Narrativity in History: Post-Structuralism and Since

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Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0018-2656%28198712%2926%3A4%3C1%3ANIHPAS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y

History and Theory is currently published by Wesleyan University.
NARRATIVITY IN HISTORY: POST-STRUCTURALISM AND SINCE

HANS KELLNER

I. POST-STRUCTURALISM, HISTORY, NARRATIVE

Recent debates among historians on narrative often suggest that what is at issue is a simple decision: should the historian tell a story (that is, narrate his material in a chronological, cause-effect way), or not? To choose not to tell a story is to be more "modern," following the social and economic sciences in presenting synchronic, and quantitative if possible, models of past affairs. New historical methods and recently explored kinds of documentation often deal with the general and the mass, rather than the particular and the individual; modelled on computers and lacking in "events," this "new" history, which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, established the basis for a non-narrative history that challenged the traditional core of historical knowledge. Even the turn to storytelling by certain prominent non-narrative historians only served to mark the distinction; tales of personal life in heretical medieval villages, or of returning husbands with uncertain identities, were distinctly different from the earlier work of these historians. The stories seemed to be luxury articles, earned as indulgences after the drudgery of economic, social, climatological, family, and demographic history. Indeed, the stories were often by-products of such research.

During the same period of time, roughly the twenty years from 1965 to 1985, another movement of thought emerged, which looked at forms of knowledge from quite an opposite perspective. While historians were confidently processing larger and larger quantities of information, producing broader comparisons and wider conclusions, and in general extending the historical domain toward a goal of a "total history," the counter-movement sought, like Penelope, to unravel the weaving of texts and to question wherever possible both the meaning and the tactics and conditions which made meaning possible in written texts of all sorts. History was for some of them a special target; they considered it both dependent upon and reinforcing the oppressive and inescapable atmosphere of "humanism."

Both movements, at first, found their theoretical inspiration in France; both found essential, practical support in the large and varied world of American academia. The post-war *Annales* "school" of historians has by now seen three generations, each with its own style and interests. The movements once marked as "structuralist" have similarly changed and developed to such an extent that the term "post-structuralist" is conventionally used in the United States at least
to designate the idiosyncratic and difficult thinkers who have challenged the primacy and security of meaning, of history, of narrative, and of the idea of "man" which is constructed by these practices.

To study the writings of the "unravelers," the opponents of the extensive and totalizing forms of reading which information technology has made into the tacit current model of knowledge, is to suspect that the debate over narrative history is a good deal more complex than the recent debates among historians might suggest. My purpose here is to present an image of post-structuralist thinking on narrative and its intricate relationship with history and to sketch the work of three writers on historical narrativity. I am looking for common threads which might serve as guides for those studies of historical writing which desire neither to dissolve history into the area of pure textuality in which it will have little or no identity, nor to accept the representationality of historical writing on its own traditional terms of "getting the story straight."

At the risk of bringing down on my head the objection that "argument by selective example is philosophically unpersuasive, a rhetorical device not a scientific proof," I shall sketch an image of post-structuralist thought about narrative and history by discussing briefly a few quotations from prominent figures. These figures might reject the term post-structuralist, which is a term current primarily in the United States; even the small group of writers sampled here differs in more ways than they might agree. A properly post-structuralist reading might well find important ways in which each passage differs from itself, offering a play of contending voices repressed by readings that stress their meaning and their essence. This said, I can only add that a survey of post-structuralist thought is a project that runs against the grain of post-structuralism. What follows is meant, therefore, as a point of departure, not a conclusion.

(182) He reaped the fruits of his genius by winning the sculpture prize. * ACT. "Career": 4: to win a prize.

(183) established by the Marquis de Marigny, the brother of Mme de Pompadour, who did so much for the arts. * REF. History (Mme de Pompadour).

(184) Diderot hailed the statue by Bouchardon's pupil as a masterpiece. * ACT. "Career": 5. to be praised by a great critic. * REF. History of literature (Diderot as art critic).


So much of Roland Barthes' work has dealt with history and historical texts that it seems absurd to enter this corpus by way of a quotation from S/Z, Barthes' unique and meticulous decoding of a story by Balzac. The quotation itself requires decoding: the parenthetical numbers refer to the numbered segments (quoted in italics) into which Barthes has divided Balzac's text; the abbreviations marked by an asterisk (for example, "REF", "ACT," and so on) designate the five codes which Barthes traces through the tale in his search for the conditions which give rise to the creation of meaning in this text. In S/Z, as we can see, "History" figures within a single code, the Referential, among the five which con-

1. This observation is made by Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," Past and Present 85 (1979), discussed below.
stitute this version of narrative poetics. What makes this instance important for a consideration of post-structuralist explorations of history and narrative is that it signalled a change in Barthes' way of approaching narrative.

In his work of the 1960s, heavily influenced by the formalism of early structuralism, which he had done much to articulate, Barthes presents narrative as "international, transhistorical, transcultural; it is simply there, like life itself." Naturally, the model Barthes used to describe narrative was that of language; it follows that, for him, mimesis, or realistic representation, is a matter of codes that are largely conventional. At about the same time, Barthes wrote related essays on "Historical Discourse" and "The Reality Effect" that spelled out in the structuralist terms of the mid-1960s how the illusions of reality are achieved in the realistic texts of both history and fiction. Certainly, narrative and the narrative competence of readers were essential parts of the referential and rational illusion. "In fully constituted 'flowing' discourse the facts function irresistibly either as indexes or as links in an indexical sequence; even an anarchic presentation of the facts will at least convey the meaning 'anarchy' and suggest a particular philosophy of history of a negative kind." This flowing narrative discourse carries its own message independent of its subject matter: the gist of this message has to do with the meaningful relatedness of the facts in the discourse. Even meaninglessness or anarchy is meaningful in this view. Narrative is irresistible.

Returning to the quotation from S/Z cited above, we see that history serves there merely as one of the systems of reference which generate the "effect of reality" in narrative, just as, in a different way, it is narrative that creates the possibility of historical discourse. Both history and narrative have for Barthes a mythic dimension, in the sense of myth developed in his work of the 1950s. The essence of this myth is the conversion of history into nature, and the essence of the myths of our own day is the process by which the dominant cultural forces transform the reality of the world into images of that world. Myth is a meta-language,


4. Barthes, Mythologies (Paris, 1957), 215, 229. Yet these political writings of the 1950s (which maintained that, yes, the left also made myths, but that these myths were "inessential"), which would have seemed to herald a career trajectory of historical demystification, led in fact to Barthes' great battle with the establishment of literary history in France over his book On Racine. At the beginning of the last chapter of this book, he cited a "naive and touching" program on French radio which sought to suggest to its listeners that art and history are interconnected by introducing musical selection—"1789: Convocation of the Estates General, recall of Necker, concerto for strings #4 in e minor, by B. Galuppi."

In his Sade, Fourier, Loyola (Paris, 1971), Barthes would produce a reply to chronological history by treating three figures from disparate areas of endeavor and different centuries, organizing his discussion without regard for chronology (going so far as to divide his discussion of Sade into two sections separated by Loyola and Fourier, thus repeating in his text the "mania for cutting up" which he describes in his subjects). The final section, a dozen pages long in the English translation, is called "Lives" and presents a series of unconnected statements ("biographies") about Sade and Fourier (but not Loyola). These fragments are not only unconnected, but pointedly lack any consistency
an allegory in that it gives structure to a gap between its surface and its content, and history is mythologized by its subservience to "irresistible" narrativity.\footnote{Among many examples of post-structuralist readings of historical discourse, see Linda Orr's \textit{Jules Michelet: Nature, History, Language} (Ithaca, 1977); "Tocqueville et l'histoire incompréhensible," \textit{Poétique} 49 (1982), 51–70; "L' Autorité 'populaire' de l'historiographie romantique," \textit{Romantic Review} 73 (1982), 463–472. See also Dominick LaCapra's readings of Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin's \textit{Wittgenstein's Vienna} in LaCapra's \textit{Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language} (Ithaca, 1983), and of Carlo Ginzburg's \textit{The Cheese and the Worms} in LaCapra's \textit{History and Criticism} (Ithaca, 1985).}

What can a science of writing begin to signify, if it is granted... that historicity itself is tied to the possibility of writing; to the possibility of writing in general, beyond those particular forms of writing in the name of which we have long spoken of peoples without writing and without history. Before being the object of history—of an historical science—writing opens the field of history—of historical becoming. And the former (\textit{Historie} in German) presupposes the latter (\textit{Geschichte}).

The science of writing should therefore look for its object at the roots of scientificity. The history of writing should turn back toward the origin of historicity. A science of the possibility of science? A science of science which would no longer have the form of \textit{logic} but that of grammatics? A history of the possibility of history which would no longer be an archaeology, a philosophy of history or a history of philosophy?


