but at that point I was unsure what it all meant (if, indeed, I do now). To compound this large bag of mixed feelings and associated intellectual problems I had to decide how White's analysis of history could be turned into practical classroom practice and – even worse for me – in writing professional academic history.

So, as a social science historian I was not ready or willing to intellectually re-skill at what seemed to be a fundamental epistemological level. In the long late 1970s and early 1980s I still believed that historians had some very good and well-justified reasons for not only knowing what happened in the past (which I still do) but that we were perfectly well-equipped to 'discover' the meaning of the facts via smart inference or – even better – by deploying serious level hypothesis testing. This is what I later called constructionist history. So, I was now rethinking my social science faith as I began to think about issues of 'representation'. I continued to assume that after the colligation process, whereby I inferentially connected the dots of the data I could with reasonable objectivity, I could advance a pretty sound interpretation of the meaning I 'found in the data'. So, having read White I was suddenly caught between intellectual worlds. I was both convinced by the straightforward empirical-analytical-representationalist process (statements of justified belief, inferential reasoning and representation-ism) through which the past and history were capable of being aligned, but my somewhat protracted reading of *Metahistory* had created an unnerving doubt. This was now becoming a bit of a crisis. Historians are paid to teach and ideally research as well. But I was now unsure not about doing the research but writing the history. After all I was no history theorist, much less a philosopher of history. I am probably still not.

So, while endeavouring to make sense of *Metahistory*, while at work I also pursued researching and then in a frantic 1978 writing up *The Urban Political Assimilation of European Immigrants in the United States, 1870–1920*. So, at work I was reading White and his sources, and in the evening at home I was reading and absorbing US census reports, photocopies of newspaper articles from the late nineteenth century, plus a range of other secondary sources in the hope

and expectation of gaining a seriously hard core social science PhD that demonstrated the explicatory benefits of statistical analysis.

For example, I was reading secondary texts on mass politics, political sociology, comparative politics, ethnocultural politics, sociological theories of Americanisation, American immigration policies, urban boss politics, economic history, the nature of late nineteenth century urban governance, Progressivism, developed an intimate local history knowledge of the city of Boston, MA, hyphenism, psephology, the Progressive Movement, and primers and eventually higher level texts on quantitative statistical analysis. I also ended up on fairly intimate intellectual terms with a rather large range of contemporary secondary sources on anthropology, ethnocultural politics, socialisation and adaptation, political reformism and corruption and patterns of immigration and the absorption of European immigrants over a 50-year period in 50 middle- and large-sized cities. But this was, of course, how social science historians got their PhD. My wife Jane did more than her bit, typing up 520 pages of a PhD that was probably in excess of 100,000 words; somewhat over the limit.

In my parallel universe then my practical teaching necessity meant I had to come to terms with the delivery of this 'interdisciplinary' Literature and History undergraduate degree. So, after my PhD viva I returned with something less than enthusiasm to White. Was he getting his story straight? Well, the only way was now to read up on White's sources: Pepper, Burke, Mannheim and Frye. And then I felt obliged (although reluctantly) to follow this up with usually indigestible doses of Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Croce. Frankly there were many times when I resentfully thought 'why am I doing this?' I was being transported out of my social science comfort zone, the experience of which I later rationalised/theorised as lying somewhere between the epistemological choices of reconstructionism and constructionism.

So, for several years in the early 1980s I was leading a double intellectual life that had me very uncertain about not just what I thought *as* a historian but what I ought to research *as* a historian. This pushed me into a kind of intellectual compromise. I moved into 'American Studies'. This was not interdisciplinary but was multi-disciplinary. White's *Metahistory* (though by now it was dog eared, spine broken, annotated, with pages falling out; and as I write this it is in a bookshelf just outside my eye line, with its heavily corrugated spine now coated in a faded green) seemed to incarnate my notion of an 'area study' in which a variety of disciplines went into the intellectual mixer. And initially and up to a point it worked. I met other academics in literature at conferences hosted by the British Association of American Studies. Happily many of them had heard of Hayden White and of course those American literary theorists I was stumbling across. And most of us were desperately trying to figure out the pronunciation of 'synecdoche'.

