History as disturbed narrative
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Abstract
The article proposes that a going beyond of the fact-fiction debate is feasible only once the current emphasis on text and textuality is rethought. In doing so, it does not advocate a turning away from textuality (or even intend to suggest that such a thing would be possible) but only proposes that the over-simplified claims made in the name of the linguistic turn (largely by supporters of a re-turn to empiricism) be abandoned and a more detailed investigation of the boundaries and implications of the textuality of historical narratives undertaken. To this end, the article claims that histories are essentially disturbed or impaired narratives. This disturbance is seen as a result of their referential commitment, the "historian's promise" of speaking about the past "as it really was"; referentiality creates a disruption in narrative coherence at a literary level of semiotic closure, even while more basic narrative and tropological acts are performed. The article thus challenges the claim that historians should seek to follow literary examples in order to increase the experiential and emotional impact their narratives have on readers and, rather, suggests that histories should aspire to the status of "bad" art. In line with this aspiration, postmodernism's emphasis on discontinuity and confusion as well as the poststructuralist refusal of representation are seen to provide a direction in which history might -- rather paradoxically -- find justification for its continued existence. Instead of dwelling on the benefits this might have for the debate on historical epistemology (and so return to the fact-fiction question), however, the article proceeds to discuss the ramifications the abandonment of literary exemplars might have in terms of the reading of histories and particularly on the communicative space existing between reader and author. In addition to examining the relation of this space to different genre commitments and the particular entailments it brings to historians writing their narratives today, the article suggests that history might have very distinctive means of recourse to reality within this space.

In his book American Gods (2005) Neil Gaiman (or, to be accurate, his character Mr. Ibis) writes: "There was a girl, and her uncle sold her. ... This is the tale; the rest is detail." (345) In contrast to examining narrative as a basic theoretical unit in an abstract sense, like Ricoeur or Genette for instance (something like E. M. Forster's "the king died and then the queen died of grief"), we might follow Mr. Ibis's lead and say that a literary narrative -- a tale -- is defined by its decisions, by the way it narrows down a field of unlimited alternatives. And this is so not only in literary or folk narratives: the historical narrative similarly selects from a practically limitless mass of particulars. For complex narratives, however, the question is not one of a tale (an abstract narrative) that can be separated from the details prior to the writing of it. The tale appears only as a judgement after the emplotment of detail. Hence the significance of any representation is dependent on the details included. God -- or at least our best approximation of Truth or reality -- is in the details, so to speak. Further, as Mr. Ibis elegantly argues, we need the details to see things in personal terms, in order for the story to move us. (Gaiman 2005, 345--347) Staying on an abstract level, we are not engaged emotionally but simply remain detached recipients of information.

1 History as disturbed narrative. For many contemporary historical theorists, historical writing faces a dilemma. It should own up to being an imaginative process to the extent of disowning the past or, at the very least, somehow make its processes of interpretation and explanation so transparent as to leave no doubts about aspiring to say anything "definite" or "conclusive" about reality. Opting for such a radical solution, theorists would effectively abandon history, however, leaving it in the hands of those historians who still think they need not justify their writing about the past in any way. Or, at least, are unwilling to problematize their work beyond the familiar mantras of fidelity to the sources and professional consensus and ratification. To curb the potential threat presented by epistemologically myopic historians (who, one hopes, are diminishingly few in number), theorists such as Hayden White have, of course, made various radical pronouncements. White's primary strategy has been to argue for a focus on the consequences of interpretations. (Thinking perhaps, that, even if all historians cannot be convinced that their narratives inadvertently convey ideological positions, they might still be enticed into wanting to make a difference, into considering what kind of ideology they would want to perpetuate.) For White, the ideological contents of a narrative need to be an object of conscious awareness and choice before anything like a critical historiography can properly emerge. While he is certainly correct in this, I find some of his suggestions misleading, particularly the focus on modernist literature as an example that historians could continue to learn from.

