

# Deconstructing History

Second Edition

Alun Munslow

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# Deconstructing History

Deconstructive readings of history and sources have changed the entire discipline of history. And in this second edition of *Deconstructing History*, Alun Munslow examines history in what he argues is a post-modern age. He provides an introduction to the debates and issues of postmodernist history. He also surveys the latest research into the relationship between the past, history and historical practice, as well as forwarding his own challenging theories.

In this fully up-to-date second edition, Munslow:

- discusses the limits of conventional historical thinking and practice
- assesses afresh the claims of history as a form of 'truthful explanation'
- examines the arrival of 'experimental history' and addresses its implications for a radical rethinking of the discipline.

Including a fully updated glossary and bibliography, Munslow maps the philosophical field, outlines the controversies involved and assesses the merits of the by now familiar deconstructionist position.

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# 1 Introduction

## APPROACHING HISTORY

It is my intention to navigate through the central debate to be found in history today, viz. the extent to which history, as a discipline, can accurately recover and represent the content of the past, through the form of the narrative. Put plainly, to what extent is the narrative or literary structure of the history text an adequate vehicle for historical explanation, and what implications can we draw from our answer? It is now commonplace for historians, philosophers of history and others interested in narrative to claim we live in a postmodern age wherein the old modernist certainties of historical truth and methodological objectivity, as applied by disinterested historians, are challenged principles. Few historians today would argue that we write *the* truth about the past. It is generally recognised that written history is contemporary or present orientated to the extent that we historians not only occupy a platform in the here-and-now, but also hold positions on how we see the relationship between the past and its traces, and the manner in which we extract meaning from them. There are many reasons, then, for believing we live in a new intellectual epoch – a so-called post-modern age – and why we must rethink the nature of the historical enterprise to meet the needs of our changed intellectual beliefs and circumstances. Later in this chapter I will pose some basic questions about the nature of history, not least the fundamentally changed nature of how we come to understand the past as a body of knowledge from which we can derive a meaning for it. As we shall see, it is precisely this situation of *how* we constitute knowledge about the past that directly affects the nature of the meaning we impose upon it. History can no longer legitimately be viewed as simply or merely a matter of the discovery of *the* story of the past, the detection of which will tell us what it means. This belief results from a debate on the nature of



## 2 Introduction

knowing that began well over one hundred years ago in the nineteenth century.

What are these changed circumstances that justify the claim that we live in a postmodern age? First, the claim is not being made that postmodernism is a particularly new perspective or position arrayed against other old positions or perspectives about how we gain knowledge of the real past (or present). Postmodernism is, rather, the changed and contemporary condition under which we gain knowledge. Among the key principles of this new condition of knowing are the broad doubts that now exist about the accurate representation of reality. Indeed, postmodernism is not particularly new if we think about the self-reflexivity of the period supposed to exist prior to it.

Indeed, the term postmodernism is actually somewhat misleading. You will note I use the term un-hyphenated in this book. Rather than 'post-modernism' which is often the way it is described, I prefer to think of our present intellectual age not as something that came after (hence post-) but which is rather a transmutation of modernism. 'Post-modernism' has often been deployed to mean the arrival of a new set of conditions for knowing when it seems more appropriate to say modernism has now become fully aware of its own in-built critique of knowing. So, as we shall see, much that we refer to as postmodern (un-hyphenated) is in fact modernism's re-evaluation – especially in the last thirty years or so – of its own principles.

One of the main points about the Age of Enlightenment modernism from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was its self-consciousness in asking questions about how we know what we know. In a peculiar sense, perhaps modernism was always going to end up fundamentally critiquing itself. Maybe postmodernism was the inevitable consequence of modernism? We will see how this affects the study of the past throughout the rest of this book, but it is important from the start to recognise that history was always going to be in the forefront of this modernist will to self-criticism. It is as a result of this postmodern condition for knowing that history, as a discipline, has always been particularly susceptible to debates about its nature.

This book is called *Deconstructing History* because at its core is my belief that history must be reassessed at its most basic level. It is not enough merely to criticise historical method, but rather to ask can professional historians be relied upon to reconstruct and explain the past objectively by inferring the 'facts' from the evidence, and who, after all the hard work of research, will then write up their conclusions unproblematically for everyone to read?

