

**Based on a True Story:
Contemporary Historical Fiction and Historiographical Theory**

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This article considers the history of the historical novel, alongside the development of contemporary historiographic theory. It maps the development of the historical novel from its popular form in the nineteenth-century Romantic period, a time when the novels of Charles Dickens or Victor Hugo were rarely subject to critical appraisal, through to the contemporary, postmodern mode where historical narrative is often scrutinised for its (re)presentation of historical ‘truth’. I analyse the works of writers such as Julian Barnes and Jonathan Safran Foer to reflect the blurred lines between narrative histories and stories told in the traditional mode. I ask scholars and readers of the past to overcome their demand that historical works must always present clear, documented evidence to be taken as true, and challenge the assumption that all fictions are merely stories conjured in a writer’s mind. This article examines how much ‘truth’ a fictive text may command, and asks that narrative is not seen to be compromising ‘truth’ but instead in terms of its ability to offer readers access to a past unavailable to traditional or ‘proper’ modes of historical research. I argue that narrative history allows experience an opportunity, and that it is often the encounters we have and the stories we tell that make history accessible, memorable and applicable to our present.

Ways and Means: To Blur, but not Sacrifice, the Laws of Fact and Fiction

Narrative histories, or historical fictions, have not been readily accepted in the academy as a legitimate form of history. More than any other contemporary literary form, narrative history has struggled to find acceptance within professional frameworks designated as either history *or* fiction. To accept narrative as a precise, learned method of historical representation, we would first have to overcome the demand that historical works must present clear, documented evidence to be taken as true, and challenge the assumption that all fictions are merely stories conjured in a writer’s mind. Such works are often excluded from being seen as history, or as having something to offer an audience interested in the past being represented

in a manner that works both within and outside of what is designated as 'history'. But all distinctions are problematic. Drawing a distinction between what is historically factual and what is literarily possible 'ignores the role of possibility in historical analysis and the role of actuality in the writing of literature – what could happen, what typically happens, what might have happened and what actually happened' (Strout 1992: 154). This article examines how much 'truth' fictive texts can command, and deems that they are capable of offering readers access to a past unavailable to traditional or 'proper' modes of historical research. I argue that historical narratives can operate within the realms of 'truth' if the author does not compromise what is known to be 'fact', with the usual understanding that facts can be manipulated in ways that can serve paradoxical views, and that 'truth' in an age of relativity and perspectivism is a volatile concept. The reader appreciates the writer's play with history and that very 'playing', it can be argued, may succeed in representing a time with more validity than by other methods. Fiction based on an historical period and scholarly academic history may have more in common than one thinks. As Hayden White explains:

Within a long and distinguished critical tradition that has sought to determine what is 'real' and what is 'imagined' in the novel, history has served as a kind of archetype of the realistic pole of representation [...] Nor is it unusual for literary theorists, when they are speaking about the 'context' of a literary work, to suppose that this context, the 'historical milieu', has a concreteness and an accessibility that the work itself can never have, as if it were easier to perceive the reality of a past world put together from a thousand historical documents than it is to probe the depths of a single literary work that is present to the critic studying it. (1978: 89).

White encourages the reader by suggesting that histories may be subject to the same kind of imposition of fictive devices as literary texts.

History finds itself in Fiction: Modernism

Historical narratives fit into two broad forms: the first places its events within an historical backdrop or period; the second employs historical 'fact' to tell its story. I would like to call these 'Once Upon A Time' and 'According To' narratives respectively. Further, these narratives are billeted into categories and defined by criteria that might involve genre – the epic, the detective story, biography; or theoretical perspectives such as feminist, Marxist; or by forms such as satirical literature, verse narrative, airport lounge romance novels and best-sellers (the latter will tend to be a mixture of the above diluted for maximum consumption). Each of these genres and approaches will have a particular form. Form is characterised by the