For White, literary narratives (expressly those of the "modernist" kind) serve as an appropriate model for historical writing because they go beyond a (more) straight-forward account of events; they actively engage the reader on an aesthetic and not only epistemological level. In other words, in terms of effectiveness, they far surpass narratives that are intended to be objective and which hence remain superfluous in terms of any formal significance. The kinds of historical narratives -- or perhaps reports -- that White employs to make his point, the archetypal content-oriented "conventional" histories, simply do not achieve the effectiveness that modernist literary texts do. At least, that is, when these latter are successful as works of art. It is this workliness that can be seen to lend the added effectiveness -- an emotional impact as it were -- that White would like to see historical narratives also attain. Now, White maintains that historical narratives cannot avoid a "content" to their "form" via figuration and closure any more than literary ones. But he also insists that if historians were to abandon their false belief in objectivity, they could produce narratives that are not only aware of their ideological impact (the judgements resulting from emplotments and closure) but could also find literary (and through this, perhaps, enhanced political) effectiveness by adopting new, experimental or "unconventional" forms of historical representation.

2 See e.g. White 1978, 27--50, esp. 45, and 1999, 66 ff. As he writes with reference to the avoidance of the "intellectual mastery" and domestication of traumatic events: "it seems to me that the kinds of antinarrative nonstories produced by literary modernism offer the only prospect for adequate representations of the kind of 'unnatural' events ... that mark our era." (White 1999, 81.) The term "unconventional" is not employed by White; I use it here to refer to the debates inspired by his work as well as, and particularly, to the 2002 theme issue of History and Theory entitled "Unconventional History" and the discussion surrounding it. On experimental history see, e.g. Alun Munlow's recent Narrative and history (2007, 103--110).
So why do I say history is a "disturbed narrative"? What do I mean by this?

My main reason for speaking of history as "disturbed" in terms of narration is the belief that literary narratives gain their impact from tightly controlled closure and the coherence of their signifying systems. For a narrative to attain workliness, its system of signification also needs to be "literary", including the metaphors employed, the structural reiteration of these metaphors, expectation, fulfilment, and so on. In short, it needs to make sense as a whole (as a linguistic artefact, to again refer to White) rather than break down into random constrictions when examined on the level of sentence and individual word. Historical narratives, I claim, cannot produce this kind of heightened sense. 1 The reason is simple enough: Historians work within a set of limits. They are committed to the ideals of truth and reference -- as well as some version of transparency concerning the figurations they construct. Hence they are held back by facts (dates, names, factual statements concerning events, and so forth) and these facts disturb the creation of narrative coherence in a literary sense. In other words, the name of a historical character cannot be altered in order to create the kind of narrative truth produced by assigning a long-winded theorist a character name like Waffling. 4 (Or, conversely, representing the characteristics of a historical figure as matching a descriptive name. Describing the British art historian/spy Anthony Blunt, for instance, as dull-witted.) In this way, the past (as it is the object of historians qua historians) disrupts story-telling. Historians are obliged to incorporate masses of detail into their writing, thus yielding to inexorable non-narratological, non-literary considerations. Hence histories are impaired narratives, constantly disturbed by reality in their process of meaning-making. When compared to literature.

[2] Disturbance as strength in historical representation. Instead of being disappointed by the fact that history cannot become (high) literary narrative or by the limitations history's generic commitments bring, we might decide to look at disturbance or disruption as a strength. Indeed, isn't the interruption of (automatic) ideological assumptions the mainstay of White's agenda too? It is, after all, not only historians who should be wary of re-affirming and perpetuating received ideas; readers must also recognize the means by which they are led and be capable of making judgements within their reading-process. And this is something that literature with its requirement for the suspension of disbelief is not good at facilitating. Despite the self-reflexivity attributed to contemporary, complex (modernist and postmodern) literary forms. Disruption by detail, however, can potentially combat the instinctive acceptance that easily accompanies the fictional attitude. 5

So, what can history do?