Even if, as many might argue, history has never been nor is now precisely as positivist a research process, or as unreflective a literary undertaking as that description suggests, the crude empiricist or reconstructionist emphasis on the historian as the impartial observer who conveys the 'facts' is a paradigm (defined as a set of beliefs about how to gain knowledge) that obscures history's real character as a literary undertaking. I will argue that the genuine nature of history can be understood only when it is viewed not solely and simply as an objectivised empiricist enterprise, but as the creation and eventual imposition by historians of a particular narrative form on the past: a process that directly affects the whole project, not merely the writing up stage. This understanding, for convenience, I shall call the deconstructive consciousness. This use of the term is not to be confused with its original use by French cultural theorist Jacques Derrida, who employed the term more narrowly to mean the process whereby we grasp the meaning of texts without reference to some originating external reality. The deconstructive consciousness not only defines history as what it palpably is, a written narrative (the textual product of historians), but additionally, and more radically, suggests that narrative as the form of story-telling may also provide the textual model for the past itself. Recognising the literary dimension to history as a discipline does not mean that we cannot ask ourselves is it only our lived experience that is retold by historians as a narrative, or as historical agents do we experience narratives – as people in the past? In other words, does the evidence reveal past lives to be story-shaped, and can we historians retell the narrative as it actually happened, or do we always impose our own stories on the evidence of the past?

Whatever we decide, it follows that history cannot exist for the reader until the historian writes it in its obligatory form: narrative. What do I mean by narrative? When we explain in history we place its contents as events in a sequential order, a process usually described as the telling of a story. No matter how extensive are the analytical apparatuses borrowed from the social sciences and brought to bear on the past, history's power to explain resides in its fundamental narrative form. As the pro-narrative philosopher of history Louis Mink said in the early 1960s: 'Where scientists . . . note each other's results, historians . . . read each other's books.'<sup>1</sup> So far as this book is concerned, the *reality* of the past is the written report, rather than the past *as it actually was*. I will argue that history is the study not of change over time *per se*, but the study of the information produced by historians as they go about this task. In *Deconstructing History* I am attempting to highlight the essentially literary nature of historical knowledge and the significance of its

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narrative form in the constitution of such knowledge. In our contemporary or postmodern world, history conceived of as an empirical research method based upon the belief in some reasonably accurate correspondence between the past, its interpretation and its narrative representation is no longer a tenable conception of the task of the historian. Instead of beginning with the past we should start with its representation, because it is only by doing this that we challenge the belief that there is a discoverable and accurately representable truthfulness in the reality of the past.

### **SOME BASIC QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF HISTORY**

Four specific questions about the nature of history flow from the belief that history as it is lived and written is structured as much by its form as by its content. Although we can distinguish these questions for the purpose of listing, in practice it is very difficult to keep them separate.

- Can empiricism legitimately constitute history as a separate epistemology?
- What is the character of historical evidence and what function does it perform?
- What is the role of the historian, his/her use of social theory, and the construction of explanatory frameworks in historical understanding?
- How significant to historical explanation is its narrative form?

These questions prompted the writing of this book and lie at the heart of the status crisis besetting history today.

### **Epistemology**

The first question confronts the basic issue about history as a form of knowledge: is there something special in the methods deployed by historians to study the past that produces a reliable and objective knowledge peculiar to itself, and which makes it possible to argue that there is such a thing as a discipline of history at all? Historical knowledge, as it is usually described, is derived through a method – called a practice by those who believe in the possibility of an accurate understanding of the past – that flows from its techniques in dealing with the traces of the past. The most basic function of the historian is to understand, and explain in a written form, the connections between events and human intention or agency in the past. Put another way, the historian has to work out some kind of method or means whereby he/she can grasp the

relationship between knowledge and explanation in order to find the foundation of truth, if one exists.

One method would be to imitate the natural sciences, and although there has always been a large minority following among historians (especially among those with a positivist or social science training) for this flattery, it has never achieved a dominant methodological status. History cannot claim to be straightforwardly scientific in the sense that we understand the physical sciences to be because it does not share the protocol of hypothesis-testing, does not employ deductive reasoning, and neither is it an experimental and objective process producing incontrovertible facts. Moreover, the better we do it does not guarantee we will get closer to the truth. Scientific method works on the assumption that data are connected by a universal explanation, and consequently the scientist selects his/her data according to this belief. The historian, however, selects his/her data because of his/her interest in a unique event or individual acting intentionally in response to circumstances. Evidence is chosen for what it can tell us about that unique event or individual, rather than any and every event within a general category being explained.

What particular consequences flow from this for history as an epistemology, or special form of knowledge?<sup>2</sup> Can we gain genuine and 'truthful' historical descriptions by simply following the historian's literary narrative – her or his story? This is certainly the opinion of several commentators. The British theorist of history M.C. Lemon considers that the 'very logic' of history as a discipline revolves 'around the rationale of the narrative structure'.<sup>3</sup> In respect of what peculiarly constitutes historical explanation, Lemon argues that its essence lies in the manner in which historians account 'for occurrences in terms of the reasons individuals have for their conduct'. In other words, history can be legitimately defined as the narrative interpretation and explanation of human agency and intention.<sup>4</sup> The special character of narrative that makes it so useful to historians is, as Lemon points out, its 'this happened, *then* that' structure which also, of course, is the essence of historical change. It is a process that saturates our lived experience. In other words, the past existed and will exist as knowledge transmitted to us according to the basic principles of narrative form.