use of a particular prose and dialogue; setting, costume and characters; use of documentary accounts or manifestoes; the presence of anachronisms, inter-textual devices or lacunae; or a sense of timelessness that allows the author to jump from one era to another. The ways in which a narrative identifies with these criteria determines if the reader should expect a bodice-ripping, swash-buckling yarn in which characters live happily ever after, or if attention should be paid to erudite facts or dates in case they are called upon later. Historical narratives may also draw on language in a poetic way. The use of symbols and metaphors mean that a world is apprehended rather than defined, and that metaphor may perhaps succeed in representing the world in ways that history proper cannot. This may refer to the psychology of a character, a philosophical view presented by the story as well as the use of place, dialogue and relationships between characters to denote an attitude, an enigma, or what Raymond Williams refers to as a 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977: 132).

Historical narrative was popularised in the nineteenth-century Romantic period and consisted mostly of 'Once Upon A Time' stories that adopted an historical setting upon which to install a fictive narrative.¹ Fictions of this genre were rarely subject to critical appraisal by traditional historians, yet were often taken by their audience to be representing an historical reality. Charles Dickens' novels, such as example *A Tale of Two Cities*, came to be seen as valid representations of the conditions of life and social injustice in Victorian Britain; Leo Tolstoy found the constraints of historical enquiry devoid of the human condition so, in *War and Peace*, produced an epic tale of tragedy and conflict that depicts individual experience and emotion; Walter Scott's *Waverley* and *Rob Roy* revived an interest in Scottish history; and Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is believed to have encouraged a cultural heritage society to protect Parisian monuments. Historical fiction was lauded for generating a popular interest in social and national history, namely because it was more accessible than biography or 'proper' history. A distinction for novels of this period could be neatly summarised as:

in a history text, the historian's reading of the past is at the foreground of the narrative, and therefore more readily open to scrutiny and questioning. In a novel our attention tends to be focused on the fates of individual characters, so that the background interpretations of history are often absorbed almost unconsciously. (Morris-Suzuki 2004: 42)

¹ For practical purposes only my focus is restricted to fictions of Australia, Europe and the Americas, and does not directly include the tradition of oral history telling that often evolves into narrative.

In both cases the creator is open to 'error' in his/her representations.

These clear distinctions broke down as the creative climate of the early twentieth century produced two new forms of modern writing: the modernist, with interests in self-consciousness along Freudian and existential lines, and the 'realist' where the interest was in telling the story of class conflict or stories within recognisable social, economic and religious settings. The former gained attention as an experimental form for its lack of orthodoxy and departure from the objective focus of narratives of the previous generation. Modernist texts of the 1920s could be distinguished by extreme changes in their form: ambiguity, introspection and a focus on psychology, replacing chronological order with a fluid and often backtracking sense of time and the absence of a reliable narrator. Writers such as Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce and Katherine Mansfield maintain contemporary influence despite being criticised for 'their elitist cultural assumptions, their failure or refusal to engage constructively with the great public issues of the time and to communicate to a wider audience' (Lodge 1977: 47).

Such criticism is not surprising as twentieth-century narrative was developing in tandem with the changing social and intellectual climate shaped by artists' awareness of the ideological, political and cultural movements of the 1930s. The period from World War I through World War II was a time in which fiction dealt enthusiastically with historical forces. Literary texts that reflected popular public opinion, the political split between left and right, communist and capitalist, and a growing interest in sociology and documenting one's existence came into favour alongside classical modernist works. Although the author may have dissociated himself from 'the fellow-traveller set,' George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984* are obvious responses to debates on Marxism and censorship in Britain during the period. They are also modernist in that they engage with what might be seen to be the three philosophies that were the touchstones for modernist writers: Freudianism, Marxism and existentialism. The evolution of the modern novel also led to the birth of popular fiction. Depictions of contemporary reality were crucial to narrative; these writers didn't experiment with literary models, and content was privileged above form.

