

## Stories about Stories about History: Hayden White, Historiography, and History Education

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### INTRODUCTION

The field of history education is haunted by the specter of skeptical challenges, lurking at every theoretical corner. These challenges often are associated under the fashionable label of “postmodernism,” but in philosophy of history, the important developments date from at least the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the field engaged in the so-called “narrative turn.” The most significant theorist of that turn is Hayden White; to a remarkable extent, his work still serves as the reference point to which subsequent philosophy of history refers.

The narrative turn may be characterized primarily by a new focus on stories, that is, on the historical narrative as a philosophically significant unit.<sup>1</sup> Previously, analytic philosophy of history had (in general) concentrated on the individual historical *proposition*, and especially propositional explanation of historical events. But it was now commonly argued that the narrative whole is greater than the sum of its parts. “The premise of this turn,” writes Louis O. Mink, “is that...the *form* of the narrative is both essential and cognitive.”<sup>2</sup> Stories about history embody *interpretations* of history; they capture the *meaning* of historical events.

The turn to narrative raises some straightforwardly philosophical issues. How do narratives present interpretations? Are historical narratives subject to evaluation on epistemological grounds? Do the literary qualities of narratives obey their own logic? But the narrative turn also raises significant educational questions. Thus, Peter Seixas has recently explored the question of how we determine which narratives to teach, and more fundamentally whether it is justifiable to teach any particular story at all.<sup>3</sup> Barbara Norman has claimed that since historical stories cannot represent the past, therefore the only task available for history education is a kind of reflexive self-examination.<sup>4</sup> Chris Husbands, in the final chapter of his *What is History Teaching?* hesitates to endorse the arguments of postmodernism but finds himself unable to offer any coherent alternative.<sup>5</sup> And finally, consider the common view that students ought to learn to approach the historical past, and historical texts, as professional historians do.<sup>6</sup> But if professional historiography is, in the end, a matter of ideology or aesthetics, then why should this be a goal for history education? Is this a skill that we want students to learn?

Naturally, these questions are too broad and too numerous to receive satisfactory treatment here. Instead, my goal is to show that White helps us to understand how history, both professional historiography and history education, is unavoidably interpretive. However, I will also show why his more relativistic conclusions are unjustified. And finally, I will suggest that certain passages in White point the way toward a more satisfactory epistemology of history, a *better* story about stories about history, one which can inform our understanding of both the goals and the methods of history education.

## HAYDEN WHITE'S IMPOSITIONALISM

In 1973, White published his magisterial *Metahistory*, in which he showed how historical narratives consist of the emplotment of events within one of four established frameworks or modes: Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Satire.<sup>7</sup> Emplotment is what transforms mere *sequences* of events into meaningful and comprehensible *stories*, and that transformation constitutes the act of historical interpretation. The selection of a mode of emplotment imposes a criterion for the *selection* of the relevant facts, imposes a *plot* structure, and imposes *closure* on the story, all features essential to a meaningful account of the past.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, White maintains that emplotment is *chosen* by the historian, in accordance with her aesthetic preferences or political ideology. He writes: "the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetical or moral rather than epistemological."<sup>9</sup>

On the one hand, White's work has captured important features of the writing of history. He has problematized the traditional distinction between history and philosophy of history, arguing that every historian, regardless of the scope of her historical writing, operates with a "metahistory," a set of commitments that structures her historical narratives.<sup>10</sup> He has shown that historical facts emerge only once we bring a larger narrative to bear, a narrative which determines which facts are significant and even supplies the theoretical language to allow us to articulate those facts.<sup>11</sup> And he has focused especially on the way in which particular historical events may be emplotted differently by different historians, undermining the naive belief that historical stories are simply built up from correct depictions of particular events.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, however, White's radical epistemological conclusions are troubling. White claims that historiography is "an essentially *poetic* act," and historians are—or ought to be—in search of whatever makes for a meaningful story.<sup>13</sup> But if history can be told in many ways—if ideology or perhaps simple creativity governs modes of emplotment—then what becomes of historical truth? In education, of course, the question is not merely academic. Presumably, we ought to be able to justify curricular choices in the field of history, including the narratives that we tell. But the multiplicity of emplotments raises doubts about such a legitimation. And the popular easy solution of teaching both sides of controversial issues—both stories—is hardly more defensible, since there is no readily available criterion to determine when to teach the story and when to teach the conflict about the story, or even which conflicting narratives deserve space in the curriculum.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, if one believes that students ought to learn how to engage in the practice of history, then presumably one also believes that doing history entails something other than imposing a narrative on the past. Can this intuition be defended?

