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Narrative Truth*

Kalle Pihlainen†

Abstract

In this article I explore Hayden White's constructivist approach to historical representation through the lens of "narrative truth". My aim is to show that – in addition to helping historians make peace with constructivist premises – openness to a notion of narrative truth could support a useful rethinking of the commitments of disciplinary history. In elaborating the notion, I discuss common misunderstandings concerning the relation of representation to reality, the nature of history as a discursive practice and the more specific epistemological claims made by narrative constructivists. Particular attention is on intuitions that the past is storied in itself, assumptions that historical representation is somehow a "natural" or essential aspect of cognition (hence I also rehearse some arguments regarding "narrative form as a cognitive instrument") as well as on beliefs regarding the role played by facts in historical representation. Also, and in light of my discussion of these other biases, I tackle the currently popular focus on the relation of experience and history.

Keywords: Hayden White - historical theory - narrative constructivism

Resumen

En este artículo, exploro la aproximación constructivista de Hayden White para la representación histórica, a través de los lentes de la "verdad narrativa". Mi objetivo es mostrar que –además de ayudar a que los historiadores hagan las paces con las premisas constructivistas– la apertura a una noción de verdad narrativa podría sustentar nuevas y útiles reflexiones sobre los compromisos de la historia disciplinar. Al elaborar la noción, discutiré comunes malentendidos concernientes a la relación entre representación y realidad, la naturaleza de la historia como una práctica discursiva y las afirmaciones más específicamente epistemológicas hechas por los constructivistas narrativos. La atención particular se posará sobre las intuiciones acerca de que el pasado es relatado en sí mismo, suposiciones de que la representación histórica es de algún modo un aspecto "natural" o esencial del conocimiento (de modo que también ensayaré algunos argumentos respecto a la "forma narrativa como instrumento cognitivo") así como también sobre las creencias con respecto al rol jugado por los hechos en la representación histórica. Además, y a la luz de mi discusión de estos otros sesgos, abordaré el foco popular actual sobre la relación de la experiencia y la historia.

Palabras clave: Hayden White - teoría histórica - constructivismo narrativo

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The qualification of “truth” with “narrative” in my title is intended as a provocation. When the question of the status of history status as knowledge was introduced to mainstream discussions of history by Hayden White – in the context of the 1960s and the 1970s, when aspirations that history be taken seriously as science still largely dominated the discipline – all such ideas certainly seem to have provoked strong reactions. Today, after four or five decades of debate, some vague attachments to an unqualified truth may still linger on in the minds (or at least hearts) of history practitioners, yet less rigorous ideas like that of “narrative truth” appear by-and-large to have become acceptable. There still exist, however, limiting biases that are easily incorporated into discussions of such thinking – perhaps to curb radical readings and to control the damage, as it were. Against any attempted domestications of White’s thought, I will present an argument for “narrative truth” in what I take to be the spirit of White’s constructivism. Although the possibility and definition of such truth raises issues that are not exclusive to the practice of history, I will here tackle things from the standpoint of that discipline as well as of related discussions within theory of history. In spite of this narrower focus, the significance of “narrative truth” beyond the boundaries of history should be obvious.

The first bias that the prefacing of truth with any qualifier suggests is that there is something that “truth” alone somehow unproblematically marks. That there is, so to speak, a genus that “narrative truth” is a subspecies of. Given the ways in which we generally use language this is a justified prejudice. The pairing of the words here marks a contested space, however: “Narrative truth” is a useful concept precisely because it also questions the possibility of truth plain, beyond the introduction of a certain level of discursive complexity. Beyond, that is, the point at which we enter into the sphere of more complex linguistic representations. The same does not necessarily hold for qualifiers such as “partial”, “subjective”, “perspectival”, and so on. Or at least not in a similar way. Any such epistemologically and hermeneutically oriented qualifiers still hold out the possibility of an objective or at least *determinable* truth.

The first thing to understand, then, is the idea, familiar from White as well as other pioneering (dare I say “scepticist”?) thinkers that truth, *in the sense of meaning*, is not “out there”, it is not something that can be discovered. And nor is it – and this follows – something that can be independent of construction. This position is presented well in relation to history in one of White’s undoubtedly best-known statements – and one that has caused great deal of controversy. In “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” (White 1978), White urges us to “consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (White 1978, p. 82).