History can potentially withhold the suspension of disbelief that is part-and-parcel with literature while -- at the same time -- producing an experience capable of shaking us out of our habitual attitudes for viewing the world. For history, however, the creation of this position is never a purely aesthetic affair (whether it is so for literature is of course a debatable question also). History relies on the certainty of its commitment to a reality, however unattainable, and the idea of the existence of its referent (and the simultaneous, intriguing absence of this referent) for its capacity to cause us to rethink. Reframing reality in this way, historical narratives can work toward social change. And history can thus also have a practical function. (Importantly, however, we need to remember that the reality that is reframed is never that of the past. Like anything, historical narratives can only make a difference in and to the present and any reformulation of belief only involves those in the present. The past is simply their tool and interpretations concerning it are only relevant with regard to the present of the reading act, the contextualization of the text in the reading of it.)

[3] "Bad" art and genre expectations. From the preceding, it should already be obvious that -- as a theme -- there must be something particular about how historians narrate.

Disruption by detail

1 This heightened sense might be termed "metaphorical insight" or "narrative truth" for example, as it has by some commentators. I have presented this argument in more detail in Pihlainen 2002.

4 A theoretician and historian (of magic) in the Harry Potter books.

5 What needs to be made clear here is that this is not an argument in favour of "historical objectivity". While, that is, focusing on the disruptive nature of reference may at first seem like an argument for increased emphasis on empiricism, it is not. Historians' commitments to reference are not at issue and nor should they be seen as relevant regarding the ultimate unattainability of any historical truth. Nor should empiricism be seen as in any way a remedy to the uncertainty involved in historical representation. Disruptions (and hence reference) are interesting only as textual elements and the purpose -- here -- is to deal with what historians do, because they continue to write histories within the referential boundaries of their genre.

6 This desire for engaging representations is persistent. As White noted as early as his "The Burden of History" (1966), contemporary historians who follow the examples of "late-nineteenth-century social science and mid-nineteenth-century art" 6 can be criticized "not because they study the past, but because they are studying it with bad science and bad art." (Reprinted in White 1978, 43)
of "truth" regarding the past as well as doubt concerning the capacity of linguistic representation to offer any kind of comprehensive access to a reality. The attitudes to invention active today in the history genre might better be described by statements like "historical narratives present a story that incorporates what we know of the past to the best of the author's literary abilities." (The historian's promise to represent the past as best he or she can remains a central definition of the genre, of course. See e.g. Munslov 2007, 124.)

Most often there is another limitation in place, which sometimes even causes unnecessary invention to happen. Historical narratives are expected to cover up contradiction; even if much contemporary theory would prefer to have contradiction foregrounded and the limitations on the historian's knowledge to be made more transparent. This desire for non-contradiction remains quite central to narrative representation in toto. (And is the result of pressures that relate to consumption as well as simply -- and more fundamentally -- to our cognitive preferences. In other words, it results from readers' expectations to be entertained. A similar desire is the desire for completeness. Interrupted narratives interfere most frustratingly with the narrative expectations of readers.) Whatever else a narrative may do, then, it is primarily a play on expectation. Both in terms of generic conventions and in terms of story expectations and their fulfilment.

[4] Discontinuity as a strategy for representation. All in all, representation is a critically painful issue for postmodernism and poststructuralism. While it is impossible to avoid engaging in it, doing so is extremely problematic both epistemologically and ethically. On the epistemological side, the impossibility of "accurate" representation is undeniable. (In the sense of a correspondence or grounding of any kind.) This sentiment has been presented by Richard Rorty, for example, in terms of the inability of language to go "all the way down" and -- in history -- has most vocally been expressed by Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit and Keith Jenkins.