What, then, is the relationship of history to its closest neighbour, literature? The bottom line seems to be one of referentiality. I take this to mean the accuracy and veracity with which the narrative relates what actually happened in the past. As Lemon argues, while literature is not wholly 'devoid of referentiality', it is 'not referential in the same manner' as the historical text.<sup>5</sup> It follows that, like literature, *the past* and

*written history* are not the same thing.<sup>6</sup> Not recognising this permits us to forget the difficulties involved in recreating the past – something that does not exist apart from a few traces and the historians' narrative. Because we cannot directly encounter the past, whether as a political movement, economic process or an event, we employ a narrative fulfilling a two-fold function, as both a surrogate for the past and as a medium of exchange in our active engagement with it. History is thus a class of literature.

The most basic assumption that informs my book is that the past is negotiated only when historians represent it in its narrative form and that historical interpretation should not close down the meanings of the past to pursue what at best must remain an ersatz 'truth'. Indeed, we ought to be more open to the possible meaninglessness or sublime character of the past. Although mainstream empiricists may dispute it, I shall argue that there cannot be any unmediated correspondence between language and the world as a discoverable reality. Of course, even if this is the case, it does not stop us from asking, although we cannot provide a definitive answer, is it possible that the past unfolded as a particular kind of narrative the first time around and can we recover it more or less intact, or are we only selecting and imposing an emplotment or story line on it derived from our own present? Are stories lived in the past or just told in the present? Do we explain our lives at the time like the unfolding of a story? The most important question, then, is not the dog-eared modernist one of whether history is an accurate science, but the postmodernist one of how and why when we write about the past, we cast it in a particular narrative form. Further, how adequate is the cognitive power of narrative? What is its capacity to explain the past plausibly?

Just as it is impossible to have a narrative without a narrator, we cannot have a history without a historian. What is the role of the historian in recreating the past? Every history contains ideas or theories about the nature of change and continuity as held by historians – some are overt, others deeply buried, and some just poorly formulated. The theories of history mustered by historians both *affect* and *effect* our understanding about the past, whether they are explicit or not. To the extent that history is a narrative interpretation built in part out of the social theories or ideological positions that historians invent to explain the past, history may be defined essentially as a language-based manufacturing process in which the written historical interpretation is assembled or produced by historians. As the pro-narrative philosopher of history Arthur Danto put it, 'to tell what happened . . . and to explain why . . . is to do one and the same thing',<sup>7</sup> or in the words of

Lemon, the historian regularly encounters questions of ‘selection, relevance, significance and objectivity’ in his/her description of events.<sup>8</sup> I will suggest, therefore, that history is best viewed epistemologically as a form of literature producing knowledge as much by its aesthetic or narrative structure as by any other criteria. In addition, as we acknowledge history’s literary and fabricated character, I shall also address the past as *a* narrative, as well as describe it *in* narrative.

## Evidence

The second question concerns the raw materials in the history industry’s manufacturing process – the traces or evidence of the past. We should be beginning by now to see that because of the central role of language in the constitution of knowledge, or historical understanding is as much the product of *how* we write as well as *what* we write, so that history’s so-called raw ‘facts’ are likewise presented either wholly or in large part to us in a written or literary form. Even raw statistics have to be interpreted in narrative. If you, as a student of history, were asked to give an example of a historical ‘fact’, the normal response is to quote an incontrovertible event or description that everyone agrees upon. That slavery was the ultimate cause of the American Civil War is clearly not such a ‘fact’. It is a complex interpretation based on the relating of disparate occurrences, statistical data, events and human intentions translated as actions involving outcomes. But if we say in cold factual terms that the American President James Madison was ‘small of stature (5 feet, 4 inches; 1.62 metres), light of weight (about 100 pounds; 45 kilograms), bald of head, and weak of voice’ this seems unproblematic – Madison was or wasn’t this tall, was or wasn’t slight, was or wasn’t bald, was or wasn’t weak voiced. The important point, however, is the meaning that these ‘facts’ about Madison produce in the mind of the reader, rather than the inherent veracity of the ‘facts’ themselves.