The characteristic prose of Jacques Derrida, with its personified substantives, its inquisitorial nominatives ("A science of the possibility of science?"), semantic conundrums ("a science of science"), passive modalities ("if it is granted"), implied assertions ("which would no longer have the form of"), mixed concretes and abstractions ("the roots of scientificity"), ambiguous relationships ("in the name of which"), and so on, is easier to identify and even describe than to penetrate. But this is not because Derrida does not write well—his prose is clearly an inextricable part of his thought, like Milton's no less difficult prose—but because, like Lacan and other modern writers, he takes great pains to perform the rigors of his thinking in his work. Derrida's project is a science of sciences that will delve the roots of the generalized writing which he takes to be the acknowledged and repressed counterpart of the privileged voice of centered and locatable meaning that has dominated the "history of metaphysics."

Those who follow this project find that reading even the rational, commonsense world of historical writing is fraught with dangers and pitfalls. The contradictory voices brought forth by deconstructive readers are generated by the fact that writing for them is constituted by a system of negative "traces" which
mark an absence; the negative hermeneutics of Derridean analysis arrives at a dispersed, even chaotic, field of signifiers posed against the meaning-oriented, false coherence always sought (and always found, even in paradox and error) by the "logocentric" reading of the tradition. That this tradition supports itself as a discourse of morality and a discourse of power by means of its image of itself, its history, is clear. The "origin of historicity" referred to above is not, or is not only, the origin of history-writing as the histories of historiography locate it; it is the origin of the possibility of historicity, of being in history, which is a vital part of the creation of "humanity" as our culture represents it. Thus, Derrida is usually taken to be one of the radically anti-historical inheritor-critics of the structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.

The fundamental concepts which make history possible, that is to say, orderly, are undermined by Derrida, and dispersed by a discourse that confesses it must make use of these concepts at every turn (hence, the importance of Derrida's style, which calls attention to its inevitable implication in language by what has been called "sawing off the branch on which you are seated"). This process of reading, well described as the "careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself," strives to leave no essential concepts unexamined, while welcoming the paradoxes, problems, and intricacies that are routinely overlooked by less rigorous readings.7 The material assumptions of totality, identity, self-agreement, and so forth yield before this analysis; all of the logocentric human sciences of Western metaphysics come under scrutiny — history most of all, perhaps.8 Cause, in particular, which can be seen as merely the product of narrative structures once the world is considered as a text, is a trap, always to be questioned.9

As to the problem of fiction, it seems to me to be a very important one; I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that

8. An interesting survey of these issues is found in "Text and History: Epilogue, 1984," an essay added to the Expanded Edition of Robert Weimann's *Structure and Society in Literary History*. Weimann takes issue with the contention in Michael Ryan's *Marxism and Deconstruction* that there is "a radical concept of history in Derrida." (Weimann, *Structure and Society in Literary History* [Baltimore and London, 1984], 277, citing Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction* [Baltimore and London, 1982], 57.) He grants, however, that Derridean philosophy offers a "certain mode of textual analysis which, by analogy, can prove potentially helpful in dismantling any monistic, mechanical, or idealist approaches to historical data, events, and gestures" (278). I take this to mean that deconstruction is appropriate to everything except dialectical materialism.
9. Examples of the sort of assumptions questioned by Derrida are easy to find; the assumptions seem perfectly "natural." For example, in a review of Lynn Hunt's *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, Robert Darnton writes: "Split by incompatible arguments, the book pulls the reader in opposite directions—toward sociology on one side and hermeneutics on the other." (*New York Review of Books*, 31 Jan 1985, 23.) That arguments should be compatible, that readers should be pulled in only one direction, that the author is in charge of the reader's performance, and that sociology and hermeneutics (or any forces in a text) should be "connected" somehow at the end of a responsible work, are all epistemological and (primarily) aesthetic assumptions built into the discourses analyzed by Derrida.
a true discourse engenders or "manufactures" something that does not yet exist, that is, "fictions" it. One "fictions" history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one "fictions" a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth.


Michel Foucault’s importance for historical theory scarcely needs mention; it was his “revolutionization of history,” which led many to the desire to “forget” him. Although his earlier work, especially Madness and Civilization and The Order of Things, put forth a highly rationalized image of modern Western history implicitly based upon the sequentiality of the ordering principles found in rhetorical tropes, the work of the 1970s (reflected in the theory of historical “fictions” above) extends his scope in such a way as to call these very presuppositions into question as constructs towards a goal.

When Foucault asserts that our enlightening, demystifying liberators actually repress us with their scientific authority, based on surveys, experimentation, and research, the open-endedness inherent in the critique expressed in the quotation above becomes manifest. In beginning his History of Sexuality, for instance, he posits as a problem, not the repression of sexual practices, but rather the discourse surrounding the discovery and attack on such alleged repressions. “The question I would like to pose is not, Why are we repressed? but rather, Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?”12 Foucault’s emphasis on the discourse about repression rather than the alleged repression itself is characteristic of his work. He repeatedly examines authoritative “discourses,” particularly the meliorist and value-free discourses of enlightened modern social improvers (medicine, psychiatry, penology, and so on) in such a way as to unearth, “genealogically,” the will to power embodied by all appeals to authority. For this reason, I stress the emphasis on “fictionality” and “truth” in his own work expressed above.

“Truth” and “reality” are, of course, the primary authoritarian weapons of our time, an era characterized by nothing more than the debate over what is true of reality. Despite the obviously constructed nature of these twin concepts, which Foucault like other post-structuralists points up again and again, he will not dispense with them, but rather examines the way in which discourse creates reality, as reality creates discourse. His own fictions, therefore, are true because they are based upon a certain reality; this reality is real, in part, because it has been figured.

10. For example, Paul Veyne’s “Foucault révolutionnaire l’histoire,” in Comment on écrit l’histoire (Paris, 1978). “Is Foucault still a historian? There is no true or false answer to this question, since history itself is one of those false natural objects; it is what we have made of it, it has not ceased to change, it does not survey an eternal horizon.” (242) See also Allan Megill’s “The Reception of Foucault by Historians,” in Journal of the History of Ideas 48 (1987), 117-141.


by his fictions. Insofar as Foucault is the opponent of what is "natural" and "common sensical," insofar as he un masks these as merely the doxa, the dominant opinion of our time, he links himself with Barthes as a radical historicist, who surveys the past "under the sign of the Other," confronting (that is, creating) a stark sense of repressed differences in history.\textsuperscript{13}

If it were to come out in a new day that the logoscentric project had always been, undeniably, to found (fund) phallocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself?

Then all stories would have to be told differently, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies; another thinking as yet not thinkable will transform the functioning of all society.


The de-naturalizing that seems so much a part of post-structuralist practice appears most complex, contradictory, and provocative among feminists, who are concerned with the dilemmas of entering a discourse which, by its very structure as rational, sequential thought, they assert, excludes a certain notion of woman, as body, freedom, Other. Among these modes of masculine, phallocentric writing, history is particularly indicted because it is not only the substance of a story which has, to a large extent, excluded women from its scope, but far more important from a post-structuralist perspective, because its alliance with narrative has indentured it to hidden forms of authority which are far more repressive to woman than being nameless in histories. "Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged aphorisms" (Cixous, "Sorties," 249).

The problem confronted for Hélène Cixous is how to speak, to find a voice within a discourse of reason and representation which has not only failed generally to speak of woman, but has more generally repressed the possibility of speaking as a woman from our very imaginations. Only an occasional poet, the foe of representationalism, has managed briefly to open a crack in which for a moment, woman might appear. "Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield" (Cixous, "Sorties," 252). Logocentrism, the term which denotes Derrida's concept of the word-centered, conceptual history of Western metaphysics, is equated with phallocentrism, the need to claim authority by defining, clarifying, making sequential points, leading to conclusions.\textsuperscript{14} The danger is the theoretical, the authority of the signified, of essentialized meaning and definitions them-

\textsuperscript{13} Paul Ricoeur, \textit{The Reality of the Historical Past} (Milwaukee, 1984), chap. 2.

\textsuperscript{14} The notion of the phallus referred to here is central to an understanding of Jacques Lacan. It is not a human organ of any sort, but rather a reference to the ancient processions in which a veiled phallus was carried about. For Lacan, the phallus is a signifier which creates desire for the unveiling of a signified, of meaning and truth; since this is always deferred by the nature of desire, it is desire of the phallus which is the basic motor of the inter-subjective economy because of the universality of castration. Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in \textit{Écrits: A Selection}, transl. A. Sheridan (New York, 1977), 281-291.
selves. All of these traps are encased in a form of writing that leads through text-time to a goal, like histories, and which we may call narrative.\textsuperscript{15}

If the attentions of structuralism and its aftermath to history have a coherent direction—that is, if we choose to make plausible historic sense out of them—then it seems to me that this direction must lead toward a thoroughgoing examination of the process of reading. It is reading that is the key, that has been redefined by post-structuralist practice, and revealed as a process far more elusive and problematic than before. In a sense, reading has been re-invented.