Hand-in-hand with this is the further ethical dilemma involved in representation. Since we can never represent "faithfully" we are always involved in moral judgement and political action when representing. A representation always has some structuring agenda, whether that agenda is made explicit or not. For many poststructuralist philosophers, this is reason enough to argue for a full ban on representation. Representing others (particularly the "intentional lives" of others, as one commentator formulates it) should be forgone. (This returns us to Rorty's thought that the re-description of people's experience of themselves, their "identities", is the ultimate form of cruelty.) Again, emphasis on communication and interaction seems to help here. Verbal signs (or indeed signs of any kind) are never exhaustive of meaning. Rather, meaning always resides in the subjectivities of the participants of a communication. Thus, although language is unable to "properly" or "fully" represent, truthful understanding can be approximated through an extension of communication to the level of the non-verbal. In other words, through pragmatism, as Rorty, for one, argues. And this seems, to me, to mark the problem with the overly linguistically oriented theorizing in recent historical theory: there appears to be a confusion involving the nature of language and rationality itself. History employs natural language and the expectation (even if only present for the sake of being attacked) that meanings can be defined, delimited, circumscribed and exhausted in a natural language is misguided. Hence hermeneutic approaches emphasizing the similarity between historical study and conversation à la Gadamer, for instance. Meaning is always an approaching, an understanding in the becoming, never something fully pinned down. Despite this, most historians seek (and present us with) totalizations. (Not out of theoretical naïveté but because of generic expectations and the related academic acceptance and reader approval; this ultimately translates into commercialism, if not necessarily in simple terms of book sales. Historical practice is consumer-driven whether consumers are academic journals, university presses, funding institutions or the public at large. There is no doubt that historians do cater to expectations concerning what acceptable history is.)

[5] Experientiality, agency and desire. Because of the descriptive nature and the tradition (and goal) of objectivity and truthfulness of historical writing, the historian as narrator is generally completely hidden from view. This concealed narrator of most historical narratives is not only absent in terms of not being identified but also -- in large part because of the distance and disarticulation between the present of the author in the writing and the present of the past -- temporally removed from the events in question.

Further, even if the historical narrator has identity and voice, he or she seldom has any recourse to the physical. The historical narrator is completely disembodied, using a language that (seemingly naturally given the absence of the past) conveys no personal corporeal or tactile involvement or interest. Following from this, the focus of such a narrator is seldom on the physical engagement of subjects in the world -- at least in terms of physical experiences and experiencing. And this lack, as we know, has come to be seen as an expression of a kind of objectivity by historians. The author (more properly the narrator) should not become "emotionally" or "personally" involved with the subjects of research.

Now, to counter this, we've been offered approaches based on "re-enactment" or "empathy". Yet to me, these also miss the crucial issue of the role of embodiment in understanding. (Except of course in recent American historical entertainment -- popular historical theme parks and the re-enactment of historical landmark events -- where the experiences of the participants are clearly physical ones.) Embodiment and corporeality become effective through a re-creation and living-through of an experience of agency, not only in an experience or simulation of actions. And while this experience can be characterized as an imaginative identification with the past or even a "direct experience" (although this latter hopefully only ever said as a provocation), it can more profitably -- in my view -- be understood as an encounter with uncertainty, an (admittedly imaginative) experience of a before to the outcomes we witness as historians studying the historical records. Emphasis being then, again, on the experience of agency. Embodiment is a housing of intentionality (desire) and embodied consciousness is a living-forward, and so reading works as life does; the physical and the mental remain interdependent and any dualism is untenable from a pragmatic and experiential point of view.

Agency, though, is hard to convey or "re-enact" through a traditional narrative, and this returns us to the critique of historical writing as form, which we are familiar with from White: particularly the uncertainty involved in the human condition is far too easily excluded...
from the historical narrative that organizes itself as a report of how things happened. Jean-Paul Sartre has also famously made this point in *La Nausée* (1938). Writes Roquentin:

[W]e have the impression that the hero lived all the details of that night like omens, like promises... We forget that the future wasn't yet there; the fellow was walking around in a night without portents which offered him a jumble of humdrum riches, and he didn't choose between them. (Howells' translation, Howells 1988, 226–227.)