Because he was short, slight, bald and had a squeaky voice, does this incline us towards an interpretation that he was weak, could not therefore hold his cabinet together, and eventually became a dupe of Napoleon?<sup>9</sup> History is about the process of translating evidence into facts. You and I as historians do this. Even when straight from the dusty archive, the evidence always pre-exists within narrative structures and is freighted with cultural meanings – who put the archive together, why, and what did they include or exclude? ‘Facts’ are literally meaningless in their unprocessed state of simple evidential statement. The evidence is turned into ‘facts’ through the narrative interpretations of historians; but facts usually already possess their own narrators, and then they gain

further meaning when they are organised by the historian as strands in a story producing a particular, appealing, followable, but above all a convincing relationship. Historical interpretation is the written explanation of that perceived relationship.

As we can see, 'facts' are never innocent because only when used by the historian is factual evidence invested with meaning as it is correlated and placed within a context, sometimes called the process of colligation, collation, configuration or emplotment, which then leads the historian to generate the 'facts'.<sup>10</sup> Traditionally, this process of contextualisation is undertaken by the historian as part of the process of interpretation as he/she relates masses of apparently unconnected data with an eye to producing a meaning. The evidence of the past is processed through inference, with the historian construing a meaning by employing categories of analysis supposedly determined by the nature of the evidence. The traces of the past are thus traditionally viewed as empirical objects from which to mine *the* meaning, or as sources out of which social theories of explanation can be constructed.

However, this positioning or organising of the evidence in relation to other examples – what I choose to call the process of emplotment – is where the historian's own views and cultural situation usually emerge. In writing history it is impossible to divorce the historian from the constitution of meaning through the creation of a context, even though this is seemingly and innocently derived from the facts. It is at this point that the historian unavoidably imposes him/herself on the past, whether it be through the apparently wholesome practice of mining the evidence for its true meaning, or more obviously through the creation and use of social theories, but most importantly, I would suggest, because of the emplotment or story-line (narrative structure) deployed to facilitate explanation and historical interpretation. I will examine the implications of the role played in writing history by the evidence and our representation of it. Evidence is there for us to infer meaning from and thus create historical knowledge. However, the inference of meaning emerges as we organise, configure and emplot the data. It does not, I would argue, just turn up or suggest itself as the only or most likely conclusion to draw.

### **Theories of history: constructing the past**

The third question in this debate comes out of the belief, held by hard-core empiricists, that history is a practice founded on the objective reconstruction of the facts, through which we get close to what actually happened in the past. This is what the English philosopher of history

R.G. Collingwood called 'naïve realism', and it is based on the idea that experience can be the object of historical knowledge.<sup>11</sup> In order to sustain this position, such empiricists deny that historians should intervene or impose on the past by suggesting that they must be not only impartial and objective in their treatment of the evidence, but also that they should reject social theory models in interpreting the past. This latter process is viewed by them as a crude construction or invention of the past.

However, since the 1920s, social and cultural history has been popular because it demands the construction of explanations of how post-industrial society has been able/unable to cope with the massive social changes that have occurred in the train of capitalist industrialisation. This modernisation process could not be explained without recourse to a new and utilitarian kind of history in which historians played an active role in its construction. They play this role either by empathically rethinking the thoughts of people in the past to ascertain their intentions, or by constructing social theory explanations rather than just waiting for them to suggest themselves. Hard-core empiricists (Collingwood's naïve realists) today embrace the idea that historians must not yield to this twin siren call to justify historical interpretations by imagining or empathising with past historical actors, nor less construct universal explanatory theories (usually described today as meta-narratives) that can explain the past. Such empiricists refuse to accept the changing character of contemporary thought, not least what has now become a commonplace argument among the majority of historians, that historical knowledge is not objective but has upon it the fingerprints of its interpreters.

As twentieth-century Western society has experienced total war, social, political and ecological revolutions, and new technology, the growing need has been to make the past intelligible to the present, and that means historians speculating on the causes of change, the nature of continuity, and the endless possibilities in the past. Such speculations cannot simply rely upon empathy or its corollary historicism – seeing the past in its own context or terms. Although the most obvious example of twentieth-century constructionism is the Marxist school of history that stresses the social theory of class exploitation as *the* model of historical change, the advent in France in the 1920s of the *Annales* school of historiography also produced a parallel constructionist-social science-inspired history that proposed alternative behavioural and demographic theories. From the 1970s an anthropologically indebted social history has also emerged that challenges class as the major construct in historical explanation in favour of taking single events and



decoding them for their wider cultural significance. In addition, the modernisation school has stressed the benefits of model-making to comparative history. The New Economic History of the 1960s and 1970s emphasised quantification. Constructionism has thus been subject to fashions or trends.

