8

The question of narrative

Story-telling is generally perceived as one of the important functions of writing history. Some historians have suggested that this is the defining feature of the discipline; François Furet, for example, argues that '[h]istory is the child of narrative' – that history is defined by its 'type of discourse' rather than its object of study.[1] Central to story-telling is the construction of a narrative that has a beginning, middle and end, and which is structured around a sequence of events that take place over time. The following definition of narrative, by Lawrence Stone, might be taken as representative of the conventional understanding of narrative:

> Narrative is taken to mean the organisation of material in a chronologically sequential order and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with sub-plots. The two essential ways in which narrative history differs from structural history is that its arrangement is descriptive rather than analytical and that its central focus is on man not circumstances. It therefore deals with the particular and specific rather than the collective and statistical. Narrative is a mode of historical writing, but it is a mode which also affects and is affected by the content and method.[2]

There are two key phrases in this definition which require elaboration. The first concerns the idea that narrative is a single, coherent story, and the second is the suggestion that narrative is inherently descriptive, not analytical. Narratives require a high degree of coherence to work as a story. However, the scale of the narrative may entail quite distinct levels of conceptual coherence. Drawing upon Allan Megill's categorization, these levels range from the micro-narrative of a particular event; a master narrative which seeks to explain a broader segment of history; a grand narrative 'which claims to offer the authoritative account of history generally'; and finally a metanarrative which draws upon some particular cosmology or metaphysical foundation, for example, Christianity.[3]

Robert Berkhofer suggests that 'great stories' continue to exert considerable appeal for both historians and their readership. Taking the example of the five hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus, Berkhofer showed the highly contested nature of a particular master narrative. Was the Columbus story 'a discovery, an invasion, a conquest, an encounter, an interaction, an intervention or something else'?[4] In terms of grand narratives, Megill argues that most twentieth-century historians have retained a commitment to a single history of humankind, but only as it exists 'ideally, ... the unreachable end of an autonomous discipline. Coherence is now located not in the told or anticipated story, but in the unified mode of thinking of the discipline'.[5] This compromise, he argues, has enabled historians to keep the idea of coherence embedded in the methods and aims of the historical profession.

How, then, have historians gone about the process of constructing coherent narratives from the mass of empirical evidence? Let us begin with an argument which supports Stone's thesis that historical narrative is primarily descriptive, not analytical. One contribution to this debate by M. C. Lemon states the case for traditional empiricism by arguing that it is possible for a narrative to simply 'inform the reader of "what happened"'.[6] Lemon rejects the idea that narratives invariably have a persuasive or rhetorical purpose, and is highly critical of those written from a particular perspective. Recognizing that historians must engage in a process of selection among the available facts in order to construct a narrative, Lemon suggests that the way in which these choices are made rests upon the requirements for coherence and intelligibility, in which prior and subsequent events are cemented together by a 'conventionally acceptable contiguity'.[7] In terms of narrative's explanatory power, Lemon argues that 'it seems to offer an understanding in the sense that the reader can see an action as an appropriate response by an agent'. Lemon agrees that narrative 'assumes a general theory about human conduct ... a set of assumptions about how people behave and how the world works'.[8] However, contrary to Abrams' critique of unexamined concepts in the writing of narrative history, referred to earlier in the context of Elton's work, Lemon sees this as the strength of a narrative approach.[9] He concludes:

> that this mode of explanation does not need articulating on each occasion through explanatory and analytic discourse but is actually embedded in a form of discourse exclusive to itself (viz. narrative), suggests that narrative explanation is sophisticated rather than naive.[10]

Lemon draws a firm line between historical narratives, based upon fact, and fictional narratives, utilizing imagination. However, this distinction has been challenged in the late twentieth century as the essentially constructed nature of historical narrative has been subjected to closer, and critical, scrutiny. Historians must now consider the assertion that our representation of the past has no greater claim to truth than that of novelists and poets, and that our narratives are literary artefacts, produced according to the rules of genre and style. This challenge has come from Hayden White, who argues that 'in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they manifestly are – verbal fictions, the contents of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences'.[11]

In a widely read essay entitled 'The Burden of History' published in 1966, White criticized what he perceived as the disingenuous way in which historians claimed that their work 'depend[ed] as much upon intuitive as upon analytical methods', while their professional training focused almost entirely upon the latter.[12] He argued that historians had lost sight of the value of 'historical imagination' for understanding the human condition, and he pointed to 'history's golden age' between 1800 and 1850 when 'the best representatives of historical thought' actively engaged historical imagination to illustrate 'man's responsibility for his own fate'.[13] White pursued this theme further when he published a major analysis of the narrative modes employed by major philosophers and historians during 'history's golden age'. The writings of four leading European historians: Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville and Burckhardt; and four philosophers of history: Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Croce, form the basis for White's theory of 'historical imagination'.[14]