For the historian, it is the detail, this "jumble of humdrum riches," that is at the same time more significant and infinitely more elusive than for the literary author. What is more, this jumble involves mainly sensory experiences, not linguistically formulated or even properly formulable understandings. Linguistic formulation is the "tale" (to again return to the formulation by Gaiman), an imposition of judgement on the part of the author, and -- importantly -- an exclusion of the uncertainty and vulnerability of the agent in the middle of everything, embedded in experience. Hence also Sartre's own philosophical objections to any closure: "expectation, decisions made in uncertainty, weighing things, choices, which are the characteristics of the human condition, cannot be integrated into any synthesis because they are precisely what is eliminated from any synthesis." (Quoted in Flynn 1997, 49; see Sartre 1992, 467)

[6] **Embracing representations.** So, whatever the nature of the history we may be dealing with, *embracing* it is not, of course, a purely intellectual activity. Indeed, nothing embodied humans do can be separated from our emotional and physical make-up. After all, even simple copula, let alone other relational words, have natural meanings.10 Similarly, even a rationalized acceptance of an uncomplicated account involves (at least a participation in or collusion with) various judgements and thus engages the emotional. So, in the case of writing directed at producing emotional and even physical responses the censoring of such responses is -- while conceivable -- clearly counterproductive to communication.

[7] **Engagement and corporeal experience.** An essential point in understanding the significance of embodiment for literature and linguistic figurations more generally is one made by many phenomenological philosophers regarding cognition and rational reflection (and thus, by implication, language): our means for (linguistic) appropriations of the world are largely based on the experience of *seeing*. Given the prevalent tendency for a separation of mind and body, this bias in favour of seeing over other forms of experiencing is perhaps natural -- at least so, when compared with the experience of *touch*. Samuel Todes, much like Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, emphasizes the participatory nature of touch; touching is always also an experience of being touched, there is a circularity to it, whereas seeing is an exercise in unidirectional observation. (See e.g. Todes 2001, 266) Thus visual observation alone (under normal circumstances) entails no engagement with the object being seen. Our means for thinking, then, just like our means for representation, largely imply an objectivity and separation from the world along the lines of detached seeing. In his book *Touch* (1996), Gabriel Josipovici formulates this difference in possible modes of thought nicely:

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

We think (when we stop to think about it at all) of other people as occupying an objective space in front of us, and of our knowledge of them as being derived from our ability to see. But this is not in fact how we apprehend others. At least part of what enters into an apprehension of them is our common bodily and kinaesthetic reaction to a physical world which we both inhabit. ... it is our bodies which give us common access to the physical world; in other words we are participators, not spectators.... (Josipovici 1996, 6)

If we are to engage ourselves with the world, increased reliance on the experience of touch can lead to participation as opposed to observation. This is, naturally, particularly relevant in the creation of any communicative space in the narrative: If the goal is to facilitate participation (and hence communication proper as opposed to a one-sided transmission of opinion), emphasis on corporeality -- and particularly on touch as well as various cross-modal connections (including so-called natural "empathy" and mirroring) -- feels like a potentially rewarding means.

Further, it seems that providing a space for communication between author and reader, and thus, allowing the reader to participate in the production of meaning, is the only means by which any text can be properly *engagée*. At question is, after all, the capacity of the text to have significance in the now of its reading, not only in the now of its production. And, while it might be said that every text is only actualized in the reading, it seems clear that some texts permit more significance to be read into them than do others. Such *Jetzeit* is generally approached in terms of workliness, yet it seems -- to me -- that it can also be understood through *confusion*.

Does this return us to White's idea of experientiality? If so, I hope it does so with at least slightly different emphases. While White's conception of modernist literary means (and certainly his later focus on "antinarrative nonstories") can be understood as covering feelings of alienation and estrangement, it still appears to be directed more at aesthetic closure and workliness than at confusion and experience of undecidability. Persistent ideas of (fundamental, aesthetic) non-contradiction and completeness, or at least meaning and comprehensibility, still inform this call for new representational forms.