Importantly, this problematic of truth does not – maintains White, along with like-minded theorists of history such as Frank Ankersmit and Keith Jenkins, for instance – present quite the same challenges on the level of what can

be termed singular existential statements, on the level of facts, that is, since these are not in the same way subject to complex narrativization. The main focus of narrative theorists of history or *narrative constructivists* like White is, then, on the meaning-making processes of histories. Rather than stopping at discussions of language and reference on a fundamental level, these narrative constructivists quickly move on to problems specific to the kinds of more involved discursive practices to which history(ing) too belongs. Thus, even though it would be possible to criticize White and others from the perspective of philosophy of language – to focus on how they refuse to appreciate that the question of reference is equally problematic on the level of individual facts – such critique misses the main drive of their arguments.¹ For them, agreeing to operate on terms of straightforward truth-value and reference makes sense on the level of singular statements but is not a valid way of relating to narratives and representation. Here, something else is needed. (Further biases that interfere with understanding the somewhat poetic idea of narrative truth relate more to the notion of narrative as explanation than to the question of truth in this more obvious sense of knowledge. I will explore these further below.)

In addition to being an expression of a non-reductionist world-view, the narrative constructivist choice is a practical one. Even if there is no “truth at the end of inquiry” (indeed, even if it turns out that there is no end to inquiry once we think things through), we need not give up on discursive practices. And nor do we need to give up on trying to make socially useful contributions through engaging in those practices.² The idea is that the availability of truth *simpliciter* is not a prerequisite for choices and action. And, obversely, that the flag of “truth” should not be used as an argument for the adoption of some specific values. I will go on to discuss all of this in more detail. For now, this rhetorical framing by White will perhaps best prepare the way:

And as for the notion of a true story, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions. Which means, of course, that they can be true only in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which a figure of speech can be true. *Is this true enough?* (White 1999, p. 9, my emphasis)³

¹ Although I present Ankersmit here as a narrative constructivist, his later writings suggest that he now tends to view meaning in a somewhat different way (see e.g. Ankersmit 2013a and 2013b; cfr. Icke 2012 and my footnote 7 below). In what follows, I will briefly discuss some of Ankersmit’s more recent claims too. Despite a shift in some of his emphases, Ankersmit still maintains – as I understand him – the critical distinction between individual statements and complex representations: “it is absolutely crucial in the context of my argument that historical representations (or texts) and the sentences contained by them should carefully be kept apart. My whole argument depends on this” (Ankersmit 2013a, p. 576).

² The recurring assertion (and fear) that the recognition of such a general condition of discursivity would lead to people giving up on trying to reach practical understandings is a common (and to me facile) criticism of scepticist or “relativist” positions: In denying authoritative stances, scepticism is said to lead to nihilism. (Yet, rather strangely, given this apparent power to annihilate, it is often also claimed by the same critics to remain a self-defeating position).

³ White has qualified his view of history’s truthfulness on numerous occasions. Here he goes on to say: “This does not imply that traditional historiography is inherently untruthful, but only that its truths are of two kinds: factual and figurative” (White 1999, p. 10).

The idea of narrative truth could equally well be presented in terms of “the content of the form” (which is arguably White’s best-known formulation of the general notion), “figurative truth”, “metaphorical insight”, and so on. For me, the usefulness of the idea follows from its invoking constructedness and a process of formal closure (which, in a general way at least, can be seen to include any kind of theory or proposition about the world) in tandem with the idea of some level of broadly shared truth or insight. In other words, it best suggests both the idea of truth-creation and the simultaneous appeal to something already familiar. Hence, and while I do not claim that narrative truth can replace these other formulations, I will pursue that idea now, all the while intending narrative in a minimally restrictive sense.⁴ Indeed, as far as I can see, speaking of narrative in a narrow sense would not resonate at all with a reading of White’s theoretical intentions. And neither would it be very useful for discussing historical representation as a genre. What is more, although White does refer to the alternative forms of history(ing) that he is often after as “antinarrative non-stories”, he is still best understood as a “*narrative*” constructivist since that more focused terminology serves to separate his point of view – which centres on the form (and the “content of the form”) of historical writing – from purely epistemological discussions concerning the construction of knowledge. As he reminds:

The notion of the content of linguistic form scumbles the distinction between literal and figurative discourses and authorizes a search for and analysis of the function of the figurative elements in historiographical, no less than in fictional, prose. (White 1999, p. 4)

1. What history is not?

Implicit in White’s question “Is this true enough?” – which I will represent here as asking: “Is it enough that history can provide us with examples of ways of acting and thinking, with metaphorical insight and figurative truth?” – is also the whole of his epistemological argument regarding the nature of historical representation – of, that is, historical narrative and narration. The stance of narrative constructivism that this argument marks out concerns, then, in its first part, history’s epistemological standing. As such, it is equatable with general linguistic-turn, poststructuralist and “postmodern” positions advocating scepticism regarding truth and meaning. At the same time, however, with its refusal of essences and recognition of a general “discursive condition”, this critique questions the naturalness of history as a genre too.