New approaches to the historical novel exposed the history within fiction rather than concealing it within costumes and family sagas. Writers embraced 'According To' narratives, using personal experience and primary sources to tell a story. Ernest Hemingway's novel of the Spanish Civil War, *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, offered a commentary previously reserved for newspapers and magazines. His narration of the experience of an outsider observing from within revealed the realities of conflict in a way other correspondence pieces, such as C. E.

W. Bean's discourse of the Australian and New Zealand campaign at Gallipoli during World War I, could not meet. Hemingway's focus on the introspective experience of war, negotiating individual ideology and justifications for violence, and the crucial relationship between a guerrilla and the land is a departure from the political/historical focus of much war literature. In Hemingway's case his views against Fascism were explicitly rendered in his narratives. In *A Farewell to Arms* he directly addresses the relationship between experience and fiction: 'I don't know about heroism, I don't know about the history-book stuff; when you are in a war the orator's phrases and the newspaper words don't mean a thing; expressions like "brave", "victorious", "gallant" become nauseous and shameful' (Hemingway 2004: 143-4). Later in this novel the protagonist has been stopped by a group of Italian soldiers who saw it as their mission to kill defectors or spies. This scene tells of the ferocity and indiscriminate nature of violence and through the narrator we get a sense of what may happen in war that is not otherwise accounted for. He writes:

I was obviously a German in Italian uniform. I saw how their minds worked; if they had minds and if they worked [...] They were executing officers of the rank of major and above who were separated from their troops. They were also dealing summarily with German agitators in Italian uniform [...] We stood in the rain and were taken out one at a time to be questioned and shot. So far they had shot every one they had questioned. The questioners had that beautiful detachment and devotion to stern justice of men dealing in death without being in danger of it [...] I ducked down, pushed between two men, and ran for the river, my head down, I tripped at the edge and went in with a splash. The water was very cold and I stayed under as long as I could. I could feel the current swirl me and I stayed under until I thought I could never come up. The minute I came up I took a breath and went down again. It was easy to stay under with so much clothing and my boots [...] There were shots when I ran and shots when I came up the first time. I heard them when I was almost above water. There were no shots now. (2004: 199-200)

Immediate post-Second World War European (and to a lesser extent American) narratives of conflict, death, mass destruction, and underground movements emerged, and gave voice to an age of violence. This retrospection transformed through the 1950s as Evelyn Waugh, L. P. Hartley and Anthony Powell among others wrote forward-looking criticism focussed on concerns of the development of the Welfare State in Britain and a changing social climate in Eastern Europe. Into the 1960s and 1970s international politics and the rise of superpowers, wars in Southeast Asia, and an active global awareness and politically active generation of new writers, scholars, and artists gave rise to a 'predominantly social commitment of literature' (Ivask & von Wilpert 1973: xii). Grand narratives of Ancient Greece or Victorian

England were deemed unfashionable and irrelevant as writers focussed on their own time, their own generation and their own grievances.

Early postmodern writers – Marguerite Duras, Jeanette Winterson, J. M. Coetzee, Kazuo Ishiguro – wrote of their guilt for being born too late for the heroism of parents who fought at war. Fictions of this era were of authors seeking out their roots, not only to contemplate their pasts in order to understand their present, but to reclaim an estranged past. Critics asked for depictions of contemporary life rather than of an unyielding focus on the past, but what these critics did not see was that a focus on the past was an attempt to find historical paradigms for contemporary situations (Byatt 2001: 11). We can see how the Paris Riots of 1968 are reflected in the fictions of Julian Barnes, or the British preoccupation with class structure and social convention within the works of Kazuo Ishiguro, and it is suggested that José Saramago was interested in the politics of conquest and dispossession, and Israeli policies towards Palestine, when he wrote *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*.