I also began team teaching the 'interdisciplinary core course' on our new interdisciplinary literature and history degree. As it turned out, I shared a course with a colleague who taught American literature. Eventually – by the mid-1980s

– we co-wrote an article that served to clarify and solidify my thinking concerning history as a narrative form (Ellis and Munslow 1985). In it we addressed Frederick Jackson Turner as an author. But it was not until the late 1980s that I produced my own article-length application of Whitean-inspired scholarship. I was a late bloomer when it came to publishing. But (I like to think) the delay was due to my other growing interests in Antonio Gramsci, my discovery of the concept of cultural interpellation and my belated encounter with Hayden White's engagement with Michel Foucault (Munslow 1988).

Through the 1980s and into the early 1990s I slowly read more and more on Gramsci, White and Foucault, and eventually decided to write a cultural and intellectual history of America between 1870 and 1920, which had been the period I covered in my PhD and which I mainly taught. The book was published in 1992 and turned out to be a mix of biography, Faucaldian structuralism and Gramscian notions of ideological interpellation, all mixed together and guided by White's formalism (Munslow 1992, 2009).

So, it took a number of years to come to terms with White and *Metahistory*. It took most of the 1980s, as I was also trying to keep up with his huge scholarly output of journal articles. However, it was always *Metahistory* that I went back to. So, what was it that inspired me to turn from being a hard-hitting social science historian (with the PhD to prove it) to some sort of deviationist who had wandered off the shining path of empirical-analytical and representationalist history thinking and practice?

It was one of my regular returns to *Metahistory* in the early 1990s that prompted me to consider whether it might be possible to deconstruct the nature of history thinking and practice along Whitean lines. It seemed to me that *Metahistory* captured the notion of what I later called (and still do call) 'history of a particular kind' or 'empirical, analytical and representationalist history' and what I increasingly saw as its intellectual bankruptcy and consequent failure to recreate any narratives presumed to exist in the reality of the past. The reason, of course, was because of the nature of history as a fabricated narrative that directly controlled the processes of 'objective empiricism' and/or social, political or economic theorising (and because of the issue of ethics and the aesthetic preferences of the individual historian as well), rather than the other way around. So I reread *Metahistory* (and tried to keep up with White's growing oeuvre), searching for some sort of intellectual basis for my emerging belief that history was nothing more or less than an unprivileged literary form. And of course that is what I found.

So, did I get the idea that, ontologically, history was a literary form from reading *Metahistory*? Well yes of course I did. But I felt obliged to use the thinking that I read in(to) *Metahistory* that propelled me into working out for myself a logic of historical thinking and practice that was (with very little irony) 'as much invented as found' (White 1973). The happy combination I found/created of Foucault and White required me to acknowledge the nature of historical writing that results from the capricious signifier-signified connection

that made the comfortable notion of some sort of extension of past into present so unconvincing. So, from the early 1990s I began to believe that the past exists for us only *as* and *in* the history authored by historians.

So, how we think and rethink the nature of what later I would come to call 'the-past-as-history' is dependent upon the extent to which we agree with White's verdict that all historians must also be philosophers of history. I think this was the key idea I derived from my reading of *Metahistory*. I suppose I had always recognised that historians brought 'assumptions' to what they did and that other historians (and every history reader) needed to understand what those assumptions might be in order to make some sense of the conclusions they reached about 'the meaning and explanation of the past'. Okay, there was, for example, Marxist history and feminist history (to name just two genres), but I began to believe that all forms of history had in-built into them modes of creating 'the-past-as-history'. And this was, of course, a philosophy that encoded history in a variety of ways (forms) because history was a tropological invention.