White's central point is that language, and linguistic protocols, fundamentally shape the writing of history. They do so in two ways: in the choice of the theoretical concepts and narrative structures employed by historians to analyse and explain historical events, and secondly, through the linguistic paradigm 'by which historians prefigure their field of study'. It is the latter that White defines as the metahistorical element in all historical writing:

> Histories combine a certain amount of 'data', theoretical concepts for explaining these data, and a narrative structure for their presentation. . . . In addition, I maintain, they contain a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic in nature, and which serves as the

precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively 'historical' explanation should be. This paradigm functions as the 'metahistorical' element in all historical works that are more comprehensive in scope than the monograph or archival report.[15]

The metahistorical element in historical writing is determined right from the start. The historian must 'prefigure the field – that is to say, constitute it as an object of mental perception'.[16] This mental process takes place first, and underpins every other aspect of research and writing. White describes it as a 'poetic act which precedes the formal analysis of the field, [in which] the historian both creates his object of analysis and predetermines the modality of the conceptual strategies he will use to explain it'.[17] To understand the metahistorical aspect of history writing, White turns to the theory of tropes. Tropes are the underlying linguistic structures of poetic or figurative language. The way in which the historian conceptualizes his or her research is, he argues, constrained by these linguistic structures. White suggests that there are four tropes which shape the 'deep structural forms of the historical imagination', and these are as follows:[18]

The theory of tropes

metaphor	one thing is described as being another thing, thus 'carrying over' all its associations
metonymy	the substitution of the name of a thing by the name of an attribute of it, or something closely associated with it
synecdoche	a part of something is used to describe the whole, or vice versa
irony	saying one thing while you mean another

Through the concept of tropes, White transforms figures of speech into deep structures of thought which predetermine the kind of narrative the historian will construct. Two critiques of this proposition may concern us here. In practice historians may employ more than one trope. White's own study of nineteenth-century historians illustrates that each one employed multiple tropes, for example, Tocqueville alternates between 'two modes of consciousness, Metaphorical and Metonymical', mediated through Irony.[19] On a more fundamental level, empirically minded historians have rejected the elevation of tropes to a determining role in historical narrative. Windschuttle, for example, claims that '[t]ropes are not deep foundations that determine the whole structure. Rather, they are relatively minor stylistic devices used *within historical accounts*. . . .

White has mistaken the surface for the substance, the decoration for the edifice'.[20]

Once the historian has commenced research, White argues that he or she must choose specific theoretical concepts and narrative structures to make sense of the evidence. White suggests that historians have three strategies that may be used for historical explanation: emplotment, formal argument and ideological implication, and each of these have four alternative modes of articulation:[21]

Mode of emplotment	Mode of argument	Mode of ideological implication
Romantic	Formist	Anarchist
Tragic	Mechanistic	Radical
Comic	Organicist	Conservative
Satirical	Contextualist	Liberal

The particular combination of emplotment, argument and ideological implication chosen by a historian determines his or her historiographical style. But that choice is not entirely free. White suggests that there are 'elective affinities' among the various modes and these are represented on the horizontal plane in the table above.[22]

Let us take Leopold von Ranke, one of the historians examined in *Metahistory*, to see how the theory works in practice. Ranke was among the foremost nineteenth-century historians writing about the history of peoples and nations. White suggests that most of Ranke's work employs the comic, organicist and conservative modes of emplotment, argument and ideology. Historians emplot their narratives in particular ways, and these may themselves provide a form of explanation. After all, the sources do not tell historians when to begin their narrative, or when to end it. White argues that Ranke employs a comic emplotment, a model in which men may triumph over their divided state, even if temporarily, and achieve reconciliation and harmony. Secondly, the organicist argument, as the name suggests, employs an organic metaphor for explanation. Individuals and entities are component parts of a whole, and the result is 'integrative in intent'. Finally, the conservative ideological implication is also consistent with an organic metaphor. Change is best undertaken slowly, and should be a gradual adaptation of prevailing institutions and structures. These three aspects, according to White, are integral to Ranke's accounts of the rise of the nation. Ranke's narrative, like the

definition of comedy above, moves 'from a condition of apparent peace, through the revelation of conflict, to the resolution of conflict in the establishment of a genuinely peaceful social order'.[23]

The narrative strategies of emplotment, argument and ideology Ranke employs in his narratives are, according to White, derived from the 'metahistorical' element, the 'tropological explanation' with which he began. Ranke's work illustrates the 'trope' of synecdoche, that is, his characterization of European history 'provides the reader with the sense of succession of formal coherencies through which the action moves in such a way as to suggest the *integration* of the parts with the larger historical whole'.[24] White does not suggest why Ranke would choose this trope over the alternatives, and this has been the source of one critique.