White, himself, responds to worries about skepticism by rejecting the notion that he has collapsed history and ideology or history and propaganda.<sup>15</sup> He claims to affirm the existence of historical *facts*, what he sometimes calls "singular existential statements."<sup>16</sup> Thus, while he explores the interesting ways in which historical stories and fictional stories "resemble or correspond" to each other, he does *not*

believe that history and fiction are identical. “Historians,” he declares, “are concerned with events which can be assigned to specific time-space locations, events which are (or were) in principle observable or perceivable.” Fictional writers, on the other hand, are not limited to such events.<sup>17</sup>

White’s theory of historiography therefore operates at two distinct levels. On one level, the level of facts, statements can be unproblematically true or false. He is even willing to say that “a historical discourse [is] properly assessed in terms of the truth value of its [facts]” in order to distinguish it from mere fiction.<sup>18</sup> But at the second level, the level of the narrative, the historian imposes an account on the past, subject only to aesthetic and political concerns; the assessment of the individual statements referred to above “does not provide us with any way of assessing the content of the narrative itself.”<sup>19</sup>

To summarize White’s story about stories, I propose three core theses. First, the *Spontaneous Generation of Narratives*: historical narratives are not generated by events and are not built up from discrete historical facts, but rather emerge fully grown from the minds of historians, who then manipulate the historical data to fit. Second, the *Immunity of Narrative*: narratives, once produced by the historian, are not susceptible to repudiation on the basis of evidence. Third, and most fundamentally, the *Heterogeneity of Fact and Narrative*: facts are simple descriptions of states of affairs that obtained in the past, whereas narratives are meaningful stories. Now, no historian dreams up a complete story about the French Revolution sitting in her armchair, of course. But White *does* believe that the historian imagines a *kind* of story, a *type* of emplotment, determining in advance whether it will be a story of, for example, progress or tragedy. With this caveat, we can now proceed to examine White’s theses more closely.

#### THE HETEROGENEITY OF FACT AND NARRATIVE

I will start from the third thesis and work my way backward. Consider, again, White’s claim that “[historical events] can be assigned to specific time-space locations, [and] are (or were) in principle observable or perceivable.”<sup>20</sup> And consider, too, an observer of an historical event: the firing upon Fort Sumter. That observer might be characterized as observing any one of a number of different events: the movements of ships, the movements of cannonballs, the injury of certain people, or the beginning of the Civil War. So which event is assigned to the “specific time-space location”? Which event is the *real* one, out there in Charleston Harbor, waiting to be observed? What criterion is available to distinguish which description of the event should be primary?<sup>21</sup>

Consider, too, the way that actual historical facts are, inevitably, radically compressed narratives. This is obviously true of facts about the sequence of events (that is, that WWII followed WWI). But it is true of other facts as well. Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon into Italy in the year 49 BCE, a fact that is highly significant in the larger narrative of Caesar’s ascension to power. But it is not hard to imagine a micro-narrative about the very crossing itself. Indeed, to a hypothetical perceiver sitting on the riverbank of the Rubicon, the event of the crossing is unavoidably structured *as* a narrative: the perceiver must consider the event to have a beginning, an end, and something like a plot if it is to be called a “crossing” at all.

The argument here is exactly parallel to familiar arguments from philosophy of science about the theory-ladenness of data. The perception of any event is not simply a matter of visual sensations. In order to perceive a “river crossing,” the perceiver must possess some prior notion of what *constitutes* a river crossing. That notion structures his perception of the crossing as one unified event, beginning with Caesar on one side and ending on the other. Thus, the perceiver is no less an interpreter than the historian who emplots the event in a narrative, and the very fact that the event must be structured in this way undermines the idea that one kind of description, a narrative description, is imposed upon another kind of description, a factual description of the event itself.<sup>22</sup>

#### THE IMMUNITY OF NARRATIVES

If these arguments against the *Heterogeneity* thesis are correct, then we should wonder about the second thesis—the *Immunity of Narratives*—as well. After all, White’s picture proposed that narratives are immune to facts *because* they are different kinds of entities, operating in different ways, for different purposes. But rather than pursuing this line of argument directly, I want to focus on the way that White periodically *admits* that emplotments are not quite as immune as his theory makes them out to be. How can we make sense of these admissions?