Sociological and anthropological constructionism is one of the key sources of what has become known as the New Cultural History and what I shall designate as deconstructionist history. As a variant of constructionism, the New Cultural History works on principles derived not only from anthropology but also from the broader intellectual movement of post-structuralism which itself emerged from literary critical theory in the 1970s. Deconstructionist history regards the past as a complex narrative discourse, but one, as the French cultural critic and historian Michel Foucault has pointed out, that accepts that representation is not a transparent mode of communication that can adequately carry understanding or generate truthful meaning. Deconstructionist history is a part of the larger challenge to the modernist empiricist notion that understanding emanates from the independent knowledge-centred individual subject designated variously as Man, humanity, the author or the evidence. As already noted, our postmodern condition for knowing has meant that the discipline of history debates its own nature as much as it does the meaning of the past. The most recent development has been the emergence of a 'new empiricism' that has acknowledged the postmodern critique, especially of history's discursive construction.<sup>12</sup> Part of this recognition has been to emphasise that empiricism has never been naïvely accepted. But as the term 'new' suggests, there is also an acknowledgement of the discursive or linguistic turn that indicates a degree of disillusionment with a realist view of language and representation. Nevertheless, there remains a desire to retain empiricism, though be it in some kind of modified form, as the bedrock of history. In other words, there is, among new empiricists, a desire to argue that the correspondence theory of knowledge still works, though it is now opened up to the potential meanings in the past. No new empiricist is anti-realist, although the historian Carla Hesse described new empiricism in those terms.<sup>13</sup> They are actually realists who see empiricism as not containing a necessary or given meaning. This is the key notion behind the New Cultural History.

New Cultural Historians are increasingly moving towards this new empiricism. They are not epistemologically sceptical but they are epistemologically self-conscious. This manifests itself in several different reactions to modernist history. New Cultural Historians – dependent upon the personal proclivities of the individual – tend to be

anti-representationalist. They are happy to accept teleological explanations if they are held to further certain ethical considerations (such as the recovery of gender or race).<sup>14</sup> This constitutes the emergence of the so-called ethical turn that has been increasingly significant in the past decade or so. There is a willingness to confront notions of time, which for modernists is resolutely linear. They accept and can work within the concept of the fabrication rather than the discovery of meaning. Such historians are often willing to work with the idea of history as a truth-effecting rather than a truth-acquiring discipline. They acknowledge the narrowness of the boundaries between fact and fiction. They can be 'experimental'. They will explore the troubled relationship between form and content. They will be willing to work with a discipline that is historicist as well as linguistically constructed recognising the past is inextricably bound up with the present and its appropriation has never been naïvely empiricist.

Modernist empiricism is in crisis because of the objection that meaning is generated by socially encoded and constructed discursive practices that mediate reality so much so that they effectively close off direct access to it. This situation is compounded when language is considered not to be a pure medium of representation. Is it any longer possible to write history when not only are we looking at it through our constructed categories of analysis – race, class, gender – but the narrative medium of exchange itself confounds the realist and empiricist dependence upon what one commentator has called an 'adequate level of correspondence between representations of the past and the past itself' as it once actually existed?<sup>15</sup>

The leading practitioner of the narrative or rhetorical version of constructionism remains the American philosopher of history Hayden White. White insists that history fails if its intention is the modernist one of the objective reconstruction of the past simply according to the evidence. It fails because the process involved is the literary one of interpretative narrative, rather than objective empiricism and/or social theorising. This means that writing history requires the employment of the past not just as a way of organising the evidence, but also taking into account the rhetorical, metaphorical and ideological strategies of explanation employed by historians. The study of rhetoric as the mode of historical explanation is summarised in the claim that history is literary artifact, as White says, as much invented as found.<sup>16</sup>

**History as narrative**

Because history is written by historians, it is best understood as a cultural product existing *within* society, and as a part of the historical process, rather than an objective methodology and commentary *outside* of society. This brings us to the fourth key question – posed by White along with Collingwood, and more recently by Louis Mink and Arthur Danto – what is the significance of narrative in generating historical knowledge, and what is its relationship to the previous three questions? But, first of all, what do we mean when we talk of historical narrative? The modernist empiricist historical method handed down from the nineteenth century requires and assumes historical explanation will emerge in a naturalistic fashion from the archival raw data, its meaning offered as interpretation in the form of a story related explicitly, impersonally, transparently, and without resort to any of the devices used by writers of literary narratives, viz., imagery or figurative language. Style is deliberately expunged as an issue, or relegated to a minor problem of presentation. This vision of the history as a practice fails to acknowledge the difficulties in reading the pre-existing narrative constituted as evidence, or the problems of writing up the past.