Now this was an insight that influenced my entire thinking about the nature of 'doing history' from the mid-1980s through to the present. So, I was shifting rather rapidly from a modernist to a postmodernist understanding of the nature of history and (what later I would call) 'historying'. And of course I had the good fortune to read and meet Keith Jenkins in the early 1990s. So, re-reading *Metahistory* on and off I was 'turned' toward the desire to address how historical knowledge is not at all naturalistic in form. I would later learn to refer to history as a fictive enterprise. So, as discussions with Keith confirmed, although individual referential statements may be empirically justified as true/false, every history narrative exceeds their sum. The historical narrative was to be understood as a compounded interpretative exercise that, beyond statements of justified belief, can be considered as neither convincingly true nor false. To coin a phrase, narrative exceeds its excess.

So stories exist in history but we cannot know if they exist in the past. The result is that there are various stories that can be voiced by the historian about the same events in the past. So, justified belief remains undamaged, but meaning is more complex than a definition of it as an interpretative report based on probabilities and pellucid representation. All those meanings I derived from the statistical analysis in my PhD I now viewed somewhat differently.

Unless my memory defeats me, it was around this time (the early 1990s) that I moved up the ranks in my profession and started to acquire more and more university administration. I started to chair meetings and come into more intimate contact with the university administration. Although I like to believe I was a reasonably good administrator (I eventually headed up the happy band of historians where I was working as a sort of drudge Head of Department), I recognised that there was a very strong inclination among university bureaucrats to collect what usually turned out to be a pointless and feckless collation of data that they ignored when politics dictated. Around that time I also came across 'The Gleaners' by Jean-François Millet, which portrays three bent

peasant women gleaning a field of vagrant grains of wheat after the harvest. The image appealed to me for several epistemic and ethical reasons. There was my political sympathy for an exploited social class (I was and remain a fairly hard left socialist), but also the figurative notion that also seemed to come to me of the process of picking up the detritus of the past and making it meaningful and thus functional.

Apparently in my analogic thinking process I was comparing 'doing history' of what I was increasingly calling 'history of a particular kind' (empirical-analytical-representationalist historying) with my effort to make sense of 'the-past-as-history', understood as a literary form of representation. Of course I will never know the truth of 'the gleaners' because all I have in my mind is Millet's painting. But, as White had argued (and as I write this I blush at its basic and so obvious 'truth'), when historians describe the past, it is the act of narration that imposes what seems to be an unavoidable permanency, completeness and uniqueness on the past. This is summarised in the sense of 'how it most probably was'. My PhD was now looking like a rather unfortunate excursion into a realm of invention that I had long viewed as a demonstration of high probability.

I appreciate historians of a particular kind (epistemological-analytical-representationalist) would probably say this is not what they do. They say they do not tidy up the past merely based on probability theory, rather that they reveal its uncertain complexity. But that makes no sense in narrative terms. While acknowledging history is on the one hand plainly an act of narrative making, historians of a particular kind are characterised by their collective professional belief in the epistemology of inference and the power of the word to explicate the most like explanation/meaning. There is an epistemic inconsistency here that cannot be avoided except by ignoring it. Historians of a particular kind insist that their narrative is directly connected to the reality of the past because it is the most likely explanatory narrative available from 'back then'. Hence 'the past' and 'history' are to all practical realist effects the same thing. So, a history is not some sort of adaptation or remediation of the past in another form.

But as White has pointed out, most historians ignore the content of the form and that no body of events necessarily has its given intrinsic narrative meaning. Indeed, as Ankersmit also so famously has pointed out, history is all about narrative substances. So, historians of a particular kind insist – against all logic that I can see – that what they write *as* history *is* the most likely history. This is founded on the unlikely idea that any given body of data have to be judged only by the measure that it is a literal re-presentation of events in order to qualify as history. But, as White pointed out in *Metahistory* (and subsequently elsewhere and many times), the logic of history once history is defined as what it manifestly is in ontological terms – a figurative representation of real events – the matter of its truthfulness falls under a different set of criteria, which requires an understanding of the nature of the truth of fictions.