Consider White’s discussion of the multiple possible emplotments of the life of John F. Kennedy, Jr.,

What the historian brings to his consideration of the historical record is a notion of the *types* of configurations of events.... True, he can misfire. I do not suppose that anyone would accept the emplotment of the life of President Kennedy as comedy, but whether it ought to be emplotted romantically, tragically, or satirically is an open question. The important point is that most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways.<sup>23</sup>

White thus momentarily admits that the historian can “misfire” by imposing an *inappropriate* emplotment upon the facts of the life of Kennedy, an emplotment that no one would or indeed *should* accept. Unfortunately, he does not recognize the significance of this admission, so it never finds a place in his story about stories.<sup>24</sup> But perhaps he *might* argue, if pressed, as follows. Once we have committed ourselves to a narrative of Kennedy’s life, we have already radically narrowed our historiographic options. We have identified one story, from among the infinite stories that can be told about this time period, as the focus of our historical interest. We have identified a genre of biography, so that we are (more or less) constrained by the termini of his birth and death. And we have determined that Kennedy will be the focus of the story. Once we have done all this, we cannot ignore the fact of his assassination, the death of our central character at a relatively early age through an act of violence. It is precisely *that* fact which forbids a comedic emplotment.

But this is not quite enough. In addition to these premises about topic, genre, and subject, we must also be committed to other understandings, about certain terms (like “assassination”) and certain beliefs (such as the misfortune of a violent and early death). Otherwise—for example, if I genuinely believe that death, no matter how violent or early, is a blessing—a comedic emplotment of the life of JFK begins to seem rather more plausible than White imagines. This demonstrates the complex inter-relation of our judgments and beliefs. So we might characterize the premises

identified here as a kind of intermediary mechanism, a set of gears that enable an engagement between the straightforward factual information on one side and with the larger narrative emplotment on the other. Without these gears, without some account of how the two elements interact, there is no way to make sense of White's admission of a limitation on impositionism, even in extraordinary cases. *With* these gears in place, on the other hand, facts about the historical past can and do engage both with other beliefs and, indeed, with our narratives—which are then not so immune after all.

#### THE SPONTANEOUS GENERATION OF NARRATIVES

In one sense, of course, the *Spontaneous Generation* thesis is correct; historians, like inquirers in all fields, are sometimes inspired to see new connections among disparate elements, to construct interesting new metaphors, or to produce insightful and creative new accounts. But the thesis says more than this: it is not simply the case that the historian's creativity *contributes* to her historiographical product, but rather that that product springs forth fully formed, with no empirical guidance. This stronger claim, like the other theses, is untenable.

I wish to claim that, in an important sense, historians deal with events that are *in every instance* already portrayed, implicitly or explicitly, in other historical accounts.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes this is obvious, as in the case of a new history of the French Revolution, an account which bases itself upon, and reacts against, earlier histories. But even when it is less obvious, the implicit narratives are always lurking in the background. Thus, consider a micro-history of some small French village in the early nineteenth century. This topic may never have been explicitly tackled by professional historians. But implicitly, the story has already been told within the general characterizations of the Revolution, or in the broad histories of the Church and its interaction with local affairs, or in the histories of early industrialization, or in some combination of these and countless other narratives, both professional and popular.

Equipped with these narratives, the historian approaches her topic with the task of showing how these other accounts are true, or not true, and of course how the close inquiry into the particular case sheds light on the larger histories and gives them new subtlety. Even in path-breaking work, in cutting-edge interdisciplinary historiography, the historian is in the position of borrowing from other narratives and applying them in a new way.<sup>26</sup> This amounts to saying, *with* White, that the historian always approaches her subject with some prior conception of the form of the story—and not just its form, but indeed its content too—but at the same time saying, *against* White, that these various preconceptions come not from the spontaneous creativity of the historian but from numerous and diverse outside influences. The actual work of historical interpretation, and its actual creativity, consists of negotiating among an abundance of pre-existing narratives, proto-narratives, and narrative types, some large-scale and some small, some academic and some popular, some explicit and some hidden deep in the background of our various commitments.

#### A BETTER STORY ABOUT STORIES

If the arguments that I have advanced here are accurate, the result is a sketch, at least, of a better story about stories about history. That sketch acknowledges the

significance of the narrative turn, as a valuable contribution that allowed a new focus on the way that history is *written* and on narrative as a mode of presentation of historical interpretations. Moreover, White's contributions should be celebrated, for he has helped us to see that narratives are not simply built up, inductively, from facts, and that every historical narrative carries with it a variety of metahistorical commitments. At the same time, the specific positions that form the core theses of his impositionalism cannot be sustained.