We historians employ narrative as the vehicle for our reports but usually neglect to study it as an important part of what we do. For most analytical philosophers of history the essence of historical understanding is the ability to recognise, construct and follow a narrative, that is *a* story based upon the available evidence. A historical narrative is a discourse that places disparate events in an understandable order: as Lemon says, ‘this happened *then* that’. Such a narrative is an intelligible sequence of individual statements about past events and/or the experiences of people or their actions, capable of being followed by a reader while he/she is pulled through time by the author towards the conclusion. All such narratives make over events and explain why they happened, but are overlaid by the assumptions held by the historian about the forces influencing the nature of causality. These might well include individual or combined elements like race, gender, class, culture, weather, coincidence, geography, region, blundering politicians, and so on and so forth. So, while individual statements may be true/false, narrative as a collection of them is more than their sum. The narrative becomes a complex interpretative exercise that is neither conclusively true nor false.

The commonsense version of the general empiricist and reconstructionist position on the essential role of narrative is well described by the philosopher W.B. Gallie:

Historical understanding is the exercise of the capacity to follow a story, where the story is known to be based on evidence and is put forward as a sincere effort to get at *the* story . . .<sup>17</sup>

Gallie is suggesting that the actual events as they really occurred in *the* story of the past have a striking resemblance to the shape of *the* narrative eventually produced by the historian – the narrative is found (discovered?) by the historian in the events themselves and then reproduced. The narrative here has referentiality. While philosophers of history like Keith Jenkins, Louis Mink and Hayden White believe that we do not live stories but only recount our lived experience in the story form, the American philosopher of history David Carr supports Gallie and French philosopher of history Paul Ricoeur in holding that there is a basic continuity or correspondence between history as it is lived (the past) and history as it is written (narrated).<sup>18</sup> Are we justified in claiming that because our lives are narrativised and written history is a text, then surely the past itself conforms to the structure of narrative? White reverses the argument – *the* narrative does not pre-exist but *a* narrative is invented and provided by the historian. Consequently, there are many different stories to be told about the same events, the same past. While still constrained by what actually happened (historians do not invent events, people or processes), as the French historian Paul Veyne suggests, the meaning of history as a story comes from *a* plot, which is imposed, or, as Hayden White insists, invented as much as found by the historian.<sup>19</sup>

The argument runs that just as there are no grounds for believing that an empiricist methodology can guarantee an understanding of the past as it actually was, neither is there a discoverable *original* emplotment. However, the self-reflexive and self-conscious historian may argue that it is possible to offer an interpretation that, although not claiming to be *the* true narrative, is nevertheless a plausible and therefore quite acceptable rendering of it. The range of emplotments upon which people in the past, and the historian, draw, though wide because of the combinations possible, is formally limited to the four main kinds – romance, tragedy, satire and comedy. This is no different to other narrators who operate in the realm of fiction. Of equal significance to the narrative emplotment, however, is the dimension of figurative description or style.

Historical story-telling, like all other kinds, employs the four primary figurative devices known as tropes. These are more commonly known as the four primary figures of speech: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony, and their use constitutes what is called the troping process.

Troping means turning or steering the description of an object, event or person away from one meaning, so as to wring out further different, and possibly even multiple, meanings. When we use these four master tropes we describe objects, events, persons or intentions, in terms of other objects, events, persons or intentions, according to their similarities or differences, or characterise them by substituting their component parts for the whole – like hands representing workers, the one element or aspect representing the essence of the other (as a synecdoche), or sails for ships, the one aspect again representing the other, but now in a part-whole relationship (to be read as a metonymy). Metaphor is, however, the most basic kind of trope, with metonymy, synecdoche and irony as secondary kinds. Metaphor refers to one thing by denoting another so as to suggest that they share a common feature. To deny literal meaning is to use irony. Troping is as crucial to the writing of history as it is to other forms of literature because it permits us to create meanings that differ from those of colleagues and to disrupt the expectations of readers different to those anticipated.

Later I shall examine emplotment and troping in White's formal model and his argument that there is no continuity between lived experience and its narrative representation, that narrative as a form of historical explanation is ultimately inadequate, and that writing history is also an unavoidably ideological act. Narrative is normally deployed, therefore, not to defend the correspondence theory of empiricism so much as to act as its vehicle – getting at *the* story – but always at the expense of the historical sublime. By this, White means the celebration of the undiscoverable, possibly meaningless, and open-ended nature of the past. Such a meaninglessness is the only invitation that potentially oppositional and dissenting groups of historians may get to challenge certainist (e.g. fascist) history. They, and we, empower ourselves when we can find no objective certainty in the past – in the sense of a factual correspondence of evidence with Truth – that can be used to validate the authority of those in power over us.<sup>20</sup> From a strictly philosophical point of view, the existence of a past reality does not in itself verify the correspondence theory, since it does not mean *the* truth of past events can be found in any correspondence between the word and the world as statements of past reality. Paradoxically, most historians, even leftist dissenting ones, prefer to believe it does.