While formalist structural narratology seems to have reached a state of near technical perfection, offering an array of useful tools for foregrounding and examining aspects of texts, or of any phenomena that may be treated as though they were written texts, its treatment of the essential concept of the reader has, in general, been limited to matters of competence and how readers are constituted by texts. Post-structuralism has produced a practice of reading which has enacted the difficulty, even the impossibility, of trusting readings based on a simple, communicative model.\textsuperscript{16}

The post-structuralist trajectory continues Roland Barthes' project of demythologizing; the myth is the conversion of history (the contingent, the force of the letter, human discourse) into nature (what is absolute, common-sense, be-

\textsuperscript{15} Post-structuralist consideration of narrative from a feminist perspective tends to conflate the weight of history and the ends-oriented exchange value of narrative. Maria Minich Brewster writes: "We [interpreters of twenty-first texts] read and describe with relative ease texts of fiction that contain a multiplicity of narrative voices, dissolution of characters, and perturbations in the logic of events and temporal developments. The challenge to narrative constraints in modern texts may seem to stem from a discontinuity created between essential terms: process without assigned Finality; multiple textual effects without an identifiable Cause; Writing that possesses neither a simple Origin nor End; signifiers without immediate access to a privileged Signified." "A Loosening of Tongues: From Narrative Economy to Women Writing," in \textit{MLN} 99 (1984), 114.


In stressing the importance of reading as a category of research for historians, I am not referring primarily to the "history of reception," as the Germans and Swiss have pursued it, nor the "sociology of literature," as the French have pursued it, nor to histories of publishing and printing & la Robert Darnton and Elizabeth Eisenstein, nor to attempts to discover whether more Renaissance readers were reading Plutarch or Polybius. These unquestionably respectable pursuits all deal with an essentialized view of the book, of context, and of society, and with the partial exception of \textit{Rezeptionsgeschichte} have little sense of reading as process, nor of the reciprocal construction of text and reader, nor of conflicting voices within the text, nor of codes which make reading possible, nor of narratological categories.

That such a pursuit of signs, codes, and the like need not be a formalist exercise conducted in an "historical vacuum"—such exercises, to be sure, are often of great value—is demonstrated by Hayden White's essay on Droysen, and on how his \textit{Historik} functions to construct a particular kind of bourgeois reader. "Droysen's \textit{Historik}: Historical Writing as a Bourgeois Science," in \textit{The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation} (Baltimore, 1987), 83-103.
yond doubt, universally granted). As more and more of the accepted and inevitable components of human life are revealed as construction, no particular perspective can claim to be a privileged, secure basis. Although the post-structuralist thinker might point to a term, a scheme, a tactic, as a master viewpoint at any given moment, it is more than likely the next work will discard that term or scheme and erect an entirely new one. Their creation of jargons and specialized, neologicist vocabularies is authorized precisely by subsequent rejection and replacement by other jargons and vocabularies; the perils of language require that it be treated as scaffolding, always waiting to be taken down. One might say, with Hélène Cixous, that the chaos of reality occasionally peeps through a crack, a poetic moment; but narrative and history, for the post-structuralist, are guilty until proven innocent.

II. WHO WRITES NARRATIVE?

Among the most often-cited forerunners of the *Annales* school's preference for non-narrative forms is that portion of Jules Michelet's *Histoire de la France* called the "Tableau de la France." This section (which was expanded and separately reprinted in the later nineteenth century as a patriotic panorama) serves as a totem for the new social history in France, which seeks to move from the "knowns" of geography to the "unknowns" of social and political life. For the *Annales* even the intrinsically suspect endeavor of political history needs the bedrock of a non-narrative tableau. Michelet is a "solitary peak" in the nineteenth century, writes Jacques le Goff, noting the distaste of the *Annales* for the trio of political history, narrative history, and history of events. Michelet's priority in the field of historical geography is secure; the "Tableau" is often cited as his masterpiece.

In fact, although historians have viewed the "Tableau" and its historical progeny as non-narrative forms, from a narratological point of view it is loaded with nar-

17. According to François Furet, for example, political history is of questionable value because it must follow the "this before that" procedures characteristic of narrative. Cf. Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23 (1984), 8-9. In a standard work on *Annales* historiography, Thiian Stoianovich cites Michelet as model, adding that *Annales* historians "aspire to a history like Paul Bois' study of the rural folk of western France; it opens with a tableau of the twentieth century—thus with the contemporary knowns—and proceeds to the unknowns of the French Revolution and eighteenth century . . . " *French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm* (Ithaca, 1976), 165-166.


narrative events. The overall form of the chapter is a sequential journey being led by a tour guide ( Michelet himself) who points, comments, explains, prophesies, and celebrates; this is not only an ancient *topos* (for example, Virgil in Dante's *Commedia*), it may even be called the *allegory of narrative* itself because it duplicates the movement of the reader *through* the text with a movement toward comprehension *in* the text. Michelet characterizes each of the provinces proleptically, by looking forward toward the personality it will reveal through time. The course of the journey, an outward-inward spiral from the peripheries to the heart (Paris), is a narrative of coming-to-self-consciousness, a sort of geographical *Bildungsroman* in which the nation-to-be finally "finds" itself (in Paris, naturally). Further, the position of the "Tableau," which comes between the end of the Carolingian era with the almost unnoticed ascent of Hugh Capet in 987, and the chapter "The Year 1000," has an important meta-narrative function, since the "Tableau" sets in motion the historical and linguistic machinery which will ultimately *bind* the material fragments of a chaotic geographical entity into the soul of a (Michelean) nation and people. In short, the narrative aspects of this non-narrative "interruption" are significant. By the same token, all of the narratological categories which pertain to the story-like sections of the *Histoire* apply equally to the "Tableau." The voice of the narrator, the encoded assumptions about the narratee addressed by the text, the attitudes toward text-time and tale-time, and so forth, are all equally in play.

Although Michelet's belief in the importance of geography to history dates back into the 1820s, it was the publication of Victor Hugo's *Nôtre-Dame de Paris* that gave him the formal apparatus he needed to create his "Tableau." Hugo's chapter "A Bird's-Eye View of Paris" (in 1482), appeared (to vast acclaim) in 1831, the year before Michelet prepared the lectures which were to become the famous "Tableau de la France." In many ways, Hugo's work left its mark in Michelet's *Histoire*. The "Tableau" inverts Hugo's methods to some extent: the spiral (an important trope in Hugo's mythology) found in both the ascent to the towers of Notre-Dame, and the visual itinerary of Paris, are repeated in Michelet, but from outside to inside, reversing Hugo's plan. Hugo works from the whole (the still-walled medieval Paris) to the parts (City, University, Town), soon to be lost in the growth and decline of the modern Paris of 1831, a tragic image of dispersal; Michelet works from the parts (provinces and regions) to the whole (a yet unborn France soon to arise with the centralizing late medieval monarchs).

The foundation of the post-war *Annales* anti-narrative movement, Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949), begins with its three-hundred page section "The Role of the Environment," cast in the same spiral movement around the concentric rings of the sea's geography, and using characteristic Michelean figures and themes. The work as a whole has a distinct narrative movement which ironically comments upon and undercuts the elements of its (verbal) construction: from the geographic world, where meaning is most secure, but names are most misleading, to the world of human events, where names and language are most adequate, but meaning is
The irony of tracing the quantitative anti-narrativist trends of *la nouvelle histoire* (yet another “new history”) back to Braudel, and beyond to Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, and beyond them to Michelet, and beyond him to Victor Hugo’s romantic novel, is like the irony of any quest for origins. Social scientific history has an important ancestor in the romantic novel, just as narrative history does. This genealogy of *Annales* school anti-narrativism does not close the debate on narrative historiography, but it does reformulate certain questions. Since it is not the geo-historical, but precisely the literary (formal, rhetorical, and phenomenological) aspects of Michelet’s “Tableau” — the parts Michelet might have gotten from Hugo — that Braudel employs, perhaps it is there that historians must look for the sources of meaning and reality in their texts? And since these non-narrative interruptions of a narrative text (at least for Michelet and Hugo) prove in fact to be narrative on a number of different levels, the historiographical debates on narrative lose their focus. Who writes narrative, and who does not?