Due to its different generic conventions and the assumption of reality the communicative space of historical narratives permits questions, however. Because, that is, there is agreement about postulating a "beyond the text" (however accessible or inaccessible one may take it to be), questions concerning the validity of the text as representation can still make sense. This particularly historiographical communicative space also permits identification with pain and suffering in a different way: literary narratives heighten experientiality as a function of coherence of detail, whereas historical narratives might more productively aim to overwhelm with the *abundance* of detail, thus better approximating an experience of reality and evoking agency.11

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10 As Horst Ruthrof (1997, 52) writes: "even the most formal features of natural language, which appear to be entirely conventional or symbolic, such as the copula and other 'function' words, have been able to acquire their conventionality only as a result of continuous, habitual usage in a history of diminishing representationality."

11 Compare this to Monika Fludernik, who writes: "The feature that is, however, most basic to experientiality is *embodiment* rather than specificity or individuality because these can in fact be subsumed under it. Embodiedness evokes all the parameters of a real-life schema of existence which always has to be situated in a specific time and space frame, and the motivational and experiential aspects of human actionality likewise relate to the knowledge about one's physical presence in the world. Embodiment and existence in human terms are indeed the same thing, which explains why some postmodernist texts that refuse the reader the consolation of an embodied protagonist ... touch on the one most vital parameter of narrative experientiality, with baffling and disorienting effects for the reader." (Fludernik 1996, 22.) And, again, to Samuel Todes: "... the level at which our sense of our body enters into our sense-making is such that experience shorn of that body-sense is unintelligible. We
So, the move from an emphasis on cathartic experience (based on semiotic overdetermination and closure at all possible levels) to a focus on experiential brought by uncertainty and undecidability (confusion patterned after sensory experience before the synthesis our cognitive functioning demands) simply be seen as a shift from modern to postmodern sensibilities? Perhaps it could. After all, the reception of historical narratives is thoroughly historical. Hence the emphasis on confusion and discontinuity could simply be seen as a paradigm shift. In that case, however, it is a shift that would not only be fashionable but also parallels our strong convictions concerning epistemological uncertainty and semantic instability.

[8] Engaging history. To return to the substance of the Gaiman quote: bad things happen. Does this mean, then, that historians are happy with the world the way it is? Perhaps we are. Perhaps we too have become so complacent that (intellectual) knowledge of suffering alone fails to move us. We too, then, might need to lose the lives of others that -- whether historical, fictional, or contemporary -- would move us in turn to produce our stories in ways that might "pay it forward." The key, of course, is that we should produce experience on top of knowledge (if not "instead of", as Keith Jenkins, for example, would surely say).

Now, as already noted, this has been the argument by most contemporary theorists of history. Historical theory cannot, thus, be blamed for being complacent or for ignoring the issue of real suffering. What it can -- and should -- be taken to task for is that it is heading (by its chosen means for the recognition of suffering) in a direction which, far from alleviating the problems faced by historical practice, only makes things worse. Empathy remains on understanding and observation, not agency or participation. Further emphasis on literary form tends strongly toward evasion and gloss.

[9] Empathy's failings. And this is where "empathy" also goes wrong: The crucial problem with a purely reflective empathy is that it incapacitates. Through empathic understanding we all into the world and intentional lives described that we find it hard to say where our own particular beliefs and values and experiences might be in relation to those that we empathize with. More than this, empathy denies agency, or, more accurately, always makes it too late for our agency to have any effect. Empathy is felt after the fact.

While such understanding of otherness has its place and is certainly valuable, it seldom leads to practical understanding. To, that is, understanding which permits us to actively pursue change on the basis of who and where we ourselves are. What is needed, then, in contrast to empathic understanding is an understanding and experience of the circumstances, options, opportunities, and limits (and perhaps desires, hopes, dreams, etc.) faced by someone in situation. Then, the only way that we as readers of such accounts can accept the responsibilities they place on us for the present is to bring our own particular talents and limitations to the situation and see how we might work toward the materialization of our personal values. There is, of course, no reason why this should be the role of historians alone as Keith Jenkins has pointed out. There is, however, every reason for history to also assume such social responsibilities.