Michel Foucault challenges this by arguing that the idea of Man (Man = historian for our purposes) is not able to stand outside society and history and thus generate objective and truthful knowledge. He concludes (as does White) that language is an ideologically contaminated medium, and what it can and cannot do is dependent upon the use

to which it is put, and for what social and political purposes – usually to maintain or challenge systems of authority and views of what is right or wrong, allowed or banned. As he says, ‘“Truth” is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements. “Truth” is linked [to the] . . . statements of power, which produce and sustain it.’<sup>21</sup> Foucault is pointing out here how historical agents – you and me – become confederates in our own subjectivity rather than just victims. Through the functioning of language we cannot avoid being placed in subject positions where the repression of the word fixes us all – like moths pinned to a collector’s board. In this sense, the organised study of the past (history as a discipline which includes both its meanings: as a profession, and as a collection of methodological practices) as an organised narrative is itself founded on the dispensation of authority/power in contemporary society. How we write history is as open to the uses and misuses of power as any other narrative.

Written history is always more than merely innocent story-telling, precisely because it is the primary vehicle for the distribution and use of power. The very act of organising historical data into a narrative not only constitutes an illusion of ‘truthful’ reality, but in lending a spurious tidiness to the past can ultimately serve as a mechanism for the exercise of power in contemporary society. As White suggests, even when we acknowledge and describe the messiness of the past, the very act of narration imposes an unavoidable ‘continuity, wholeness, closure and individuality that every “civilised” society wishes to see itself as incarnating’.<sup>22</sup> All historical narrative is thus subject to the complex and subtle demands of ideology, and in its turn gives effect to it.

Viewing history as a literary artifact recognises the importance of narrative explanation in our lives as well as in the study of the past, and it ought to liberate historians as we try to narrate the disruptive discontinuity and chaos of the past for and in the present. This desire is, in itself, a product of our own age’s preoccupation with understanding the nature of our seemingly chaotic lives. Chaos Theory, for example, a 1990s methodological innovation, is a new aid to our historical understanding. Interestingly, one of the leading exponents of Chaos Theory maintains that its use still requires a narrative to explain the past.<sup>23</sup> This illustrates how history itself is historical, that is, its methods and concepts as well as the debates about its nature are the products of historical time periods. In the 1890s American history turned towards explaining the peculiarly American origins of the nation’s history, and in the 1950s the strains of the US–Russian Cold War produced a consensus among historians on the ideological coherence in American

history in the face of an implacable and potentially divisive enemy. The millennial rediscovery of the importance of narrative as an access to the sublime and possible worlds of the past is very much the product of today and, like all historical understandings, will presumably pass away with time. This book and the issues I raise in it are, indeed, very much products of our time.

## POSTMODERN NARRATIVES AND HISTORY

The deconstructionist view of history – as a constituted narrative rather than the report of an objective empiricist undertaking – results from the wider end-of-century postmodern intellectual context.<sup>24</sup> It is a context that the French cultural critic Jean-François Lyotard, in his highly influential 1984 book *The Postmodern Condition*, described as centring on the vexed relationship between the acquisition of what he called scientific knowledge and the functioning of narrative. In defining narrative, Lyotard suggested that it is the characteristic and essential feature of cultural formation and transmission.<sup>25</sup> Lyotard agrees with Foucault that narrative is about the exercise of power. For Lyotard it is a kind of self-legitimation whereby constructing it according to a certain set of socially accepted rules and practices establishes the speaker's or writer's authority within their society, and acts as a mutual reinforcement of that society's self-identity.<sup>26</sup> As a Western cultural practice, history has been challenged by the loss of our self-identity. Meanwhile, historians who stick to their realist belief in commonsense, science-inspired, objective empiricist paradigm remain injured to what they see as mere 'distractions' in the pursuit of truthful historical knowledge (even though they realise that technical problems with the evidence, social theorising, or simple bias may prevent its attainment).

Science, from the eighteenth up to the early twentieth century, has depended upon powerful, socially constructed, political and philosophical 'master' narratives to support, protect and legitimise it – what Lyotard calls meta-narratives. In the epistemological hierarchy the key master or meta-narratives were the eighteenth-century Enlightenment (as focused in the upheaval of the French Revolution), promising as it did human freedom through emancipation from monarchical despotism and feudalism, to be followed by the nineteenth-century narrative of human consciousness leading towards some perfectible future (as elaborated in the philosophy of Hegel). Consequently, Lyotard claims that scientific knowledge cannot describe its truth without resort to these other two meta-narratives of emancipation and self-consciousness. Science denies narrative as a form of legitimate cognition

(that is, it is not scientific) while depending on it for its own social acceptance and intellectual and cultural legitimation.