Fiction embraced the historical narrative and the role of memory and ‘The Past’ became a preoccupation of many artists; but it was done in a way that disrupted the traditional relationship of the author to the past. As Linda Hutcheon has concluded:

while historians and novelists [...] have a long tradition of trying to erase textual elements which would “situate” them in their texts, postmodernism refuses such an obfuscation of the context of its enunciation. (Hutcheon 1989: 67)

For example, as Ann McCulloch explains when analysing *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, John Fowles makes an intrusion by the author actually part of the plot itself; McCulloch refers to the way the author writes the following in the text itself and ‘apologises for his own intrusion into the story but points out that his presence is no more fictitious than that of his characters, no more real for that matter’ (qtd. in McCulloch 1986: 89).

These same writers, along with the next generations, are Janus-faced observers who live in the present yet have their gaze fixed firmly on the past, ‘moving constantly between the forward-looking standpoint of the agents and the retrospective standpoint of the hindsightful observer’ (Dray 1997: 776). They did not dismiss current events, but they did not ignore how much the past influences their present. Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 saw Europe again experience mass political and social change, dominated by the final failure of and disillusionment with socialism. The ever-evolving world of technology and over-bearing globalism became (and remain) the focus of

new fiction, not for a textual gimmick of re-living the past, but for reasons of a genuine intellectual curiosity that demands political engagement, addresses ideological change and questions ambiguous notions of unity and identity.

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is clearly related to the events of September 11, 2001, without it being history proper; Janette Turner Hospital also articulates the presence of terrorism in Western culture in her novel *Orpheus Lost* – using an Ancient Greek myth as an underlying philosophical structure to elucidate contemporary political and social change. These are only two in a wealth of texts published in the past eight years, and indicate that the War on Terror and its countless ramifications in political and cultural developments is an influence that cannot be ignored.² Foer's text represents 9/11 in fictional terms, however our experience of the protagonist's loss of his father and the parallel being made with his grandparents' experience at Dresden during World War II is poignant. The paternal grandfather has been driven to silence in his pain – something that if not avoided in the current generation, is certainly addressed with new knowledge about post-traumatic stress. Metaphorically the writer gives a structure of feeling by juxtaposing the individual experience of loss and pain across two widely separated wars.

When I thought I was dying at the base of the Loschwitz Bridge, there was a single thought in my head: *Keep thinking*. Thinking would keep me alive. But now I am alive, and thinking is killing me [...] I can't stop thinking about that night, the clusters of red flares, the sky that was like black water, and how only hours before I had lost everything, I had everything. (Foer 2005: 215)

Traditional history could not capture the emotions represented here, yet it is common to survivors of wars in which there has been great loss. Or, as in the aftermath of 9/11, when the urban landscape itself depicts trauma: 'Everything that's born has to die, which means our lives are like skyscrapers. The smoke rises at different speeds, but they're all on fire, and we're all trapped' (Foer 2005: 245).

Theorising Historical Fiction: A Retrospective Methodology

Historical fiction deals with issues, events and problems that history proper cannot. Yet because of its hybrid form – borrowing from the schools of fiction *and* history – it is often

² Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Nick McDonnell's *The Third Brother* (2005) Adib Khan's *Spiral Road* (2007) and Adrian d'Hage's *The Beijing Conspiracy* (2007) are amongst other relevant Western novels published works in this time.

seen as impure and subsequently deficient. This is, however, a generalisation carried by those operating within traditional parameters of the two genres, or those eager to dismiss the form by characterising some of the works as 'postmodern'. Historical fictions also create a 'doubleness' that allows the reader a unique interaction with the text; one may know the outcome of the story from the past, but be nonetheless drawn into a new rendering of it. The reader may have an awareness that the text's characters do not; they 'know that their characters will die. They know what comes after' (Byatt 2001: 59).