I will begin from this still broad yet now history-specific point: History (as a practice, and also, if so understood, as an orientation or “historical” world-view) is not in any way “natural”, and nor is it beyond itself being historicized. On this

⁴ Talk of narrative in this context has at times been criticized for its narrow focus, especially by literary theorists. For my intents and purposes here, however, the term can be detached from most of the formal definitions given in literary theory and understood instead to stand in for discourse and textuality *but with the one added qualification* that it does imply some imposition of formal closure. For an excellent discussion of definitions of narrative as well as of “narrative culture” more broadly, see Rigney (1992).

issue, White's challenge to the discipline is at its greatest. For him, history is "a kind of historical accident", the continued existence of which is not self-evident. It is worth quoting him on this at some length:

historians of this generation must be prepared to face the possibility that the prestige which their profession enjoyed among nineteenth-century intellectuals was a consequence of determinable cultural forces. They must be prepared to entertain the notion that history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation, and that, with the passing of the misunderstandings that produced that situation, history itself may lose its status as an autonomous and self-authenticating mode of thought. *It may well be that the most difficult task which the current generation of historians will be called upon to perform is to expose the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline.* (White 1978, p. 29, my emphasis)

So, although White mostly seems to want to offer opportunities for history's continued existence, he certainly does not claim that there is some automatic privilege or position afforded to the discipline as we know it now. Indeed, this recognition of its "historically conditioned" character can be viewed as the central challenge to history today. At the very least it means that history and historians would need to offer some reasons for engaging with the past in this specific disciplinary form. And that is what White's critique is (most often) still directed toward helping them do. But, despite White's decision to choose to support history(ing), it should be noted that alternative conclusions – like those recommending that we finish with history as a practice as presented by Keith Jenkins – would be equally valid according to this way of thinking. Since sensibilities regarding what is considered acceptable as "history" gradually change, it only makes sense that we might one day also simply choose to abandon the practice.

As a consequence, *choosing* history in the disciplinary form in which it presently exists rather than assuming that such historical thinking is a necessary condition of human existence or a fundamental "cognitive category", for instance, is a crucial step toward understanding the *kind* of truth that it might be able to provide. In addition, there are various "misunderstandings" – largely resulting from intuitive biases or unwarranted extensions of common sense and "experience" (and perhaps partially the same ones that White above refers to) – relating to the necessity of history that easily appear in discussions of anything akin to narrative truth and that need to be taken into account. Here, in this section, I will attempt to articulate what I take to be the central challenges in terms of *three* specific (albeit closely interrelated) misunderstandings, saving a crucial *fourth* one for the final section of the essay. Critique and clarification of these misunderstandings is more specifically focused on the question of what history as a narrative-making activity is and is not (as well as *why* it cannot be many of those things). While that discussion thus also still relates to the question of literal truth, it does so in more precise ways, then.

The *first* of the more specific misunderstandings affecting views of the nature of historical work follows closely on the heels both of the idea of a truth "out there" and of the received assumption that history is somehow a natural

category for making sense of the world. This is: the recurring intuition that narratives themselves are “real”, as if existing somehow independently outside or beyond processes of meaning-construction. Despite the immediate counterintuitiveness of this way of thinking (to me at least), it has found influential supporters – most prominently in Alasdair MacIntyre and David Carr. Extending this point of view to historical work, narratives could indeed be “discovered” by historians, and narrative truth would signify a particular aspect of the world in some more fundamental sense than when that world is qualified as being “under description”. This idea can be set against the far more understandable and general claim that narrative *as form and process* is a way of “making sense” of things (a continuous process of impositions of meaning and pragmatic engagements; see Carr 2008, for example, for a useful reading of what takes place in “narrative explanation”).

Even Frank Ankersmit has recently presented an argument for *real* aspects with respect to “representation as a cognitive instrument” (Ankersmit 2013b). In order to explain his position, he employs the (Heideggerian) idea of the “self-revelation” of reality combined with a captivating metaphor of representation as shining a light onto reality, bringing out particular aspects of it. As he sees it, the kind of “representational truth” that this process can offer: “bridges the gap between language and the world by the representation’s capacity to highlight certain aspects of reality”. (Ankersmit 2013b, p. 182). While such truth indeed sounds perfectly placed to provide a working compromise between purely linguistic construction and an unmediated access to reality in terms of phenomenological experience, it still fails, I would say, when one tries to extend it to historical representation. I will try to explain this in some more detail.