So, how can this be done in practice? After all, the theory of it seems straightforward enough. For Hayden White, the solution has been in radical forms of representation. As noted, White has explained what he wants: antinarrative nonstories. The problem with this choice is that of engaging readers sufficiently, however. The point of such antinarrative, radical forms lies in their ability to cause alienation and estrangement, hence to lead readers to question, not primarily to enjoy. There seems to be little to be done about this problem, however, as we also -- against all consumer and genre expectations -- need "non-entertaining" presentations. In addition to being "bad art" history needs to be "bad entertainment" from a contemporary perspective. The ease with which historical narratives become entertaining is another factor we need to become aware of: entertainment engages the same kind of generic commitments as does the literary suspension of disbelief, thus largely shutting down communication. After all, disruption or dissonance with reader values is seldom entertaining in the long run.

As readers, we do not need to know why "they" did what they did because we are not here to pass judgement. Nor does history need to interpret the world for us to such an extent that we have no role to play in the process. Its goal is not (or should not be) to entertain but to cause us to move. Only by so doing, can it set things in motion and draw historical research out of its self-satisfied stupor.

[10] Writing to communicate. Now, I've suggested that corporeality might somehow help in enabling communication. (And this is hardly surprising given the significance of embodiment in practical, face-to-face communication.) There are some things we need to be aware of, however: Corporeality cannot be used for a grounding because its projection and empiricism can be, and often are, used to quite opposite effect: In an article from 2002, "Where is a Text? A Neurological View", the reader-response theorist Norman N. Holland argues strongly against meaning transmission from author -- or indeed even text -- to reader. At the same time he notes how natural it is for us to think we are faced with meaning (rather than involved in its construction, as is materially the case). As even Holland admits: "we can hardly escape inferring -- no, faster than that, perceiving -- text and response as cause and effect, even if doing so is inappropriate. ... Talking about the 'power' or the 'impact' of a work of art expresses our experience quite exactly, our feeling that texts have agency." (Holland 2002, 29) Yet, as he argues, this feeling is a misattribution when the process of reading is viewed objectively. Bluntly put: meanings reside in, and only in, our brains. Again, however, this is so only when we resort to rationalizing -- what, after all, is wrong with our pragmatic intuition that texts communicate meaning, or, even, that author's intend to communicate to -- or perhaps even with -- us? Other than, that is, the epistemological qualification (the popularity of which in historical theory owes largely to literary-based, textualist theory) that we can "never know" what has been intended and that...

... theorists who can generate enough by way of emancipatory rhetorics such that we no longer need any kind of foundational -- or non-foundational -- past." (Jenkins 1999, 10)

14 Yet there is something fundamentally transhistorical involved. As Todes defends this intuition: "our body as source of our experience is cross-culturally and trans-historically invariant in the sense that it has not evolved in historical time. ... Modern evolutionary biology supports this contention ... and makes it plausible that the species-specific character of the human body may condition all human experience within some broad but definite limits. A phenomenological analysis, I will argue, justifies our current biological belief by demonstrating how our sense of our body plays a basic formative role in our making sense of everything. And not merely in a culturally bound way." (Todes 2001, 263)
the subjectivity of another is not available to us however much we might wish it so. The severity involved in circumscribing intentionality and agency from texts seems -- despite opposite intentions, one might facetiously add -- to further the separation of mind from body and world. Why could we not, alternatively, view intentionality as residing in the world of objects? (And if we do, wouldn't literary artefacts be the objects of choice, the most obvious starting place? Few would deny that a chair, for instance, conveys intentions and meaning.) If we choose to see the world of human beings as containing significance, does it really make sense to attempt to exclude those objects that are most obviously intended for communication?