Literary or 'According To' historical fiction is distinct from, although inherently similar to, scholarly or 'proper' history in as much as its writers share the same evidence. Yet the writer of fiction can employ the criteria of narrative – the traditional historian will not. American philosopher and literary theorist Louis Mink wrote of the difference between fiction and history:

the novelist can make up a story any way he [sic] wishes, subject only to the requirements of art. The historian, on the other hand, finds the story already hidden in [...] evidence; he is creative in the invention of research techniques to expose it, not in the art of narrative construction [...] the story of the past needs only to be communicated, not constructed. (Mink 2001: 215)

Nevertheless, many scholars now discuss how history can be a construction reliant on the ideological perspective of the historian, as much as the documents she selects and those she ignores.³ This is a paradox that exists at the heart of the argument between traditional historians and writers of fiction who believe they are constructing historical realities. Questions of why events occur and how they play out the way they do force us beyond the realm of historical investigation and to consider human experience, feelings and motivations that offer perspectives rarely achieved within an empirical discipline. Historical narratives become the domain of a 'seer' writing within an historical epoch that is past and (commonly) subject to previous evaluation. The author operates within a retrospective methodology. The 'doubleness' offered to the hindsightful observer allows a greater understanding of what has come before and the scope to explore the consequences of writing history as fiction.

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* utilises this 'doubleness' – her narrator, whether presented in first or second person, plays a similar role to that of the reader. Each have

³ See for example David Carr. 2008. 'Narrative Explanation and its Malcontents' in *History & Theory*, Issue 41; Linda Hutcheon *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London, 1989; and Michael Bentley's excellent discussion of postmodern historiography in 'Introduction: Approaches to Modernity: Western Historiography since the Enlightenment' in Michael Bentley (ed.). 1997. *Companion to Historiography*. London: Routledge.

knowledge of what is to come; the advantage for Atwood's narrator is that she has the power to determine what the reader is told. Atwood uses court cases, documents and oral testimonies to enhance her novel and the verifiability of her narrator's case – but the author admits the limitations of writing historical fiction: 'when there was solid fact, I could not alter it [...] every major element in the book had to be suggested in the writing about Grace and her times, however dubious such writing may be; but, in the parts left unexplained – the gaps left unfilled – I was free to invent' (Atwood, 1998: 1515). To fill these gaps, Atwood was able to imagine Grace's experience, her thoughts and actions, the people she encountered and the conversations she had. As the reader is tasked with making judgement over Grace's involvement in a crime, this exploration not only develops her character, but it also expands the reader's understanding of Grace's experience, and her supposed innocence.

In his novel *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* Julian Barnes demonstrates that our past can be evaluated and judged in text – from the journey of Noah's Ark told by a stowaway woodworm to the plight of Jewish refugees aboard the ship *St Louis*, rejected by United States and Cuban immigration months before the start of the Second World War. The narrators of Barnes' ten chapters are anti-classical, anti-Rankean observers who do not present 'Once Upon a Time' fairy tales but prefer unbiased critical examination. They find no need to conceal the dark side of history or the less-than-favourable reality of conditions onboard the Ark, instead: 'When I recall the Voyage, I feel no sense of obligation; gratitude puts no smear of Vaseline on the lens. My account you can trust' (Barnes 1989: 4). Nevertheless one heeds Barnes' words with caution, can we trust any statement like this? Does he even want us to? We all think we are speaking a truth when often it is our ignorance that makes us unknowing, or our ideological and psychological propensities and preferences that intrude and affect our judgement or determine our interpretation.

Barnes is very aware of the irony of his 'truth-telling' and jeopardises his narrative to allow the reader freedom from classical historical analysis, such as notions of 'history as progress'. When the presence of Noah's stowaway is disputed by a sixteenth-century French court in a later chapter 'Barnes implicates [the reader] in the politics of memory that [...] history demands: the affirmatory [sic] remembrance (or return) of that which [...] never happened' (Buxton 2000: 72). Even if these events are not documented on historical record, what Barnes does is allow the reader to imagine that they were. He allows us to question the official record, to query classical interpretation, and by doing so his work becomes a useful tool for examining our past. His novel is not historiography or metafiction, nor is it straight historical narrative; it is as Salman Rushdie suggests - 'fiction as critique' (Rushdie 1991:

241). Barnes makes historical events philosophically viable, he illuminates possibilities of biblical proportions; yet he does this openly and offers himself for scrutiny, claiming 'History isn't what happened. History is just what historians tell us' (Barnes 1989: 242). Barnes' luring half-chapter 'Parenthesis' reminds us that we are reading fiction by reminding us that we are human, that love exists, and that the presence of humanity and experience can blur the scholarly traditions of historical discourse.