The core difference between Ankersmit’s view of aspects and the idea of narrative truth that I argue for here centres on his belief that the world “reveals” representational truth about itself – or, as he also puts it, truth “is to be found in the world” and, further, that this truth “announces itself” (Ankersmit 2013b, p. 183). But when “representation” is used in the sense it is when referring to literary artifacts – linguistic constructions such as historical representations, for example – it seems to me that the parameters for what we might quite acceptably claim when speaking of mental representations in a philosophy of mind framework (or a phenomenological framework relating to lived experience for that matter) no longer apply. While Ankersmit does not appear to intend his idea of representation to include the extreme idea of *narratives* “out there”, it can feed into that argument too, unless great care is taken to distinguish mental representations and subjectively constructed and experienced “life” stories from more elaborate linguistic representations.

With that distinction in place, however, the very idea that “narratives” or “representation” are viewed as means for making sense of the world already argues the constructivist side of things. For what else could it mean to say that they are cognitive instruments, tools in our cognitive processes? To put it bluntly: at a basic level, the appeal to cognition in itself seems to preclude the idea of

some immediate or direct avenue to aspects of the world assumed by the kind of romantic materialism that arguments like these presented by Ankersmit now would otherwise imply. (This can be illustrated with an analogy to perception: perceptual faculties are not, strictly speaking, instruments of cognition although they may engage and involve cognitive processing.)

Defending the idea that the narratives presented by historians are somehow real would seem necessary only if we already had access to (or indeed evidence of) such narratives in the first place. The practical fact – as presented by Carr, and more recently still supported by at least Geoffrey Roberts (1997) and, in a more nuanced way, Jonathan A. Carter (2003) – that people had understandings, intentions and stories by which they conceived of their own lives only serves to highlight the ubiquitousness of narrative as a sense-making strategy and has no bearing on the discussion about historians' narratives.⁵ Indeed, it is painfully misdirected when applied to *historical* representation. I will return to the confusion that I think easily undergirds all such views in the final section of this essay and will thus offer only a general conclusion concerning it here: While narrative form can be viewed as an essential cognitive tool (and by extension narration, interpretation or explanation as essential *processes*), it is a curious mistake to extend this centrality to *historical* narratives.⁶

Since we can have no direct historical experience (continuing to assume that “history” refers to the non-subjective past under description), constructing historical narratives for cognitive purposes does not even count as a necessary *existential* condition – whereas the construction of interpretations situating lived experiences on a phenomenological continuum clearly does. The assumption of existential necessity would, after all, amount to saying that there is something to the *historical* past (that is, to those parts of the past that require uncovering, collecting and representing rather than experience, memory and remembering to become available) that makes existential demands; demands that would somehow have a hold on us irrespective of our embeddedness in particular sociocultural discourses. And surely that cannot be the case? To highlight this problem as clearly as possible: Noting that cognitive processing is engaged by reflection on historical narratives (which seems to be a rather self-evident fact) does not mean that those types of narratives are an essential aspect of cognition any more than the existence of brick buildings would mean that bricks are needed in every construction project. (The undeniable presence of “parahistorical” and popular understandings and representations of the past in our “actual”, everyday experiences serves to confuse issues further, of course.)

⁵ Carter's approach is fascinating and extremely sophisticated, but to me his focus on temporality is still open to the same critique of moving from phenomenological experience to practices of representation. I'm not convinced that his position is as far from White's as he suggests, however, at least with respect to the ways in which cultural codes and discourses constrain meaning and interpretation.

⁶ And even more so, *pace* Ankersmit (2013b), to historical representation. The title of his recent essay already summarizes this idea that I object to: “Representation as a cognitive instrument”. Whereas: if narrative form is indeed a cognitive instrument in this general way, as Arthur Danto and, famously, Louis Mink claimed, the insight that the use of that instrument affords can still be productively spoken of as narrative truth.

As far as I can see, struggling against constructivism on this level is a lost cause. This is best summarized by referring to the fundamental break between fact and value generally invoked in the discussion. In Keith Jenkins' customary formulation: *there is no entailment from fact to value*. And, viewing things from the opposite direction, from the perspective of the process of (historical) narration, there is no way of remaining solely within the factual when complex constructions are involved: "When it is a matter of recounting the concourse of real events, what other 'ending' could a given sequence of such events have than a 'moralizing' ending? What else could narrative closure consist of than the passage from one moral order to another?" (White 1987, p. 23). Narrative closure necessarily introduces an element that transcends the boundaries of the epistemological.