Elsewhere I have argued that this is the nature of history. Because it emerges straight from the rendezvous of the historian with the past *and* history, the

historian can do no more or less than authorially create ‘the-past-as-history’. So, instead of a re-presentation of what once was, history can only have the ontology of what I have called a fictive intrusion. Hence, historians can only address ‘the past’ as ‘history’. My reading of *Metahistory* started me on a path that eventually led me to believe that it is the nature of ‘historiography’ that moves it beyond the epistemic sureties of ‘objective’ empiricism, austere inference, pellucid representation and probable meaning. History, by its fictive nature, is always mediatory. Hence it is my belief that White was correct in what I think was his key argument in *Metahistory*. This is that the historian’s narrative is just that: a narrative construction of the historian. Narrative statements (or substances if you prefer Ankersmit’s terminology) are never just fact-based propositions that are endowed by ‘the past’ with ‘their meaning’, which has been ‘unearthed’ by the craftwork of the historian.

This is not to say (dare I say obviously?) that every (hi)story is a made-up fiction. But the really important point is that if anyone finishes reading *Metahistory* without acknowledging that history is a fictive (as opposed to a fictional) cultural discourse then they have not grasped the most fundamental point about creating a history. This (for me if not for the vast majority of historians) is that the ontology of practical realism, with its epistemic security built on history understood as a mimetic if still interpretative report of ‘findings’, remains hopeless and helpless in the face of the situation that the past no longer exists and so all we have is the historians remediation. One would like to think (well, I would) that surely no one reading *Metahistory* could not be caused to at least pause over the distinction between statements of justified belief and the procedure of inference that exist at the ‘meta’ level of narrative creation; ‘historiography’. Well, as we all know (and have probably experienced) the majority of historians have not and do not intend to read *Metahistory*. While a few (a very few in my experience) may say something to the effect that ‘postmodernism’ and various other ‘postist’ forms of history (e.g. postcolonialism) have revealed some of the presuppositions that underpin historical interpretation, the practical realism of the vast majority of the profession is necessarily both maintained and sustained by a rather crude ‘I know what I like and I like what I know’ sensibility. And this will not shift while history research (certainly in the UK) rewards high end empirical-analytical-representationalist thinking and practice. The notion of ‘fictive historiography’ (which for me follows on from the logic of *Metahistory*) is never going to get a four-star grade in the British ‘Research Excellence Framework’ exercise.

Now, some of my best friends are empirical, analytical historians and, despite some of the strange things that they choose to believe, I have enormous respect for their efforts in defending their position in the face of what I take to be the unanswerable logic outlined by White in *Metahistory* and his other 100 plus essays and articles. And I think 40 years on I am not too surprised at how the vast majority of historians still insist on drawing inferences from evidence ‘to discover what happened and what it all most probably meant’ in the past and, of

course, I happily acknowledge that it generally works. Common sense and practical realist inductive inference, with its armoury of arguments to best explanation, statistical inference, 'seeing patterns in the sources' and so forth, is entirely reasonable and defensible up to point. Indeed, I deploy this mechanism quite regularly in navigating my way round my local supermarket, catching a train and walking my dog, Rosie. This is not to in any way demean the process of the historian justifying their historical descriptions. Yes, there is rationality in describing present as well as past events.

The rationality of practical realist history is of course that it is an evidence-based activity. And in most cases the logic works. So, among the majority of historians, it is accepted that drawing a rational conclusion from the available evidence makes sense. But for me this rational process does not guarantee truthful meaning/explanation. After all, there are different forms of 'truth' (at the very least correspondence, correlation, coherence and consensus). Hence, such historians work on the principle that practical realist scepticism works. So, what I regularly call 'historians of a particular kind' are unhappy with any rejection of their (most favoured correspondence and representational) transcription of the past into its history.