The example of Michelet’s “Tableau” is imperfect, like all examples, but it has certain virtues as an allegory. This non-narrative “other” which separates the death of one world (the Carolingian) from the birth of another (for Michelet, that of modern France) is, as we have seen, not only saturated with narrativity once we focus on the narrator and reader rather than on any “characters” to be found in the chapter; it also serves a narrative purpose within the structure of the entire *Histoire*. One might say that its insertion into a “Realm of Conversation” between the narrator and reader frames its own narrativity, while its position in the “Storyrealm” lends it a quasi-narrativity (as a sequentially functional part of a story-like whole) although its referentiality, which conjures up a “Taleworld” for the Tableau itself, does not present an imitation of human actions. This simple but useful scheme suggests that if we consider the publication of the Tableau in 1875 as a separate patriotic work, the Tableau de la France: géographie physique, politique et morale, the piece has simply been wrenched from one Storyrealm, and made into a complete Storyrealm of its own, without a narrative “Taleworld” surrounding it. Yet it has also entered into a new Realm of Conversation which is less constrained by historical narration, but equally fated to

20. Cf. Hans Kellner, “Disorderly Conduct: Braudel’s Mediterranean Satire,” *History and Theory* 18 (1979), 197–222. The formal construction of Braudel’s text, and its tacit but unmistakable assertion that historical significance and secure meaning cannot co-exist, illustrates Saussure’s principle that both words and the concepts they represent are arbitrary.


22. This narrative scheme is drawn from Katharine Young, “Ontological Puzzles about Narrative,” in *Poetics* 13 (1984), 239–259. Note that “Storyrealm” and “Taleworld” correspond to the more usual terms discourse and story, and that neither should be seen as some sort of “reality.”
be subsumed into one or another historical understanding. In short, cutting this chapter loose does not eliminate its narrative ties; it repositions them.²³

The debate over narrative and history is usually conducted with mistaken premises. Twenty years after Hayden White noted that historians defined their trade using a nineteenth-century vision of both science and art (with a particularly aged notion of narrative modelled on a certain kind of nineteenth-century novel) and Louis Mink began his work in delineating narrative as a “cognitive instrument,” the debate over narrative is still talking about stories, as though that were the essence of narrative rather than simply one of its many modes.²⁴

To champion or to reject a certain kind of story as the model of historical studies, and to overlook the implicit narrativity of virtually all forms of historical writing leads to problems.

The refusal to recognize narrativity takes many forms. For example, Jürgen Kocka, in an essay intended to stress the interdependence of quantification and “theory” in history, sets both of them in opposition to “just descriptive, merely narrative” history, although he denies that there is a strict dichotomy between the two. However, his working definition of theory (“an explicit and consistent set of related concepts that can be used to structure and explain historical data but cannot be derived from the study of the source materials alone”) fits fully the rhetorical and literary structures which, in fact, define all human linguistic understandings. The six tasks which he sets forth for “theory” (spelling out criteria for selecting data, offering hypotheses for linking factors, offering hypotheses for explanation of change, determining units of comparison, deciding issues of periodization, and formulating “interesting questions”) are precisely what narrative does.

To be sure, Kocka recognizes the complexity of historical arguments, but his assertion that “frequently, theories become just the backbone of an argument that itself contains nontheoretical, descriptive, and narrative dimensions as well” slightest

²³. As an allegory, this example offers us a bit more. Because certain French historians have taken this work and its author, and inserted them into a narrative of the genealogy of their approach to a certain form of history (in this case, less event-oriented), the relevance of Michelet’s Tableau to twentieth-century historiography is not trivial. As I have already noted, Braudel’s Mediterranée is formally similar to Michelet’s mixed genre, except that the proportions have been reversed. When Braudel ironically states that the form of his book may be seen as that of an hourglass, infinitely reversible, he has explicitly recognized what is implicitly recognized throughout the rest of the book, that language and its formal constraints cannot be overcome. The double, and contrary, movement in Braudel’s book—from order to chaos at the level of meaning, and from chaos to order at the level of names and referent (epistemological tragedy superimposed upon linguistic comedy)—would be quite different if the order of the parts were reversed. See Kellner, “Disorderly Conduct,” 210.

the theoretical dimensions of both description and narrative, as well as the narrative dimensions of theory per se. The reasons for these misunderstandings are easy to see. The debate is not really over narrative and "science." It is about power and legitimation within the profession, not how best to present or conduct research. As Dominick LaCapra has pointed out, the recent surge of social history to leadership in historical studies has brought with it a devaluation, even scorn, for other types of historical pursuits. LaCapra laments the anti-intellectualism of social history, which would see all sources as documents, and devalue the master texts of a culture as ideological, elite cultural products. His most radical charge, that "in a sense, historians are professionally trained not to read," points up the problem of social history's attempts to assume the role of "the mother hen of historiography in general." When Lawrence Stone, for example, describes "the collapse of traditional intellectual history treated as a kind of paper-chase of ideas back through the ages (which usually ends up with either Aristotle or Plato)," he refers to an intellectual history which had been superseded already in the mid-1950s (although it has still not "collapsed" to this day). Stone writes: "'Great books' were studied in an historical vacuum, with little or no attempt to set the authors themselves or their linguistic vocabulary in their true historical setting." The assumption that the "true historical setting" is known prior to reading texts, that certain kinds of readings generate "historical vacuums" while others do not, and the priority of "the authors themselves" demonstrates many of LaCapra's complaints about the simplistic use of context, essentialized view of history, and reductive attitude to reading. "Historical vacuums" are frequently used for sweeping condemnations of certain forms of inquiry; we rarely see any historians attacked for working in a "critical vacuum." Stone's assumption that the "new historians" are asking questions "which preoccupy us all today" and which are concerned "with the masses rather than the elite" certainly presumes that "we" are quite uninterested in texts. The present-mindedness and lofty tone of this example of modern historical pastoralism, which I have chosen only because it is likely to be familiar and not because it is either typical or atypical (although I would suspect that it is the former), are based on a large number of material assumptions which

25. The word "theory" comes from a Greek word describing a procession of theos, religious ambassadors or observers. In the word "theater," the spectatorial aspect is stressed; in "theory," the processional. Thus, the modern, conceptual use of the word "theory" would seem to involve a processional, narrative sort of apprehension: one thing following, and following from, another. Ironically, the etymology of "narrative" leads to a proto-Indo-European root /gen/g, relating "narrative" to gnosis, and knowledge as such, with no processional or configural reference.


27. "Not to read" in LaCapra, Rethinking Intellectual History, 339; "mother hen" in LaCapra, History and Criticism, 10.


29. Ibid., 15.
preclude examination of the discourses of power underlying the descriptions of what “we” might all be interested in, and why.

It is worth considering whether there are not moral, as well as practical, reasons for getting beyond these discussions of storytelling which mask internecine power struggles within the profession. To seek instead the relation of narrativity itself to historical reason and writing, and to explore its function in making possible the imaging of reality in time which history, more than any of the other arts or sciences, claims to perform is to raise the discussion of history and narrative to a distinctly higher level. The advantages of emphasizing narrativity rather than a certain traditional sort of narrative are many and significant, but the most important is that only a discourse on narrativity in history has the potential to unite historians who, really, do not wish to banish their opponents from the profession, regardless of the short-term advantages of assuming fundamentalist postures.

III. THEORIES OF NARRATIVITY

Not all recent thought about history and its relationship to narrative has privileged the story as the single index of narrativity. The work of Paul Ricoeur, F. R. Ankersmit, and Hayden White recognizes in various ways that narrativity is a world-view, within which story-history is a genre. Narrativity, as explored and defined by Ricoeur, appears to authorize the historical enterprise itself in all its forms; it is the meaningful representation of human beings in time, or as Paul de Man has put it from a linguistic perspective, a sense of the irreversibility of tropes. With the acceptance of the logic and the rhetoric of temporality, history is constituted. That is to say, regardless of the form of representation, history rejects a dissociation of cause from effect, rejects the idea that cause can “follow” from effect through processes of Nachträglichkeit, or après coup, ideas which are commonplaces of the post-structuralist critique of the essentialized cause-effect paradigm.

The distances are vast between the post-structuralist critique of historical reason and the essentially defensive theorizing of Ricoeur, Ankersmit, and White. Ricoeur locates narrativity in the human soul as its fundamental way of comprehending the fact of death. Although Ankersmit maintains that reality cannot be translated into discourse, he also posits for historical writing the fundamentally humanistic goal of broadening our scope of “vision.” Hayden White has named post-structuralism an “absurdist moment,” but White, long influenced himself by existentialism, will not dismiss the absurd out of hand. Instead, he seeks to account for it historically, by suggesting, through a virtual crack in his own text, that the possibility of an absurdist, “sublime” historiography was institutionally repressed during the last century in favor of a safer, “beautiful” form, narrativity. Although from a post-structuralist point of view they often leave unexamined essentialized concepts, notions of the unified human subject and the

centered text, the studies of historical narrativity which I shall discuss below
nevertheless share one vital aspect of post-structuralist activity—namely, a con-
sciousness of the allegorical nature of narrativity, and thus of history itself.