In spite of such basic and persuasive arguments, the expectation of facts as being capable of constituting meaning "naturally" – without that meaning always needing to be imposed – seems to me to be another persistent confusion haunting discussions about history. Such faith in the derivability of meaning from facts is the *second* of the misunderstandings that I wish to draw attention to here.⁷

While constructivist claims seem clear enough, there is a great deal of confused opinion passing as theory in the contemporary debate. Much of this confusion is, I would say, attributable to readings of the linguistic turn as relating only to the use of language and to problems of reference rather than to the recognition of a much more fundamental discursive (constructivist) condition.⁸ Hence the present struggle for a number of historians and theorists has become increasingly one of pointing out that there is a reality beyond language (who are the anti-realists that these historically preoccupied individuals rail against, one wonders?)⁹ instead of simply acknowledging that there are limitations in accessing that reality in any *meaning*-full way. (The claim of "no entailment" again.)

Just to ward off one final and common objection before moving on (the *third* of the three misunderstandings that I set out to highlight in this section; this one related more to how narrative constructivist claims are often misrepresented than to any experience-based biases): None of the constructivist "corrections" to the usual history-related misunderstandings makes the claim that historical accounts could not still be falsified on the basis of facts. This is so because falsifi-

⁷ I should stress that I intend "meaning" here in the sense of the complex (and, admittedly by some extension, also "literary" and "metaphorical") content of a representation, the valuations that take place in emplotment, and so on; it is, then, here about attribution of significance as well as the kind of "content of the form" brought to the fore by White (and certainly not simply about what is intended by a discrete sign, for instance). Ankersmit's recent attempt to import a use of meaning in which the concept remains bound to truth and reference to the discussion of such more elaborate representation seems to me a far more problematic route. At the same time it also, and I think needlessly, opens him up to the kind of critique he has received from the point of view of philosophy of language (esp. Roth 2013, see also Ankersmit 2013b as well as Ankersmit's direct response to this critique in Ankersmit 2013a).

⁸ For a most cogent argument regarding this general condition, see Ermarth (2004).

⁹ Even Keith Jenkins (2009), who takes constructivist arguments concerning history to their limit, is very careful to point out that his is not an anti-realist position.

cation involves an altogether different process to construction. Although not entailed by facts – although, that is, complex interpretations cannot be extracted from simple facts – any single contradicting fact *can* serve to disprove an overall interpretation. (Such disproving need not empty an interpretation of value in terms of narrative truth or metaphorical insight, however.)

It should be remembered, then, that, in this fundamental respect at least, historical research and facts play a crucial role in White's overall view of history(ing). The failure of historians to intuit and to remember that the construction of interpretations and the procedures for falsifying them engage distinct mechanisms seems, to me, to be one of the final obstacles preventing many of them from embracing narrative constructivist ideas.

This distinction between construction and falsification is perhaps easier to keep in mind when one understands that narrative constructivism is concerned expressly with the “writing phase” of history – with, that is, narrativization and its end product, the narrative form. The “research phase” is not problematized to anywhere near the same extent. Which is why discussions concentrating mainly on reference and language tend to speak past the core constructivist issues. At the same time, distinguishing between research and writing “phases” is – as both White and Jenkins recognize – primarily a theoretical move; but a useful and necessary one in focusing attention on definite questions (see e.g. White 2000 and Jenkins 2009, as well as Pihlainen 2013b, 2013c).

So, where are we left regarding history, once we accept all these qualifications?

It seems to me that the best (simple) answer to the problematics history(ing) is faced with is still to be found in the idea that historical narratives are arguments for particular points of view or proposals for the attribution of meaning to events in the past (see Ankersmit 1983). Whether one takes this as a strictly epistemological issue (as an admission of the ultimate meaning *freeness* of facts as we can access them and the consequent need to impose *some* meanings) or decides to poeticize it in terms of a narrative truth that is somehow appealing as a result of some broader “human” truths is then largely a matter of preference. At its strictest, the idea can be presented in terms of “narrative substances” as Ankersmit has done in his early work – *not*, that is, as metaphors or proposals that attempt to capture truth *but* as descriptive constructions that confer meaning and (pragmatic) coherence. As noted, however, Ankersmit has lately focused increasingly on the idea of “representational truth”, with which he at least in part hopes, I believe, to avoid falling back even to the weaker, poetic conception of truth that I advocate here. White on the other hand – at least in my reading of him – appears to offer a workable alternative to taking the inevitability of meaning-construction as implying relativism in any simplistic “anything goes” sense (the fear of which has fuelled the swing back to more “realistic” and “materialist” theorizing for so many others). For him, the *appeal* (and usefulness) of the kinds of truths and knowledge produced by these “proposals” is firmly tied to their resonance with existing cultural and discursive practices and understand-

ings: tropological and figural forms, literary and filmic traditions, folk beliefs, popular culture icons and expectations, and so on and so forth. (Remember, the epistemological is not the only criterion at play here.) The requirement of this resonance or level of familiarity thus always sets clear limits on what makes sense as a historical poetics too.¹⁰ Is this enough?