The ultimate value of Atwood and Barnes' novels, among many others, is that they are intellectual pursuits that raise possibilities and expand the limits of our understanding of the past as well as making us aware of how faulty our powers of analysis and understanding may be. As great writers they 'show us how history can be a literature that attains the highest form of art. Reading their works provides not only lessons in the form and structure of writing and research, but inspiration to ignite the ardour of both readers and writers' (John Clive qtd. in Windschuttle 1994: 249). By scrutinising or challenging our past we, as readers and/or writers, in turn engage with it; we reclaim our estranged past and dare to dream that our own stories will one day be told, and that they may be told in ways that are erroneous from our point of view or that of others who hear them.

Historical narrative uses the evidence, manuscripts and testimonies that construct a past as the framework for representation. As a form it cannot be said to compromise the legitimacy of the past, because the story told is not fiction – it is a 'true' representation of a time or event that draws on a different form in its final rendering. Historical narrative distinguishes itself from researched, or 'proper', histories by making its form known – it openly imposes narrative devices on the past, highlights its discursive function and provides a merely chronological series of events with necessary continuity. Historical narratives should be embraced as a method of authentic representation of reality, for 'the event, the individual, even the recapture of some mood or way of thinking of the past, are not ends in themselves, but the means of illuminating some wider question, which goes far beyond the particular story and its characters' (Eric Hobsbawm qtd. in Roberts 2001: 12). Here, Foer demonstrates the potency of human experience as he contextualises a character's suffering following the Allied bombing of Dresden in 1945:

'Dear Anna, We will live in a home built at the top of the world's tallest ladder [...] We will live in a home with no walls, so that everywhere we go will be our home.' I wasn't trying to invent better and better homes, but to show her that homes don't matter, we could live in any home, in any city, in any country, in any century, and be happy, as if the world were just

what we live in. The night before I lost everything, I typed our last future home: 'Dear Anna, We will live in a series of homes, which will climb the Alps, and we'll never sleep in the same one twice. Each morning after breakfast, we'll sled down to the next home. And when we open its front door, the previous home will be destroyed and rebuilt as a new home. When we get to the bottom, we'll take a lift to the top and start again at the beginning.' (2005: 209)

Historiography confronts the Twentieth Century

Historiography was once the study of error. Or rather, its writers were distracted by the pursuit of formalising how historians' subjectivity could be measured and explained. It seems any historian writing from late-1800s to the mid-twentieth century felt it necessary to note his or her awareness of the subjectivity of their craft in the form of the (conscious or unconscious) selection, interpretation and manipulation of historical fact.

A second dimension of historical thought, the history of history: the discovery that the historian together with the here-and-now which forms the total body of evidence available, is a part of the process he [sic] is studying, has his own place in that process, and can see it only from the point of view which in the present he occupies within it. (Collingwood 1946: 248)

It was acknowledged that historians and novelists alike choose their facts, omit (contrary, conflicting) information, merge, misconstrue or manipulate events and dates; they enforce an unnatural beginning and ending upon historical retellings. And with a particular audience or reader-response in mind historians are accountable for the choice of facts presented; knowledge is sought and emphasis weighed on evidence that supports the historical record; anachronisms are to be excused, almost expected.

Defining the perceived explanations for subjectivity may be superfluous to the contemporary researcher, but these parameters were crucial to the development of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century historiography, where 'reason should not sleep [and] reflection should be in full play', as Georg Hegel warned in 1830 (1956: 11). Hayden White, historian of literary theory and criticism, contends that historiography took shape as a scholarly discipline during the nineteenth century primarily, but not only, as a backlash to all forms of myth. Leopold von Ranke and his contemporaries had attempted to secure the 'essence' of historical knowledge by attacking philosophical or narrative interpretations of the past, claiming they were ideological distortions that lacked factual evidence. They believed that if one 'eschewed ideology and remained true to the facts, history would produce knowledge as certain as anything offered by the physical sciences and as objective as a mathematical

exercise' (White 1978: 125). Ranke asked writers of history to utilise factual articles and reliable evidence as the sole resource for obtaining and promoting knowledge of the past. In doing so he believed historical accounts would then become discourse without subjective or misleading influences.