Ricoeur and the Soul of Narrative

If one is to reject "story" as the identifying mark of narrativity, then what will
replace it? Paul Veyne's *Writing History* makes the point quite clearly that his-
tory is the comprehension of plots and that theories are in fact plot summaries
(résumés d'intrigue).31 His nominalist position rejects science as a goal for his-
tory for reasons which involve a responsibility to the past. History has not the
right to reject all that has been, in order to address only what can be studied
scientifically.32 Besides, Veyne suggests that scientific theories (especially, the eco-
nomic) are too abstract to explain history.33 Veyne's position has the consider-
able virtue of being couched in terms that are specifically moral and aesthetic;
it calls attention directly to questions about the purpose of historical study which
are overlooked, avoided, or trivialized in many discussions, which are too often
interested in "what shall we teach the graduate students?" or "what will the
historian of the 1990s have to know (to get ahead)?" It also draws attention to
the vast disparity in standards of knowability for various periods, areas, and kinds
of history; for Veyne, the historian of classical antiquity, the stakes are quite
different from those of the historians of early modern Europe, whose methods
and materials seem to have provided a new model and agenda to a surprising
degree.

In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur accepts Veyne's elevation of plot in history, but
he feels that Veyne fails to explain how narrative remains the essence of history
when history ceases to be about events.34 This is the key problem for all "nar-
rativist" understandings of history, particularly in the face of the French histori-
cal accomplishment.35 Ricoeur addresses the issue in terms of time. In discussing
Augustine's treatise on time in the *Confessions*, Ricoeur sketches the terms of
the debate over the question "What is human time?" Time is experienced pri-
marily as an absence, because only the present can ever be experienced except
in the form of memory and expectation. Memory and expectation, however, are
the central modalities of time, to the extent that one may speak of human time

32. "The reason for this separation between history and science is that history has as a principle
all that has been, is worthy of it; it has not the right to choose, to limit itself to what is susceptible
of scientific explanation. The result is that in comparison with history, science is very poor, and
33. Ibid., 253.
35. "This question today must be addressed to all holders of a 'narrativist' theory of history. English-
speaking authors have been able to avoid it because their examples usually are naïve and do not
surpass the history of events." *Time and Narrative*, 1, 174. Cf. also Ricoeur, *The Contribution of
as a threefold present: a present of past things (memory), a present of present things, and a present of future things (expectation). The neatness of this threefold present dissolves with the endless and unavoidable "slippage" of the present of the future into the present of the present and of the past. It is "Augustine's inestimable discovery" to have linked this slippage with the distentio animi, the stretching of the mind in different directions by the structure of temporal experience itself. Citing the example of reciting a psalm from memory, Augustine reviews the mnemonic itinerary through the three modes of time.

What is true of the whole psalm is also true of all its parts and each syllable. It is true of any longer action [in actione longiore] in which I may be engaged and of which the recitation of the psalm may only be a small part. It is true of a man's whole life, of which all his actions [actiones] are parts. It is true of the whole history of mankind, of which each man's life is a part. (28:38).36

Augustine's meditation on eternity provides Ricoeur with another important clue about human time. Instead of merely abolishing time, the concept of eternity, which cannot be grasped by human minds except as absence, provides the elements for an internal hierarchization which deepens our experience of time itself. This, for Ricoeur, provides the key to understanding the attempts of historiography and literature to "de-chronologize narrative." Far from being the denial of temporality, this de-chronologization deepens it. "Chronology—or chronography—does not have just one contrary, the a-chronology of laws or models. Its true contrary is temporality itself."37

This temporality has an element of order and intelligibility, which is Ricoeur's subject in *Time and Narrative*: succession itself comes from this order, not from experience. Carefully following Aristotle's discussion of muthos (plot) as mimesis (imitation) of human action, Ricoeur emphasizes muthos as the key to a threefold mimesis which follows the "destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time" (54). The prefigured time [Mimesis 1] is the human experience of temporality itself, with its intense preoccupation with Care and being-toward-death, in Heidegger's terms. Configured time is the text in its formal, narratological state [Mimesis 2], which leads to our historical understanding, the analogical faculty that comes from our narrative competence [Mimesis 3].

Ricoeur's central point regarding history and narrative is that "all change enters the field of history as a quasi-event."38 He has, in effect, reversed the hierarchy of terms which places the long time-span over the event, by demonstrating how fully any understanding of long time-spans must be saturated with forms of human understanding based upon human time as understood in particular by Augustine as a threefold present. For Ricoeur the danger inherent in forgetting that events also populate the temporality of the long time-span is not historiographical, but epistemological and moral.

For the discovery of the long time-span may simply express the fact that human time, which always requires the reference point of a present, is itself forgotten. If the brief event can act as a screen hiding our consciousness of the time that is not of our making, the long time-span can, likewise, act as a screen hiding the time that we are.

This disastrous consequence can be avoided only if an analogy can be preserved between the time of individuals and the time of civilizations: the analogy of growth and decline, of creation and death, the analogy of fate.  

Ricoeur is aware that much Anglo-American discussion of history and narrative has foundered on the event-oriented history which populates its examples; his appreciation of the French historians of the past four decades is great. The example of Braudel, Chaunu, le Goff, Duby, Ariès, and others, leads Ricoeur to an understanding of event which is produced by his concept of plot, rather than the other way around. Events are not the brief and nervous motions described by Braudel, but "variables of the plot," which literally comprehends, "grasps together" as an "intelligible whole, circumstances, goals, interactions, and unintended results." It is the extension of human temporal understanding in the form of what Ricoeur (following Paul Veyne) calls "quasi-plots," "quasi-characters," and "quasi-events" which points to the analogical character of historical categories.

Ricoeur suggests that the recent works on the history of death may represent the farthest point reached by all history. In a long end-note, Ricoeur surveys the literature on death and its relation to the history of the long time-span; he cites Michel Vovelle's comment that although "the death of a certain historizing history is today an accomplished fact," the event has not really disappeared from the historical field. This citation from a leading historian of death to the effect that the "death" of a certain sort of history, although a "fact," may not be final, casts an interesting light on Ricoeur's own thesis. Even in the face of the possible "death of narrative," narrativity cannot die precisely because it is the symbol of human immortality, or at least of the understanding of human life afforded by the contemplation of eternity. History, far from turning away from narrativity with the ostensibly anti-narrative French contribution to twentieth-century historiography, has experienced a deepening and broadening of the sense of temporal employment, but Ricoeur notes that literature may yet give in to the discord between truth and consolation, a discord generated by the narratological precision of recent literary studies and by the sort of post-structuralist critique of humanism

40. Ibid., I, 142.
41. In The Reality of the Historical Past, Ricoeur stresses the "analogue" in the form of the tropology described by Hayden White in Metahistory and elsewhere. The tropological element in refiguration [Mimesis] centers the question on its goal, which is the human understanding, in Time and Narrative, this aspect becomes submerged in the whole structure of threefold mimesis governed by plot, not trope. Ricoeur, Reality of the Historical Past, 25-36.
42. Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, 111.
43. Much of Ricoeur's argument in Time and Narrative is in the extensive notes; unfortunately, in the English translation these are to be found in the small print at the back of the book.
that gives rise to the notion that common sense itself is merely the sum of the fictions which we accept as part of human nature.

The result is that the book ceaselessly oscillates between the invincible suspicion that fictions lie and trick insofar as they console, and the equally invincible conviction that fictions are not arbitrary insofar as they answer a need of which we are not the masters, the need to put the seal of order on chaos, of sense on non-sense, of concord on discord.\textsuperscript{44}

Ricoeur cites Walter Benjamin's pessimism that the end of the era of narration may come because human beings no longer have experience to share.

Ricoeur's tracing of Care (a character from the second part of Goethe's \textit{Faust}, adopted philosophically by Heidegger) and Death (who needs no introduction) toward the limits of history and narrativity, and his fear that we may lose our humanity if we discount the sense-making essence of narrativity, in certain ways reblazes the overgrown trail of Oswald Spengler's \textit{Decline of the West}. Spengler, like Ricoeur, notes the deep link between the study of a culture's behavior before death (including disposal of the dead) and its idea of the historical past.\textsuperscript{45} For Spengler, however, history and implicitly narrativity is a purely Western (that is, Faustian) ideology: for Ricoeur, it is "trans-cultural." And while Ricoeur cannot envision a proper humanity without a sense of time made possible by narrativity,\textsuperscript{46} Spengler concludes that our image of history (and of the death which it embodies), also entails the birth of the new.\textsuperscript{47} Both Spengler and Ricoeur see historical writing as consoling ways of disposing of the dead, and of situating human beings in their peculiar relationship with time, but Spengler foresaw, like Cixous, "another thinking as yet not thinkable," like Derrida, "a science of science which would no longer have the form of \textit{logic}," like Foucault, "a politics not yet in existence." In other words, Spengler could contemplate the possibility of a radically different life-form in which the solace of history would play a different part, or no part at all. Ricoeur also contemplates such a life-form, but with deep regret.