2. What can we do (with history)?

The affirmative answer embedded within White's question "Is this true enough?" – the question that I have interpreted as one concerning the sufficiency of narrative truth as the end-product of history – introduces also the second part of my discussion here. This answer itself is evident. (Rhetorical questions include their answers, after all, and here the answer is, roughly: "Yes, it certainly is enough that history can provide us with metaphorical insights and figurative truth". Especially, one might wish to add, since this is the most that it can ever hope to do.)¹¹ The further questions that it raises lead away, however, from a discussion of what history is or is not – away from questions regarding the nature of historical representation and narrative, as it were – and toward the very practical one of "So what? What can we do with this potentially free-floating discursive form?" Perhaps, even, to the question: "What *should* we do?" (But now, crucially, with no illusions of entailment.)

So, while scepticism and any consequent increase in theoretical awareness or self-reflexivity already mark a significant improvement over conventional, objectively oriented history(ing), calling attention to the epistemological problems with narration as a process of truth-*construction* is really only a stepping-stone to these more involved practical, political and ethical issues. Thus, there should be substantially more to narrative truth for it to be "*enough*" than its being the only feasible candidate for truth once history's epistemological challenges are considered. Yet when historians dismiss narrative constructivism or other parallel sceptical and "postmodern" positions by claiming that they are already – as "traditional" *historians* – fully aware that history always involves artificial constructions and closures, choices and limitations of perspective, various literary devices, and so on, they still seem to ignore the consequences. Indeed, they appear to believe that their professional method (the still-so-often touted "historical methodology" and source criticism) can insulate them from sociopolitical responsibilities beyond the limited and supposedly neutral commitments of the discipline.

¹⁰ White's claim is a sensible one: "The historian shares with his audience *general notions* of the *forms* that significant human situations *must* take by virtue of his participation in the specific processes of sense-making which identify him as a member of one cultural endowment rather than another" (White 1978, p. 86). It should be emphasized that White always carefully steers away from essentialism. To me, his views neatly align with (but also tend, for the purposes of history, to be more comprehensive than) those of Michael Riffaterre (1990) regarding "the sociolect" and the "verbal givens" that govern opportunities for understanding.

¹¹ The question of the status or usefulness of such truth and insight presents no problem for White. He makes this clear with another equally challenging (and equally rhetorical) question: "Anyway, does anyone seriously believe that myth and literary fiction do not refer to the real world, tell truths about it, and provide useful knowledge of it?" (White 1999, p. 22).

To accept, however, that truth is not “out there” and that meanings cannot be distilled from facts and from reality “as such” – that meanings are instead always discursive constructions – implicates all those engaged in authorizing discursive practices like history equally. Responsibility for consequences (*ethical* responsibility) cannot be avoided, nor can it simply be claimed that the responsibility is shouldered by the institution as a result of its practitioners’ fidelity to some governing method.

In this move from epistemological difficulties to ethics and responsibility, White is at his most existentialist and practical,¹² and these claims can be denied simply by making opposing ones about the role of science and rational thought in contemporary society. They follow on most sensibly from the detachment of meaning from reality, however. (To avoid any confusion, it should be emphasized that the ethical in this framework is not a normative category that could somehow still attach itself to knowledge in the epistemological sense, but, rather, belongs to a practical, consequential sphere. Hence it introduces questions of valuation and responsibility in a way that the attachment of meaning to truth cannot. The idea of narrative truth marks this break while offering at least something in place of an epistemically naïve derivation of morality from the way things are.)

As already mentioned, narrative closure inevitably effects a judgement of value (the imposition of meaning) and a shift from the epistemological to the aesthetic and the ethical. This interpretation of closure can be viewed as another way of making the overall claim that meaning is not “out there”, of course, but there is more. Improved awareness of the effects of representation can also lead to a better appreciation of the suasive nature of established forms, particularly those narratives – in White’s reading especially – that are modelled following the example of the nineteenth-century realist novel. In answering the question “what can we do with history”, the question of its form is thus a crucial one.