Although such practice offers a clear and known perspective of events, the empirical discipline applies blinkers to the historian's (and the reader's) understanding of historical reality. Much of the modernist period was spent uncovering where historians 'had got it wrong', and historical enquiry did not seek to learn how their predecessors had structured the past, instead they unravelled that past (and by doing so, their craft) by superseding knowledge that was seen as deficient, or simply outdated. Yet, if historical enquiry pursues conclusions as definite as a mathematical equation, it risks losing its sense of openness and natural responsiveness to actions, events and consequences that do not fit neatly into the realm of 'fact.'

It was the empiricists' inability to find value in an individual's response to events that deemed historical narratives to be fabrications. But there is a danger in this definition – if we are to focus only on mass history and the victor's spoils, we deny the significant influence and relevance of individual voice and experience. Tolstoy turned from history to represent the human condition in fiction, and by doing so produced documents on cultural history. As Snowman contents:

when (in *Anna Karenina*) he describes an aristocratic girl, Natasha Rostov, visiting a peasant's hut and instinctively picking up the rhythms of a folk dance [...] [Tolstoy] is portraying not only the girl's unspoiled charm but also the deep bonds that he believes have always united Russians regardless of class or background. (2003: 29-30)

Historiography confronts Postmodernism

Western Historians of the 1960s and 1970s wrote in a changing intellectual climate. Michael Bentley comments that this shift ran alongside a major political move away from the fellow-traveller position and socialist planning toward the free-market economics of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher (1997b: 488). The shift was also urged by the Civil Rights movement and driven by 'those born after' – the post-Second World War generation whose struggle for social equality and recognition was the movement's loudest voice. Campaigns of the late-1960s affected literary criticism, political, philosophical and social thought and created a new mood in historiographical understanding. The Modernist period was long dead and the

Postmodern 'turn' had begun; becoming strengthened, redefined and constituted through the 1980s and beyond.

Historians, although in some cases unfamiliar with the language of postmodernism, found themselves having to rethink their approach in order to maintain relevance and congruence with other forms of thought (Bentley 1997b: 489). New-Historicism scrutinised overarching issues of capital-H History, rather than focussing on a specific period or topic, recognising that there is no single version of history and that any representation must reflect multiple truths or pasts, and 'examine the broader development of historical writing by relating it to various other forms of intellectual expression'(Bentley 1997a: xiv).

A significant development in contemporary historiography is the shift from a discourse focussed on formalising the empirical conditions of historical enquiry to one that pursues the contextual, ideological and textual motivations of the author-historian. The taint of subjectivity that lingers in all historical enquiry, be it fictional, empirical, digital or otherwise, can no longer be the overwhelming, almost vain, preoccupation of historiographical study. Contemporary scholars have inherited debate and conclusions and our understanding is enhanced by an awareness of that past's interpretation. And such developments see historiographers, novelists and historians dealing 'less with the historical facts than with the epistemological problems attached to the reconstruction of historical events and to the writing of history' (Nünning 1997: 226). In maintaining a theoretical awareness and understanding of *how* and *why* predecessors saw and wrote their past(s) in ways different to contemporary research, theorists such as Jörn Rüsen, Paul Ricoeur and David Carr acknowledge that there is more than one type of past to be learnt, and that identifying the writer's ideology is necessary when evaluating the present.