However, in the wake of *Metahistory* it remains surprising to me that most historians still refuse to address the fictive (imagined) nature of the history narrative and its consequence for history thinking and practice, and not least the practical realist belief in mimesis. I suppose it is some sort of reflexive angst at being told that mimesis is not all it is cracked up to be because it has to be shored up by a further set of rather odd epistemic beliefs. Not least among these is the wholesale professional state of denial concerning the deployment of fictive concepts such as anachrony (taking events out of chronology), or how often historians are required create characterisation via literary descriptive modifiers, not to mention the timing of their texts as they create, dilate and contract time by the use of basic narrative functions like tense. It occurs to me to ask what really is so worrying about acknowledging that (a) history is not the same as the past, and (b) what are taken to be the functions of the past are – ontologically – functions of the history narrative.

As White understood and explained in *Metahistory*, historians make employment decisions even as/if they firmly believe the data of the past 'proves' a set of events must constitute a particular meaning/explanation that could be construed as a romance or a tragedy. But one is forced to ask: do such historians create their narrative rather than discover it? Facts and arguments can only operate within a rhetorical framework. My understanding of history of a particular kind is that it is an unprivileged narrative about the time before now. It follows that – from my reading of *Metahistory* – that in the absence of the continuing presence of the past, all we have is that narrative we create and call history. It is this act – not the 'knowable for what it was' past – that provides us with our sense of the continuing presence of the past in our perpetual present. The implication of this from my reading of *Metahistory* is

substantial for the theory and practice of our engagement with the 'time before now'. Hence, it is my argument that every history is fictive, fabricated, factious and factitious, as well as a factualist cultural discourse. Mimesis can be a part of all this. But it is not essential to our engagement with the time before now. In my reading of *Metahistory*, White argued that this can open up experimental historying, which, of course, entirely changes the rules of the game. And the portentous defences of 'doing history properly' is exposed as little more than a rodomontade.

Unfortunately, such artless thinking (with its consequent practical realist practice) will not do. The connections between descriptions of past things and events and what makes them true hardly fathoms out the nature of history. Although there are many practitioner-historians who defend history as a practical, realist, empirical, analytical and representationalist activity, this does not mean they are right. The upshot was that there was never going to be any rapprochement. The argument has been (and still is) regularly put that if the so-called 'poststructuralists', who seemed to be headed into the Anglophone history theory world by Hayden White (clutching his self-devised bible *Metahistory*), were correct in their belief that we cannot 'figure' the original meaning of the texts that evidenced that nature of the past and its meaning, we could have no window on past human experience and so we will remain imprisoned in the present. So, it is no small wonder that most historians draw upon their practice of reconstructing the past in order to resist this move of the intellectual yahoos. The increasingly violent debate on the nature and functioning – even the very existence – of history could be summarised by admitting that we live and think in our present, but the question that White and his acolytes were posing was whether we can re-create any of the past to sustain us in our travels through time? Keith Jenkins thought (and as far as I know – given his now self-imposed intellectual purdah – he still does) that the phenomena of postmodernism is best imagined (and surely ironically) as a retrospective/historical questioning as to whether we actually need anything from the past. Do we really need any historicisations to help us think through our understanding and creation of our perpetual present?

Clearly I have no answer to any of the questions I have posed in this essay. Understandably I have no idea whether my 'personal historical interpretation' is right, wrong, or indifferent to past reality. I have created a narrative to serve my purposes (which seemed to change with every minor textual revision) while sticking to the evidenced data. In my analysis of *Metahistory* I have simply tried to produce a narrative that describes what I think was the nature of my engagement with *Metahistory* and how it was pretty important to my 'becoming' the kind of historian I am (whatever that is). But I assume that any connection to the past reality as I have described (and referenced) is likely to be as much a function of my narrative structure as it might be anything else. As much imagined as found? Sorry – a rather obvious narrative move . . . ?

**Notes on contributor**

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