\textit{F. R. Ankersmit and the Substance of the Narratio}

In \textit{Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language}, F. R. Ankersmit has put forth a theory of historical logic and practice which reverses the traditional way in which historians and philosophers of history have looked at the relation of the historical text and the historical past.\textsuperscript{48} Narrative logic, as Ankersmit describes it, is found, not in relation to time, but in the \textit{narratio}, the narrative text taken as a whole; this logic is characterized by a strict attention

\textsuperscript{44} Paul Ricoeur, \textit{Temps et r\'ecit} (Paris, 1984), II, 45, my translation.
\textsuperscript{45} Oswald Spengler, \textit{The Decline of the West}, transl. C. F. Atkinson (New York, 1934), I, 13.
\textsuperscript{46} Ricoeur, \textit{Time and Narrative}, I, 52.
\textsuperscript{47} "Every great symbolism attaches its form-language to the cult of the dead, the forms of disposal of the dead, the adornment of the graves of the dead. The Egyptian style begins with the tomb-temples of the Pharaohs, the Classical with the geometrical decoration of the funerary urns, the Arabian with catacomb and sarcophagus, the Western with the cathedral wherein the sacrificial death of Jesus is re-enacted daily under the hands of the priest. From this primitive fear springs, too, historical sensitiveness in all its modes." Spengler, \textit{Decline of the West}, I, 167.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language} (The Hague, 1983.)
to the conditions of existence of narratio and an avoidance of the "material assumptions" which have caused a great deal of the confusion in both philosophy of history and the social sciences. Narrative logic relates the narratio only to other narrations; it does not assume that the narratio "represents" anything but itself.

Although he believes that history cannot become a social science (since social science has more to learn from history than history from social science), Ankersmit also makes clear at the outset that we must avoid associations with belles-lettres and storytelling in speaking of narratio; indeed, he asserts that non-storytelling historiography is most clearly in conformity with his narrativist philosophy. The narrative substance which is contained in narratio is the complete image contained in an historical work; it is these narrative substances which Ankersmit analyzes rather than the statements contained in them. The essence of historical thought (and the key to how historical works are evaluated and how historical debates take place in practice) is to be found in the nature of narrative substances. To look elsewhere is to be lost in a sea of relativism.

Modernism and structuralism, which was in many ways the end of modernism, stressed the scientific knowledge of "out there," whether in the sciences of nature, the sciences of man, or the sciences of the text. Nature, man, texts are all portrayed as observable, knowable, and describable because discourses about them may be repeatedly compared with the original object, using the analytic-referral method that provides a means of translating reality into discourse about reality, based on the visual model of the telescope. Citing the explosion of conflicting discourses about reality (especially historical reality), Ankersmit espouses a post-modern attention to the discourse itself, and its relation to other discourse. The historical discourse (or narratio) exists only because of other discourses, not because of the past which is always absent by definition.

The three theses of narrative logic are 1) that there are no translation rules for reality, 2) that it is the whole of a narratio, rather than the sum of its narrative sentences, which gives us an interpretation of the past, and 3) that there is a similarity between historical and metaphoric statements. Although Ankersmit reiterates Huizinga's anti-Rankean statement that there exists no "es" to correspond to history wie es eigentlich gewesen, he is nevertheless the champion of historism—with a difference. The historism Ankersmit embraces is not the historicism of the grand speculative philosophers of history; it is rather the historism which stresses the uniqueness of the historical moment and the error of comprehending it other than on its own terms. (The question of judgment is a separate

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49. Indeed, most reviews this book has received, particularly in this journal, the Journal of Interdisciplinary History and Historische Zeitschrift, are based upon precisely the material assumptions which Ankersmit wishes to put aside.

50. Examples of historical narrative substances might be Vovelle's description of early modern death (as opposed, say, to that of Ariès), or Baron's "Renaissance" (as opposed to Burkehardt), or Stephen Baron's "nineteenth century historical imagination" (as opposed to that of Hayden White).

Almost all historical writing is to some extent historist in practice, but Ankersmit maintains that historical disputes are regularly caused by our historist attribution to the “past” that which is only true of narrative substances. “Not what is explained but what explains is unique.” 52 It is not the “past” (or time, eternity, the soul, reality), but rather our understanding of narrative substances, which has a narrative structure; even if the “past” did have a narrative structure, we could not know this because there are no translation rules that might verify some correspondence between the “past” and the narrative substances that offer our only knowledge of it.

In a most memorable metaphor, Ankersmit speaks of the narrative substance as a “black hole” which draws into itself all meaning and objects, while remaining monad-like in its inability to express true statements about other things. The “Louis XIV” in Voltaire’s Le Siècle de Louis XIV and Goubert’s Louis XIV et vingt millions de Français have nothing to do with each other from the point of view of narrative logic. This startling statement may be explained as follows: assume that both Voltaire and Goubert have made only true (that is, conventionally documented) narrative statements in their narrations; because of their different interests, their statements are rarely the same and present different understandings of “Louis XIV.” To what, then, do these statements relate? To assume both that they are true, and that they relate to a “real” Louis XIV, creates misleading problems of evaluation. In fact, in Ankersmit’s view, they refer only to the narrative substances in which they appear. While narrative statements may be true or false, narrative substances should not be spoken of in these terms. The “incompatibility of narrations” (say, Voltaire’s and Goubert’s) does not mean that one is true and the other false. Ankersmit prefers the terms “subjective” and “objective” — but here again, with a difference. Texts, but not people, can be “subjective,” by which Ankersmit means much more than “influenced by moral values.”

Moreover, a historiography may be “subjective” for a number of reasons other than that its author was influenced by values. Indeed, aesthetic preferences, stylistic habits, lack of imagination or congeniality with a certain subject-matter or just sheer incompetence may also make an author’s historiography “subjective.” As a matter of fact, it is quite astonishing that the term “subjective” should always have been linked so exclusively with ethical and political values. 53

The fundamental theorem of narrative logic, therefore, is that “all statements expressing the properties of Nss [narrative substances] are analytical.” We are speaking correctly, I presume, as long as we make clear that we are talking about narrative substances and not about the past. What makes historical discussion possible is not references to specific statements, but rather “points of view,” a commonplace word which Ankersmit believes is the historian’s greatest tool.

The “point of view” of a narratio is comparable to a belvedere: the scope of the “point of view” we get access to after having climbed all the steps leading to the top is far wider

52. Ankersmit, Narrative Logic, 249.
53. Ibid., 235.
than just the staircase of the belvedere: from the top we look out over a whole landscape. The statements of a narratio may be seen as instrumental in our attaining a “point of view” like the steps of the staircase of a belvedere, but what we ultimately see comprises much more of reality than what the statements themselves express. Whatever the weakness of historical knowledge may be—and in many respects the historians’ cognitive equipment is far less impressive than what his colleague in the exact sciences has at his disposal—we have here found one of the most formidable assets of the historian’s methodological inventory.  

How then do we decide between the “points of view” which are embodied in narrative substances? It is wrong to suggest that the most “objective” narratio is the one which best corresponds to reality, because the first premise of narrative logic is the absence of translation rules. Further, according to Ankersmit, if one view of the past prevails, there is no view of the past because only a multiple play of perspectives provided by a variety of narrations can enable us to “see” at all the contours and specificity of each view of the past.

Consistent with Ankersmit’s visual metaphors (“point of view,” belvedere), he cites “scope-maximization” as the goal of narrative substances. Because narrations are ways of seeing an image of the past, what narrations on roughly the same topic have in common (their “conventionalist” part), is not part of the individuality of any particular narratio. What presents the greatest scope, and hence the most objective narratio, is the least conventional and most original, daring one. “Thus, the essential duty of the historian is to be original and to refrain as much as possible from repeating what his predecessors in the investigation of a particular topic have said.”

The metaphors of vision employed by Ankersmit would lead his readers to suspect that the visually-dominated discourse of modernism is at the basis of his narrative logic, but he makes it clear that the past cannot be seen from the historian’s belvedere. It is a masquerade of narrative structures which we “see” from the belvedere; behind this masquerade is something that has no narrative structure, and thus cannot be properly “seen” at all. Citing Wilhelm von Humboldt’s statement that historical ideas cannot be grasped by mere logic, but only by a subtle, hidden disposition of the mind, Ankersmit maintains that within narrations familiar concepts like “the Renaissance” or “the Cold War” are not “seen” but rather “smelled” or “heard.”