Contemporary historiography represents a stunning turning point in the way history as a social science is accessed, debated, and hypothesised. Historiography has emerged – or stepped forward – as a viable, innovative and pursued field of historical erudition. Its forms, structures and struggles make it a most interesting and progressive consideration, addressing problems of history, aesthetics and language, and of the validity of fiction as an historical voice – determining that history can no longer be the simple study and (re)presentation of empirical facts. Professor of Intellectual History Frank Ankersmit attests:

History is an empirical discipline in two respects. First, in the more trivial sense history is an empirical discipline in that it deals with the data the past has left us that can empirically be verified or falsified. But history is also an empirical discipline in the sense that it can be seen

as a continuous experiment with language; an experiment in relating language to the world [...] Likewise, the history of historical writing can also be seen as a series of experiments with language [...] The questions of how to properly relate language to reality, how to put into words the way reality has been experienced by us, is essentially an 'aesthetic' question. The history of historical writing is, in the final analysis, a chapter in the book of the history of aesthetics. (2006: 49-50)

A shift in the method or approach of understanding, such as embracing narrative or epistemology, did not and has not compromised the past; instead it has opened it to a greater perspective of what theorists find valuable in their past(s) and how they arrive at the conclusions they do. As R. G. Collingwood directed we use *a priori* imagination to overcome historical lacunae, so it becomes the role of the historian to create a narrative in which these events sit, to place it 'within a context by relating it as a part of some conceivable whole' (White 1978: 94). The imposition of story elements highlights where narrative departs from chronicle, and where narrative's claim as an authentic representation of historical reality is most precarious. While chronicle is restricted to events that occurred within a fixed timeframe or parameter, narrative is able to represent endings as directly linked to a faraway beginning, with action in the middle, too. As Salman Rushdie explains of the art of writing historical fiction:

The story does not go from the beginning to the end but it goes in great loops and circles back on itself, repeats earlier things, digresses, uses sometimes a kind of Chinese-box system, where you have the story inside the story inside the story and then they all come back. (qtd. in Reder 2000: 76)

Hayden White encourages students (writers, readers) of history to use their craft as a form of communication, and to see that historical writings are subject to the same emplotment and imposition of narrative devices as literary accounts. He rejects views that historical discourse cannot take a fictional form, contending that emplotment is natural to any historical retelling – because historical situations are stories waiting to be told, and the idea of the epic, the drama or the comedy is not inherent to an experience but a trope applied by the historian. 'Events are *made* into a story [...] by characterisation, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies [...] in short, all of the techniques we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play' (White 1978: 84). History is not found but constructed, and it is the choice of the historian the form in which it

will be presented. Life and historical existence are narrative in the practical sense that they are episodes of experience, *not* a literary narrative construct.

As Friedrich Nietzsche saw the past and the historian getting in each other's way and producing a skewed account of the past, White asks historians to remove the screen obstructing our view of history to produce something more than simple intellectual constructions (Ankersmit 1998: 188-189). This approach should not be seen as an excuse for writers to ignore factual evidence or compromise the truth of historical analysis. Rather, understanding the constraints of empirical study and recognising the potential of interpretation grants the reader greater insight into the past. Our understanding of a past event or era of course increases with knowledge about the period in question. And knowledge is developed and enhanced by reading varied interpretations by historians, novelists and scholars. It also forces the reader to understand and question the parameters of (re)presentation, the meaning and reasons driving interpretation, and the influences of these.

The benefits of interpretation, be it White's thesis of emplotment, or the adoption of necessary tropes, broadens our perspective of each given past and forces us to interact with the text. The reader can only serve to gain insight and knowledge by questioning their sources. So long as the writer does not breach the reader's trust (assumed knowledge, prior comprehension of events), and the reader recognises the writer's play with form, then the factual quality of narrative should not be seen to be compromised. It is too easy to simply assert that narrativising an event removes historical authority. As White contends:

It is the success of narrative in revealing the meaning, coherence or significance of events that attests to the legitimacy of its practice in historiography. And it is the success of historiography in narrativising sets of historical events that attests to the "realism" of narrative itself. (White 1987: 54)

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