Hans Kellner accepts that White posits a profoundly moral dimension to the rhetorical and linguistic choices made by historians, but argues that White provides no explanation of how these choices are made. 'Since history cannot begin with documents (the process is already well under way before a document is confronted), what is at the bottom of White's system? Where is its *beginning*?'[25] At no stage does White suggest that the choice of trope may be influenced by the historians' own biographical or historical environment.[26] It has been argued that White's 'lack of psychological theory deprives his concept of style of a fully explicated, active, synthetic principle'.[27] This leads, according to Kellner, to contradictory tenets in White's thought:

> If language is irreducible, a 'sacred' beginning, then human freedom is sacrificed. If men are free to choose their linguistic protocols, then some deeper, prior, force must be posited. White asserts as an existential paradox that men *are* free, and that language is irreducible.[28]

A second common critique concerns White's relativism. White asserts that there is no necessary relationship between the structure of the narrative and the historical evidence, and therefore there are no grounds upon which a historian can claim greater authority for one interpretation over another.[29] In an essay concerning the historical representation of Nazism, White reiterated that '[t]here is an inexpungeable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena'.[30] Many empirical historians would not accept that the narrator's subjectivity entirely determines an historical text.[31] Furthermore, such a position 'leaves no basis for a responsibility to the subject'.[32] However, in his essay referred to above, White appears to qualify his relativism. In the context of Nazism, White suggests that

complete freedom of choice in linguistic protocols, for example, the choice of a comic mode, would be rejected by an appeal to 'the facts'. As Wulf Kansteiner points out, this contradiction in White's theory 'leaves the reader in a state of methodological uncertainty'.[33]

The response by historians to the central propositions of *Metahistory* frequently reflect their own receptiveness to the concepts of poststructuralism (see chapter 12). Dominick LaCapra, for example, extols the way in which White has challenged the unreflective use of narrative in the writing of history: '[n]o one writing in this country at the present time has done more to wake historians from their dogmatic slumber'.[34] More common, however, is the argument that while White's insights have relevance for nineteenth-century historians they are not applicable to the contemporary diversity of history writing.[35] However, White has applied his tropological model to E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, an extract from which forms the reading for the chapter on Marxist historians. White perceives a correspondence between the four 'master tropes of figuration' and the four explicit divisions in Thompson's book. The first section, entitled 'The Liberty Tree', White describes as metaphorical, 'in which working people apprehend their differences from the wealthy and sense their similarity to one another, but are unable to organize themselves except in terms of the general desire for an elusive "liberty"'.[36] The subsequent sections move through metonymic, synecdochic and ironic modes, and White concludes that '[t]he pattern which Thompson discerned in the history of English working-class consciousness was perhaps as much imposed upon his data as it was found in them ... a pattern long associated with the analysis of processes of consciousness in rhetoric and poetics'.[37]

François Furet, among other historians, has argued that narrative has lost ground to 'problem-oriented' history in the twentieth century.[38] This development in history writing has not been without its critics.[39] In the late 1970s, Lawrence Stone deplored that the 'story-telling function has fallen into ill-repute among those who have regarded themselves as in the vanguard of the profession, the practitioners of the so-called "new history" of the post-Second-World-War era'. He attributed the decline to, among others, Marxist and *Annales* historians, and 'their attempt to produce a coherent and scientific explanation of change in the past'.[40] These attempts having failed, Stone more cheerfully reported, narrative was once again back on the agenda. However, some of the histories Stone identified as evidence of

this new trend, for example, Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, sit very uneasily with his own unitary, chronological definition of narrative (with which we began this chapter).[41]

The answer may lie in a more flexible definition of narrative, which takes into account the contemporary focus upon social groups for which the historical record is patchy and incomplete.[42] To what extent narrative can expand without losing the coherence of a story remains one of the central problems of writing history.[43] David Hackett Fischer called some years ago for a 'braided narrative [which] interweaves analysis with storytelling', and innovative attempts to achieve this goal have been made.[44] But the effort to enhance story-telling techniques should include active consideration of the rhetorical and linguistic aspects of narration to which White has drawn our attention. Historians do not 'simply ... explain, as some contend. On the contrary, they first of all recount, in delight, or fascination or horror or resignation.'[45] It is essential, therefore, that historians fully understand the implications of their own narrative choice.[46]

The following essay is by the American historian Hayden White whose most influential work has focused, as we have previously explained, upon the application of concepts derived from literary theory to major historical texts. Consider the extent to which he suggests that 'the discourse of the historian' and fictional writing share common features. What precisely are these common aspects? In what ways did the eighteenth-century view of historical writing, as defined by White, differ from the scholarly aspirations of nineteenth-century historians? Does the writing of history invariably entail utilizing the persuasive skills of rhetoric? Allan Megill has suggested that it is desirable to make a distinction between the literary and fictive aspects of writing; by this he means between literary rhetorical devices and the concepts and typologies employed by historians.[47] Is the narrative historian using poetic imagination to fuse and fashion the fragments of the past, as White suggests; how is this different from the application of clearly defined theoretical concepts and paradigms to make sense of human history? Finally, do you think that novelists and historians share the same goals, and are engaged in fundamentally the same enterprise?

Notes

1 François Furet, 'From Narrative History to Problem-oriented History', in *In the Workshop of History*, trans. Jonathan Mandelbaum (Chicago, 1984), p. 54.