Narratives do "create" facts, in the sense that they allow us to articulate information about historical events in propositional form by supplying both theoretical language and criteria of relevance. But narratives and facts are not entities with sharply distinct ontological status, as White claims. And moreover, narratives are not immune from all disconfirmation by facts. That disconfirmation does not occur in straightforward and predictable ways, of course; narratives often possess the flexibility to withstand criticism through adaptation and modification, and frequently multiple narratives—multiple descriptions of events or historical periods—are compelled to coexist. So we need not endorse the naive notion that facts algorithmically and methodically falsify all possible emplotments, leaving only the one true and real emplotment. Yet, confrontation with particular facts does sometimes force an historical narrative into a responsive modification. And finally, while it is surely the case that the choice of narrative structure requires the creative input of the historian, that creativity is manifest not in pure invention but in the fruitful juxtaposition of and generative negotiations among various prior narratives.

#### HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS

If we turn, belatedly, to history in the schools, the most significant point is that nothing in this story about stories is particular to professional historians. Students of history, too, engage in this kind of negotiation, between the pre-existing narratives that they bring with them into their classrooms, the narratives that they encounter in their textbooks, the often quite different narratives that their teachers offer, and the various bits of information that support or unsettle each of these accounts. The student of American history may know nothing of the firing on Fort Sumter before reading about it in her American History textbook, but she almost certainly does have prior ideas—gleaned from parents or community or popular culture—about the scope of American history, about the centrality of the Civil War to that story, about race and rights, and so forth. The student, therefore, like the historian (and, for that matter, like the teacher<sup>27</sup>), always engages in a process of interpretation, continually encountering facts and alternative narratives and reworking her own in response.

There is, of course, one crucial difference between students and historians: someone else, a teacher, is in charge of guiding and facilitating students' interpretive experiences. Note that this is not simply a matter of providing preselected source materials in order to mimic historical research. It is rather the far more difficult, far more intensive, and far more exhausting task of constantly assessing where students are, where they need to go, and what kinds of interpretive experiences are most likely to get them there. Thus, a student convinced of the unquestionable merits of the Southern cause may find that commitment challenged by learning of the facts of

slavery, a challenge that leads to modification of the pre-existing narrative or possibly even its replacement. Conversely, a student convinced of the evils of slavery, and in possession of a simple story of the Civil War derived entirely from (and limited to) that moral conviction, may find that narrative altered by the confrontation with the facts of General Sherman's pursuit of total war in his "march to the sea," or perhaps the fact of the reluctance to admit freed slaves into the Union ranks or the delay in granting emancipation.<sup>28</sup>

Success in history education, then, is quite distant from the "coverage" of an historical period or the transmission of inert facts. It requires gaining as much understanding as possible of the variety of pre-existing narratives with which students arrive in the classroom, as vague and fragmentary as they might be. To do otherwise, to assume that students are blank slates—that they know nothing of the Civil War simply because they do not know the facts of Fort Sumter or of Sherman's march—is to give up any chance of calibrating one's pedagogy to fit the student, or of understanding what kinds of classroom experiences are likely to foster more comprehensive and more responsible interpretations. Without such an understanding, no teacher can be helpful in guiding the student through the interpretive process.

There is a further and final point to be made here as well, about our deepest goals in history education. If it is true that facts do sometimes disconfirm narratives, then we ought to foster the abilities in our students to recognize when their narratives require revision. If the construction of stories is an unavoidable aspect of the study of history, then we should want our students to be *good* and *responsible* storytellers. But if it is also true that the way that this kind of disconfirmation works is not at all straightforward, that it is not always clear what counts as a disconfirming fact and what is mere anomaly, and that narratives are rarely if ever disconfirmed by isolated facts—if all this is true, then good historical inquiry cannot be characterized mechanically or algorithmically. There are no rules or rigid methodologies for how to negotiate among the fragmentary bits of textual evidence and full-blown narratives that one encounters. Instead, responsible storytelling is a product of certain dispositions or habits of judgment. According to my story about stories about history, therefore, a primary goal in history education should be the development in students of those personal qualities that we may call the *interpretive virtues*.

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1. Some theorists consider narrative to be unavoidable; others, merely paradigmatic.