If by implication, history, like science, is now under challenge today, it is presumed to be partly because of the traumatic events of the twentieth century which have meant a loss of confidence in our ability to relate the past or, as Keith Jenkins describes it, 'the general failure . . . of that experiment in social living which we call modernity'.<sup>27</sup> The meta-narrative of scientific objectivity and the unfolding of progress through our grasp of the past is now under challenge. The rise of fascism, two world wars, de-colonisation, seismic technological change, environmental and ecological disaster, the information explosion, the growth of exploitative and non-accountable global capitalism, with its commodification of labour in the 'developed' West and the worsening dispossession of the toiling masses across the undeveloped globe, have all but destroyed the meta-narratives that legitimised both science and history as foundations of what has been regarded as an inexorable trend towards individual freedom and the self-conscious improvement of the human condition.

As a consequence of all this, at the start of the twenty-first century, narratives both grand and petty, beliefs, attitudes, values, disciplines, societies, and meaning itself, appear to be fractured or fracturing. The future is one of gloomy uncertainty. It now seems quite incredible that anyone could have ever believed in the hierarchy of master narratives like liberalism, science, Marxism, socialism, or a view of history that emphasised either the discovery of the past as it actually was, or even the inevitability of progress. So it is that Lyotard describes the post-modern condition as an incredulity towards meta-narratives. We have now lost the old, modernist sense of history as the fount of wisdom or teacher of moral or intellectual certainty. What this means is that any study of what history is cannot be other than located within its social and cultural context. History, as a form of literature, is like music, drama and poetry, a cultural practice. As a text or series of texts (evidence and interpretations), history can be understood only when it is situated, as the philosopher of postmodern history F.R. Ankersmit said in the late 1980s, 'within present day civilisation as a whole'.<sup>28</sup> For our purposes this means studying both the content of the past and its interpretation in its narrative form. As a self-reflexive historian, I define written history as a socially constituted narrative representation that recognises the ultimate failure of that narrative form to represent either accurately or objectively. We can study the past only by first probing the nature of history as a discipline.



**CONCLUSION**

This definition of history, as a literary, cultural practice, places it within its present postmodern context. From this perspective, the explosion of written history, as well as in its many other forms, will continue to fill the space provided for it. Historiography well illustrates this eruption in our knowledge of the past, as well as our irruption into it. Not only is there more history but historians agree on it less.<sup>29</sup> That the past is never fixed is the message of the deconstructive consciousness, whether in terms of its epistemology, treatment of evidence, the construction of explanations, or the precise nature of our explanatory narrative form. This postmodern or deconstructive history challenges the traditional paradigm at every turn – hence its description variously as the deconstructionist, deconstructive or linguistic turn. Deconstructionist history treats the past as a text to be examined for its possibilities of meaning, and above all exposes the spurious methodological aims and assumptions of modernist historians which incline them towards the ultimate viability of correspondence between evidence and interpretation, resulting in enough transparency in representation so as to make possible their aims of moral detachment, disinterestedness, objectivity, authenticity (if not absolute truthfulness) and the objective constitution of historical facts – allowing the sources to speak for themselves. Because today we doubt these empiricist notions of certainty, veracity and a socially and morally independent standpoint, there is no more history in the traditional realist sense, there are only possible narrative representations in, and of, the past, and none can claim to know the past as it actually was. It is to this claim that I now turn by addressing the four key questions in more detail.

## 2 The past in a changing present

### INTRODUCTION

Never before has there been such a vast array of methods available with which to study the past, such a range of subject-matter and variety of audiences, and all to be understood within the broad sense of irony that seemingly encompasses Western culture today.<sup>1</sup> Never before have so many historians also accepted that written history deploys a system of language that is a part of the reality being described – a representation that is itself a complex cultural as well as a linguistic product. Living as we do in an age conceived and understood predominantly in terms of an ironic consciousness, and heavily influenced by the profusion and confusion of structuralist, post-structuralist, symbolic and anthropological models of the relationship between explanation and theory, even the strongest supporters of the traditional empiricist paradigm occasionally ask how can the reality of the past be known to us – or more precisely, how accurate can be its representation as a narrative? The debate on the relationship between postmodernity and history centres on the connection between the empirical and other methods of understanding as used by historians.<sup>2</sup>

Specifically, the impact of postmodernism on the study of history is seen in the new emphasis placed on its literary or aesthetic aspect, but not as before only as stylistic presentation, but now as a mode of explanation not primarily dependent upon the established empiricist paradigm. Even the staunchest defender of empiricism, Peter Gay, has noted that 'style . . . is worn into the texture of . . . history. Apart from a few mechanical tricks of rhetoric, manner is indissolubly linked to matter; style shapes, and in turn is shaped by, substance'.<sup>3</sup> This should be seen not as subversive but as liberating for the writing of the past. The collapse of the old universal standards upon which modernity as a phase of history was primarily founded – science, liberalism and