One solution that White offers to the problem of the ideological weight of (what in historical writing are still most often realist-type) narratives, and one that has also been explored especially by Keith Jenkins, Alun Munslow and Robert Rosenstone (see e.g. Jenkins 2009, Munslow & Rosenstone 2004), is that of formal experimentation or, one might even say, resistance. Resistance, that is, towards inherited, implicitly held values and assumptions through narrative form itself. In White’s work this often appears as an advocacy of the adoption of modernist literary forms by historians. The adoption of such forms could, this argument goes, potentially prevent the unreflective perpetuation of such values as come with a faith in the possibility of transparent realist representation; including all the associated, implicit valuations regarding the primacy of truth, objectivity, rationality, clarity, non-contradiction, and so on. Certainly,

¹² For elaborations on White’s existentialism, see Paul (2011) and Doran (2013). As mentioned, White has recently increasingly focused on “the practical past”, in relation to which the questions of what can and should we do are even more pressing. (See White 2010, 2012, p. 131.)

the very basic mechanism of realist form in creating the illusion of truth would come under scrutiny.¹³

The connection between realist representation and closure needs perhaps to be underlined further: For White, as I read him, the chief danger of realist closure is in the presentation of past events “in such a way as to sublimate, domesticate, or normalize them” (White 2012, p. 132). And it is that very domesticating or normalizing activity that much “modernist and postmodernist art” actively seeks to avoid. Or perhaps, here too: to resist.

The automatic association of closure and realism with truth is what also makes realist forms so easily available to propaganda. If no closures are carried out in the name of creating verisimilitude and convincing readers of the fact that the interpretations offered are real and natural, then readers are rather paradoxically left more open to the contingency and *meaninglessness* of the contents. Lack of the kind of narrative truth that realist narratives employ in their process of meaning-construction surprisingly highlights the textual and constructed nature of a narrative, at least in a casual reading experience. And this to me is why White can suggest – as he has in a fairly recent interview – that the goal of historical representation should be “to create perplexity in the face of the real” (Rogne 2009).

A further elaboration may be necessary here; certainly there is an important lesson to be learned. The association of realist form and its attendant closure with truth influences readers as strongly as it does largely because there is no moment of questioning called forth between the reception of this particular kind of narrative truth – the convincing realist version in which verisimilitude affirms the narrative’s values – and its acceptance. This would not necessarily be the case with more “experimental” forms in which any narrative truth becomes apparent only through a more engaged action of questioning and sense-making. Meaning in these instances is thus not an automatic companion of some unproblematic reality but, instead, both are presented to the reader already marked as clearly mediated and in need of construction. In this way, “perplexity” prevents reliance on the habitual responses and processes of meaning-making that we operate with in everyday phenomenological experience.

The importance of viewing narration as a process of construction surfaces also on the reading side – in what it is that we think and talk about when we think and talk about specific historical narratives. If this dimension of meaning-construction is not clearly present in the minds of readers – if, for instance, our cultural understanding of historical narratives includes ideals of objectivity, of narratives being real, of narrative transparency, of meanings existing in the past to be discovered, and so on – discussion is limited largely to the epistemological, to “history proper”. And then historical narratives will easily function as vehicles of received ideology, as affirmations of the way things are. The more self-evident

¹³ I have discussed the opportunities potentially offered by alternative representational forms in a number of articles, most recently Pihlainen (2013a, 2013b).

the constructedness of meanings becomes, the more the dimension of responsibility for the consequences of historical narratives is also foregrounded – and this shifts discussion to the ethicopolitical. Denying a more political, presentist emphasis (as “traditional” historians tend to do in the name of epistemology) would thus appear to support conservative values and sustain the status quo. For White at least: “Nothing is better suited to lead to a repetition of the past than a study of it that is either reverential or convincingly objective in the way that conventional historical studies tend to be” (White 1987, p. 82). (For a more detailed elaboration of how realist form tends to support the status quo, see also Jameson 2013.)

White’s concern with what can be done – and with what we should do, both as historians and as responsible individuals, it seems to me – has become more clearly articulated in his recent writings. In the forthcoming collection, *The Practical Past*, he discusses this responsibility with respect not to history only, but also in relation to parahistorical pasts (a range of popular readings and understandings of the past from political slogans to “high” art). Particularly in this broader context, any opportunities available to history relate – as far as I can see – to the ways in which it might provide readings of the past that enable emancipatory thinking and actions, in the way in which history could be “for life” rather than simply remaining a staid, closed-off discipline. In White’s long-term focus (which has mostly been on history as a discipline) this emancipatory potential has gone hand-in-hand with experimental and modernist representational forms. With, that is, forms that refuse the kinds of closures attributed to “traditional” realist as well as propagandistic representations. History does not (as I’ve suggested a number of times already) have a great deal to offer if operating from the epistemological alone. As White sums this up: “Surely, the more precise, accurate, and authoritative the accounts by historians of the historical past, the less relevance it can be said to have as an analogue of any situation in the present. Conclusion: historical knowledge is of no use at all for the solution of practical problems in the present” (White 2012, p. 127).

In this practical context, the importance of representations of the past is increasingly determined on the basis of their usefulness and popular appeal. Either they have some significance “for life” or they can be discarded. The problem of loss of authority that history faces with the decline of its epistemological mandate is less pressing an issue here – and parahistorical representations certainly have little reason to consider it; they make use of whatever means best suits them, already aimed at capturing hearts and minds according to current sensibilities at the outset, as part of their *raison d’être*.