The narratio, then, has its uniqueness, its identity, only through its existence in a world of other narrations. It possesses as its own only what it does not share

54. Ibid., 223–224.
55. Ibid., 240.
56. Although there are many different ways of putting the matter, some form or other of “scope-maximization” or other has become a standard criterion of excellence in history and other fields these days with the tacit decline of “realism.” For example, Paul Veyne’s “Lengthening the Questionnaire,” in Writing History.
57. Ankersmit, Narrative Logic, 239.
58. Ibid., 88.
59. Ibid., 196.
with them. Without this world of narrations, we could have no “apprehensions” of the past at all. The traditional historist term used to describe how the historian grasps the historical ideas is Ahnen (premonitions, apprehensions); Ankersmit, I think, might say that the historian “catches a whiff” of them. When Ankersmit remarks that human “self-identity”—far from depending on our sense of time and eternity as in Ricoeur’s rendering—is another narrative concept, and that classic mental disorders are often problems of narrative constructions, which are treated by historiographic-linguistic methods such as psychoanalysis, his reader scents the post-structuralist critique of the subject.60

**Hayden White and the Narrative Sublime**

In the recent work of Hayden White, we find a distrust of narrative which is based neither on hostility to story-history, nor on ideas that the new social history has somehow managed to escape narrative constraint. White sees narrativity itself as a potentially repressive force, especially after rhetoric and the possible visions of history it engendered were rejected when history became a discipline in the early nineteenth century. In those fields of study like history seeking the newly elevated title of “scientific disciplines” in the nineteenth-century mold, the armatures of power or appeals to political authority which lie beneath all forms of interpretation as such could not be revealed. Interpretation had to be either hidden or purified to resemble the interpretations of the physical sciences—that is, either repressed, or sublimated by dissolving the authority to interpret into the interpretation itself. Among the most important and permanent consequences of this sublimation of authority in the constitution of professional historical studies was the deep and lasting distinction between philosophy of history, with its metaphistorical goal of articulating the modes of authority and centers of power in historical discourses, and “proper” history, with its disciplinary mandate to ignore the analysis of the deep, implicit choices in presentation and configuration, and the relative merits of these choices in opposition to other possible choices.

The question White poses is: “What is ruled out by conceiving the historical object in such a way that not to conceive it in that way would constitute prima facie evidence of want of ‘discipline’?” His answer is rhetoric, which he describes, following Kant, as the awareness of a variety of ways of configuring a past which in itself exists only as a chaos of forms. By de-rhetoricizing history, thus creating a discipline, historical studies in fact chose a certain stylistic mode (the middle

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60. "Psychological disorders such as depersonalization, schizophrenia or anxieties can probably be described as uncertainties and inconsistencies in the way the No 'I'm' [the internal representation of selfhood] is constructed by human beings." Ankersmit, Narrative Logic, 191. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is the key figure in the post-structuralist dissolution of the human subject into an Unconscious modelled on language, but Foucault (who presents the subject as an intersection of pre-existing discourses) and Derrida (who places the subject in an uncentered play of substitutions) have found their own ways of dealing with human identity. Good treatments of this matter are Kaja Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics (New York, 1983) and Allan Megill, Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida (Berkeley, 1983).

style of declamation), which excludes from its scope the possibility of expressing or imagining all that does not pass for the common sense of socially "responsible" individuals at a given moment. This rhetoric of anti-rhetoric configured the past in the form of "science," a meaningful representation of a reality which was assumed to have an order which could be expressed.

In other words, White argues that by electing a certain mode of rhetoric, which found its natural expression in the realistic narrative forms of other nineteenth-century prose fictions, history became a "discipline" precisely by indenturing itself to those modes of thinking (and writing) so invisibly woven into the existing structures of power and discourse that their existence could either be denied or taken for granted as the indisputable foundation of enlightened, educated, or at least professional opinion.

The "beauty" of orderliness, which Edmund Burke put forth in his conservative assault on the "strange chaos" of the French Revolution, finds its true opposite in the "sublime" vision of history in Friedrich Schiller, who deplored the "counterfeit harmonies" of the effeminate historical vision. With Hegel's demolition of the concept of the "sublime," in favor of a rationality (hence, beauty) in history, the stage is set for the "aestheticism" of modern historical consciousness, which asserts with Ranke that the confusion of the historical scene is not essential to it, but rather a product of the accidents of sources and scholarly error, and can be set straight by historians "endowed with the proper kind of understanding." 62

This de-sublimation of the historical field, which is as well the repression of the possibility of calling to consciousness radically different ways of conceiving the past and the human role in creating such conceptions, politically domesticates history in ways which White considers unfortunate.

In my view, the theorists of the sublime had correctly divined that whatever dignity and human freedom human beings could lay claim to could come only by way of what Freud called a "reaction-formation" to an apperception of history's meaningless.

The sublime view of history as a chaotic field, and of human freedom as the power to make of it and of our place in it what we will, is what impels human beings to change their lives, like the sublimity of Rilke's "Archaic Torso." Instead, the ideologies of the last two centuries, both capitalist and communist, have based their notion of morality and responsibility on a vision of history constituted as a discipline by the suppression of the historical sublime.

To grasp White's notion of the role of narrative in this suppression, we should first note his discussion of the value of narrativity as a form. Unlike other recent commentators on the status of narrative in history, who focus on distinctions discussed above, White chooses to return to the classic historiographic genealogy: annal, chronicle, history. His suggestion is that in this apparent progression in

62. Ibid., 71.
63. Ibid., 72.
human consciousness of the past we see a growth of narrativity, which can only exist in a social world which recognizes some corporate entity which might serve as the organizing principle for a narrative selection of facts. The annal, with its discontinuous gaps between years, its lack of any theme or subject that can be followed, and its variety of annalists, can be seen at best as a record of time which might be meaningful only to God, who alone can comprehend the chaos (narrative absence) recorded by the annalist. Thus, narrative appears with a social consciousness, and carries with it the burden of representing that consciousness to its members, with all the political and ideological baggage that the construction of social consciousness entails.  

By now we can perceive the roots of White’s distrust of narrative, a distrust which he shares with post-structuralist writers like Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva. The narrative which White distrusts is not that speciously essentialized narrative that tells nineteenth-century stories about people and such as opposed to the non-narrative forms found in the work of the Annales school, or the cliometricians. He recognizes that all of these forms are narrative, easily analyzed by the narratological tools of modern criticism, well honed as they are by the study of modernist literature. 

What White calls into question is the unfailing ability of narrative to make sense out of things, and to present them in a form that seems natural. This is the “mythic” aspect of narrativity itself, both in the Aristotelian sense that narrative always gives things a plot (muthos) of some sort, but also in Barthes’ sense that narrative turns the chaos of history into an illusion of the immediacy and order of nature. Narrativity is virtually inescapable, but it is not natural, in White’s view.

And one of the things that you learn from the study of the study of history is that such study is never innocent, ideologically or otherwise, whether launched from the political perspective of the Left, Right, or Center. This is because our very notion of the possibility of discriminating among the Left, Right, or Center is in part a function of the disciplina- tion of historical studies which ruled out the possibility – a possibility that should never be ruled out of any area of inquiry—that history may be as meaningless “in itself” as the theorists of the historical sublime thought it to be.  

What has been ruled out, in other words, appears to be what Ricoeur fears may reappear, the sense of the possible meaninglessness of history, and thus of human life. White, however, adds the words “in itself” to history, alluding to a sort of past which Ankersmit, for one, believes is essentially unrepresentable, and consequently meaningless “in itself.” The past is the “thing in itself,” which is beyond our direct apprehension, although we may create a world of appearances through our narrative abilities to create meanings. Kant’s categorization of historical forms named the third one (after eudaemonistic optimism and terroristic pessimism) the abderitic or farcical; this approach maintained that humanity had

65. White, The Content of the Form, 82.
neither advanced nor decayed through time (as the other modes, respectively, asserted), but that nothing essentially had changed. Any number of interpretations or meanings could be generated from such a chaotic, directionless field. Kant wrote: “It is a vain affair to have good so alternate with evil that the whole traffic of our species with itself on this globe would have to be considered as a mere farcical comedy [als ein blosses Possenspiel].” It would seem from this quotation that an optimistic or pessimistic history always precedes the farcical. After all, it is the appearance of difference within the vision of the past that calls its form into question. Marx then was apparently thinking in a perfectly Kantian way when he noted (vaguely citing Hegel) that all significant facts and personages appear twice in history, first as tragedy, then as farce. As Ankersmit would suggest, it is only the second appearance that creates the perspectival contours necessary to create historical significance. On this view, the rule-governed, scientific structuralism of the 1960s may be regarded as a tragic moment in the light of the farcical, but very serious, post-structural critique which has followed it. The possibility of this abderitic, “absurdist moment” is what must never be ruled out of any theoretically justified inquiry, including historical study.

Ankersmit, Ricoeur, and White all reject, in their different ways, historical realism as it is usually understood. At the same time, each makes explicit a moral basis for his arguments, in what is perhaps the sharpest departure from standard procedure in building historical or philosophical positions. Ankersmit believes that what might be called his narrative perspectivism is precisely what in practice enables historians, indeed people in general, to compare, evaluate, and understand images of the past (and of the present and of the self). When he notes that “the all-pervasive anti-narrativism of the 20th century mental climate strongly stimulates solipsism,” he is in fact attacking the modernism which posits that our knowledge is of reality rather than of accounts of reality.