2. Louis O. Mink, "Philosophy and Theory of History," in *International Handbook of Historical Studies*, ed. G. Iggers and H. Parker (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 24.

3. Peter Seixas, "Schweigen! die Kinder! or, Does Postmodern History Have a Place in the Schools?" in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*, ed. Peter Stearns et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

4. Barbara Norman, "A Postmodern Endeavor: From History as Representation of 'the Past' to Historical Thinking," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 28, no. 6 (1996), 713-23.

5. Chris Husbands, *What is History Teaching? Language, Ideas, and Meaning in Learning about the Past* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996).

6. Sam Wineburg is a prominent proponent of this view; see his *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

7. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). Space does not permit an explanation of White's full analysis,

with its rigid structuralist influences. But subsequent to *Metahistory*, he acknowledges other possible emplotments (such as Epic) and focuses to a greater extent on the unrestrained creative contribution of the historian.

8. These claims, of course, give rise to the term “impositionalism,” which I use following Andrew Norman, “Telling It Like It Was: Historical Narratives on Their Own Terms,” *History and Theory* 30, no. 2 (1991). White himself employs the verb “impose” from time to time. See “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 95; “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” in *Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 44; and “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. S. Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 30.

9. White, *Metahistory*, xii. It is important to note that White intends to be prescriptive, not just descriptive. For example, he wants historians to be aware of the inherent tropology of their work, so that they will then have the freedom to “construct narrative accounts...in whatever modality of consciousness is most consistent with [one’s] own moral and aesthetic aspirations”; White, *Metahistory*, 434.

10. For example, White, “Interpretation,” 52 and White, *Metahistory*, xi.

11. To be sure, he is not the first to take this position. Arthur C. Danto famously argued that “there are no events except under some description,” in “Narrative Sentences,” *History and Theory* 2, no. 2 (1962).

12. For example, “in history what is tragic from one perspective is comic from another,” in White, “Historical Text,” 84.

13. White, *Metahistory*, x. See note 9 on White’s desire to prescribe.

14. For a nice discussion of this point, see Robert Fullinwider, “Patriotic History,” in *Public Education in a Multicultural Society*, ed. R. Fullinwider (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 219-21.

15. See, for example, White, “Burden of History,” in *Tropics of Discourse*, 46-47 and White, “Historical Text,” 99.

16. For example, White, “Question of Narrative,” 45.

17. White, “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” in *Tropics of Discourse*, 121. Immediately one should wonder about mental events, among other things.

18. White, “Question of Narrative,” 45.

19. *Ibid.*, 45-46.

20. White, “Fictions,” 121.

21. White sometimes bolsters the *Heterogeneity* thesis with a surprisingly reductionist ontology, as if it were obvious that a comparatively atheoretical description of an event is “really real” while more theory-laden and narrative-like descriptions are not. See, for example, his “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *Content of the Form*, 24-25. But this ontology flies in the face of his own arguments about the role of narrative in the emergence of facts.

22. This phenomenological argument serves as the cornerstone of David Carr, *Time, History and Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) and his subsequent work.

23. White, “Historical Text,” 84.

24. This is not an isolated example of this kind of admission. For others, see White, “Burden,” 46-47; “Problem of Truth,” 29-30; and “‘Figuring the Nature of the Times Deceased’: Literary Theory and Historical Writing,” in *The Future of Literary Theory*, ed. R. Cohen (New York: Routledge, 1989), 30.

25. This claim follows suggestions in David Carr, “Getting the Story Straight: Narrative and Historical Knowledge,” in *Historiography Between Modernism and Postmodernism*, ed. J. Topolski (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).

26. These other narratives or narrative-types are often embedded in theories (for example, about social relations). And narratives are also frequently embedded in simple labels such as “the Cold War”; Steven Crowell, “Mixed Messages: The Heterogeneity of Historical Discourse,” *History and Theory* 37, no. 2 (1998), 231; “The Dust Bowl”; William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992), 1375 or the variety of different names for the Civil War.

27. Compare Peter Seixas, “Beyond Content and Pedagogy,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 31, no. 3 (1999), 317-37, on teachers as interpreters.

28. More accurately, the pedagogic task requires the calibration of interpretive experiences, rather than just facts. This might mean simply reading a textbook, or listening to a lecture; it is more likely to mean confrontation with primary sources; but it might also mean writing in a journal, or reading historical fiction, or encountering authentic artifacts.