3. Experience and the ragged edge of history

Disappointment with the impotence of the historical past (with, that is, history’s inability to have any real and present meaning) and the consequent valorization of the practical past have had some interesting consequences even, I would claim, within the historical discipline itself. The importance of “memory” and

“experience” as well as the return to “reality” and “materiality” – presented as a getting *beyond* the sterile textualism that constructivist arguments constrain history to – could be read as testifying to the need for a reformulation of the discipline. Yet the need to change or abandon it has so far been channelled into fairly romantic conceptions that play well with more conventional understandings of what historians do (and what they should do).

The most challenging question currently relating to the idea of narrative truth in historical representation is, in my estimation at least, this same one of its relation to experience and experientiality. There appear to be many persisting confusions about the role of experiences in constituting history: History continues to be viewed as being for society what memory is for individuals, and, as a consequence, collective beliefs and values regarding the past and its meanings are ascribed the same status as personal life experiences. Hence they too are naturalized. This overall dynamic of tying phenomenology to history represents the *fourth* and final misconstrual that I want to highlight here.

The unjustified extrapolation of historical meaning from personal experience haunts the idea of history, I would claim. Since David Carr’s (to me surprisingly) long-lived argument in the mid-1980s against White and similar, as Carr has it, “discontinuity view” theorists of narrative (theorists who subscribe to a break between narrative and reality), the notion that subjectively experienced temporality and stories constructed by individuals and collective subjects in their attempts to understand their lives has something to do with historical representation always seems to return to the table. But equating narratives constructed in the process of explaining one’s life events, for example, with narratives constructed by historians to emplot “historical” events is an exceedingly weak argument for showing that narratives generally exist “out there”. Just because these narratives “existed” in personal (or indeed collective) imagination (and consequently in experience) does not make them any more real in the sense that constructivists question. In the sense, that is, that meaning and values might be “out there” to be discovered. The imposition of meaning is just as much a part of the process in these situations (cfr. Carr 1986). In this respect at least, Carr’s critique of Louis Mink’s famous description of “narrative form as a cognitive instrument” seems to miss the point: Even if narrative is indeed the quintessential form in which interpretation takes place (“the primary form of human comprehension” as Mink 1978, expresses it) – and precisely because it is so universal a phenomenon – these very different instances of interpretation have very little to do with each other. If historians were intent only on reporting how particular persons or groups construed and described their experienced life trajectories (that is, if this were all that was sought in “histories”), then a position where such experience-narratives and history were seen to be of the same order would perhaps make sense. Since that is not the case, the argument seems misplaced.

This same confusion appears to dominate attempts at bringing various discourses of “memory”, “historical consciousness” and “collective experience” to bear on history in a way in which they might help to solve the problematics

of meaning. As if, that is, history might benefit from these forms of “experienced” reality to the extent that it could dismiss scepticism regarding meaning. The problem with this is, however, that the bridge from reality to meaning remains an imaginary one.

As far as I understand it, this attitude is part-and-parcel of the general socially conditioned reliance on realist discursive forms. And it thus manifests as a problem also in the way in which reading takes place: As long as we read histories within a framework of realist reading expectations – guided, that is, by this simplistic idea of everyday experience and understanding – the dynamic is a difficult one: The more responsibility historical texts take for meaning in terms of constructing truth for us, the more real they feel and the more truth-value we easily (and paradoxically) attribute to them. This ties in also with the reason why modernist and experimental texts often appear to be so involved with the process of meaning-construction: when a text begins to resist realist closure and forces readers to work for meaning, it necessarily also draws attention to its strategies of meaning-construction or, in extreme cases, refuses to offer the reader any help at all or even aims to confuse or mislead. (See e.g. Pihlainen 2013a for more on this.)

By continuing to contextualize the process of narrative understanding and truth firmly in cultural and linguistic codings and conventions, the approach offered by White would appear to take the best of what can be had from thinking narrative form as a “cognitive instrument”. While meaning is not entailed from reality, then, narrative truth is constrained by the abundant codes within and by which we narrativize, both in our daily lives and as historians. At the same time, this approach takes into account what (little) can be gleaned from the idea of experiences of reality, not on the problematic level of unmediated experience but, again, in relation to the codes and discourses which we use to make sense of experiences. Hence the role of experientiality as “metaphorical insight” or “human truth”, for instance, comes to offer some interpretive traction or – as presented here in the idea of narrative truth – to hopefully have more resonance with historians’ phenomenologically inspired intuitions about the need for and presence of the historical past. As imaginary as they both are.

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