For twenty years the thrust of White’s inquiry into the nature of historical thinking has been to single out the moral and aesthetic (in the Kantian sense of that which validates judgments) values in the choices underlying historical images. His recent discussions of narrative, which show the influence of Sartre and Foucault as well as Roland Barthes, question the ideological weight of narrative as the “common sense,” “natural” mode of presentation for all serious formulations, including his own, within a discipline. That the orderly meaningfulness of narrativity is implicated in the repression of meditations on the potential subtlety of the field of history as an unprocessed and essentially meaningless chaos (as if such a meditation were not already processed and, so to speak, narrativized in its very conception!) cannot imply a call for some sort of anti-

narrativism that might escape the ideology, discipline, and constraints of linguistic and social productions like history. White insists that it is our awareness of the human power to construct realistic images, such as histories, and of the choices involved in doing so, that he wants to foster. Possible visions of the past far outnumber those sanctioned by the historical discipline based upon its highly restrictive rhetoric, always in the interests of some "order."

Ricoeur sees the stakes somewhat differently, since it is the human experience of time itself that is deepened by narrativity. When Ricoeur states that the end of the era of narration might come because we no longer have any experiences to share, he makes explicit both the idea that we experience the world as narrative, and that this form of experiencing is based on social forms which are precarious. What history and the novel share is the ability to configure heterogeneity in a unified form. Since most of the knowledge which humans have of the world comes in the form of "hear-say" (ouï-dire), the narrated report is the normative symbolic mediation between world and action. [As Ankersmit might say, our knowledge of the world is always a knowledge of narrations.] It is employment that enables humans to turn the heterogeneity of narrative statements into the monadic unity of narrative substances. Consequently, Ricoeur's work offers a phenomenology of plot as the essence of our being in the world. However, I agree with David Carr's statement that Ricoeur, far from suggesting that reality has a narrative form, instead points to our ability to narrativize the essentially "pre-narrative" elements of "the real world." Ricoeur's defense of narrativity against the potential loss of human experience is aimed at the same solipsism mentioned by Ankersmit. The tension between truth and consolation, however, is not resolved.

Ankersmit, Ricoeur, and White stress the figural and figured nature of historical representations; each sees analogic process embodied in tropes as the key to the realism claimed by historical discourse. However, metaphor functions in different ways in their theories. White's work since Metahistory is widely known, so I shall not spell it out too laboriously here. Suffice it to say that White points to metaphor (that is, to tropes) as the prefiguring protocol ordering our apprehension of the historical field from the start. In Ricoeur, on the other hand, metaphor (the sign of the analogue) is what can overcome the clashing visions of the past as either radically the Same (endlessly repetitive) or radically Other (chaos — Ricoeur does not share White's sympathy with the historical sublime). No reality can come from either view, but tropological imagining shifts the accent and makes a sense of "reality" possible: really has meaning only in terms of such as. Ankersmit's third thesis of "narrative logic" states the similarity of metaphoric and historical statements. Unlike Ricoeur, however, Ankersmit specifies the value of metaphor as its ability to individuate a point of view, and hence to create the play of perspectives without which our understanding of the

71. Ricoeur, Reality of the Historical Past, 35.
world would fall apart. For White, tropes are a faculty of mind; for Ankersmit, a model of narrative substances; for Ricoeur, the way in which our experience of the concordant discord of time is expressed.

The link, or at least a link between the post-structuralist critique of historical thinking and the narrativity which makes historical writing "historical" in a disciplinary sense is their sense of the allegorical nature of historical writing. One virtue of quantitative history, cliometric history, theory-oriented history, and psycho-history is that they are far more openly and self-consciously allegorical than more traditional narrative histories. By this I mean that the narrative form is much more clearly separable from the discourse itself than in less explicitly theoretical histories; a computer program, for example, resembles the narrative grammars of the formalists far more obviously, say, than does The Decline of the West. Ultimately, allegory questions its own authority by inscapably drawing attention to the will exerted in its creation; this will to represent is revealed as a human need, the product of desire or "Care," and can be understood only within the authoritative confines of... another allegory. 

The allegorical will, which seeks to "master" the "sources" and, for history at least, has the goal of referring to some form of "totality" creates problems which prove insuperable, except when revealed ironically as problems. It is this final insuperability that keeps history in its narrative business; as has often been observed, narrative continues to forestall death, while narrativity assures us in advance that it all will make sense, someday. Walter Benjamin noted that allegorical figures which express the "will to symbolic totality" always stand out at us as something incomplete and imperfect. However, by thematizing this imperfection, satirizing the contents of the book, and foregrounding the elements of will and desire, an historian like Fernand Braudel reveals the allegorical in his The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, and adds to its authority as a human creation by calling into question its authority as an allegorical representation.

Quantitative history, with its mathematical short-cut to referential realism, offers

72. In this regard, allegory "becomes the gesture of an obsessive player who knows that the game is already lost, but who continues to play." Paul Smith, "The Will to Allegory in Postmodernism," Dalhouse Review 62 (1982), 113. Hayden White has written that "the moral implications of the human sciences will never be perceived until the faculty of the will is reinstated in theory." (Tropics of Discourse, 23.)


74. Thematizing: "History becomes many stranded once more, bewilderingly complex and, who knows, in seeking to grasp all the different vibrations, waves of past time which ideally ought to accumulate like the divisions in the mechanism of a watch, the seconds, minutes, hours, and days — perhaps we shall find the whole fabric slipping away between our fingers." (II, 893)

Satirizing: "No sooner does a historian think he has isolated the particular quality of a civilization than it gives proof of the exact opposite." (II, 757)

Foregrounding: "I have loved the Mediterranean with passion..." Beginning of Vol. I

Citations are from the English translation of Stan Reynolds.

I have discussed these issues at greater length in "Disorderly Conduct."
the most explicitly allegorical of genres. One is tempted to say that an appeal to figures is naturally an appeal to the figural. The self-conscious distance between the representation and what is represented, the willful blindness of the quantification in focussing on the one aspect of the evidence which affords a series, the explicit reference to values and scientific authority which reside elsewhere, in other discourses—all of these factors are characteristic of allegories, because “it is the nature of allegory to stress discontinuity and to remark the irremediable distance between representation and idea.”75 The founder of our modern view of allegory, Goethe, put things in rather the same way.

Allegory changes a phenomenon into a concept, a concept into an image, but in such a way that the concept is still limited and completely kept and held in the image and expressed by it.

The symbolic changes the phenomenon into the idea, the idea into the image, in such a way that the idea remains always infinitely active and unapproachable in the image, and will remain inexpressible even though expressed in all languages.76

To the extent that the narrative substances presented by histories are conceptual, displaying the distance between the historian and the phenomena in the explicit manner of the “social scientific” historian, the allegorical nature of their images is foregrounded. Hence, Ankersmit’s comment that quantitative history in particular exemplifies his narrative logic. In story-history (l’histoire événementielle) the narratological devices correspond more clearly to the human sense of muthos as a mimesis of action, but a great deal is obscured, as both Ricoeur and White admit. For Ricoeur, the “lies and tricks” of récit, relying and using our narrative competence, have been unmasked; thoroughly familiar with the work of modern narrative theory, Ricoeur agrees that the Annales history inspired by Braudel and others has deepened our sense of time by building on analogies between human time and forms of the longer time-spans. But he fears the loss of narrativity, so far exhibited in literature alone, because for him narrativity alone responds to the human power of communication. White distrusts even this human “need” to communicate, and notes that it, like every other essential quality of human nature, has an ideological, socializing dimension masking some appeal to power. This may be good or bad, but only for specific human purposes. “If one is going to ‘go to history,’ one had better have an address in mind, rather than go wandering around the streets of the past like a flâneur.”77

In his famous essay, “Meditations on a Hobbyhorse,” E. H. Gombrich has pointed out that a representation is not to be looked upon as an imitation of something (by which criterion a broomstick hobbyhorse would fail to represent a horse in almost any way), but rather as something capable of substituting for the object represented for a particular purpose. The decision about what is

76. These citations of Goethe’s Maximen 112 and 1113 are taken from Hazard Adams’ Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic (Tallahassee, 1983), 56–57.
“capable of substitution” in a situation is obviously conventional, and at least to a certain extent, social. What I have stressed here is the element of will and choice in the representation of reality, even to the choice of the point-of-view that reality is representable in a coherent (narrative) way at all. It is clear that not all histories are narratives, that they do not all offer a representation of events taking place in time. But it should be equally clear that virtually all histories are founded on a narrativity that guarantees that what they represent will “contain” meaning. The foundational narrativity of modern disciplinary history precludes exactly the sort of inquiry pursued by the post-structuralist. For this reason, historians generally feel them to be anti-historical. Yet this is only another way of saying that they suggest a vision of history which has been repressed, one which can recognize in all historical representations an allegorical creation for a human purpose.

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