Of course, Holland's argument is aimed at the finer points of literary interpretation. Semiotic overdetermination, for instance, conceivably exists only in the interpretation and hence in the mind of the interpreter. Yet if the purpose of a text is to communicate ... and if this purpose is part of a generic agreement as in the case of literary or historical narrative... And this is what we get stuck. What else could a text's purpose conceivably be, as long as we are still talking about writing? Excluding private, therapeutic writing, communication is, after all, implied at all times, even in the case of notes made to oneself. So, again: if the purpose is to communicate, what point is there in excluding the intention to communicate something from the reading of a text. The only possible purpose seems to be to study literary expression per se -- to take the text out of context and to examine the "rules" of linguistic meaning-making. Yet even this seems an impossible goal: the reader will contextualize the text in the same (or at least in many ways a very similar) network of meanings that the author writes from -- if not always in quite the same sociocultural context, at least in a largely identical embodied and cognitive one. (After all, these shared rules and tendencies are what make understanding fantasy, for instance, possible. There could be no "willing suspension of disbelief" if there were no shared grounds for disbelief in the first place. Again excluding the extreme case of a text that has no bearing on the experience of a reader. Yet to have no ramifications on the reader's embodied experience a text has to be intentionally aimed at non-comprehension, to put it in code, as it were. A code that is, moreover, distinctly non-human in experiential terms as well as in terms of cognitive categories.)

Now, what does this say about understanding and representation? That these processes are always about incorporation and colonization? That representation necessarily involves a reduction of "true" experience to comprehension in linguistic terms? That, as the poststructuralists argue, representation should be avoided due to its damaging effects? Or, more simply, that we need to be aware of the extent and dimensions of our own interpretive role when dealing in and with representations?

[11] The non-verbal of historical representation. There are two sides to the idea of "detail", then. The first is the more obvious from our habitual literary-theory perspective: detail is all reference to a "world" that is not essential to the basic, abstractable narrative unit itself. It is the means for world and truth-creation. Detail (as well as narrative techniques that set up and play on our expectations and our ability to anticipate) is a matter of a Barthesian "reality-effect". Yet this mass of literary -- purely textualist and verbal -- readings of the idea of detail provides insufficient understanding of what is really going on with narrative communication. Which brings us to the second -- much more significant and largely neglected -- aspect of what detail in a narrative, and especially in a historical representation, involves: the level of non-verbal meaning, involving the kinetic, tactile, proprioceptive, proximie, haptic, gustatory, olfactory, aural, visual, and so on. Or at least evocations of them. These corporeal attachments, positions and attitudes more properly constitute the "jumble of humdrum things" of our daily existence and thus also provide the (background for verbal) cognition. (To take the discussion further, we can of course also note that this second level of detail operates both within sociocultural structures of meaning and a personal, immediately physical sphere. In other words, our attribution of meaning to non-verbal signs is never only a private matter and nor is it ever simply governed by culture or our embeddedness in it.)

This is why attention to the communicative space of the narrative is so crucial. This communicative space is the interface between the verbal and non-verbal (as long as we are dealing with natural language, communication becomes possible only when meaning is open to misinterpretations and embraces the full range of avenues for understanding as fully as possible) while, at the same time, also bringing together the idiosyncratic understandings (both relating to the verbal and the non-verbal) of both participants, the author and the reader.

The significance of the non-verbal is further complicated in historical representation by the materiality of (or at least implied by) reference. The disturbance created by the necessity of respect for historical materials and details has consequences not only on narrative coherence (overdetermination) but also on the stability of corporeal associations: historical narratives, in keeping with their promise of truthfulness, deny the tidy, remainderless abstraction of experience to familiar categories.

There is, in other words, a seeping of the uncertainty involved in experiencing the reality of the past into the communicative space through the disruptive presence of historical materials. And this is how it should be under optimal conditions. Historians and theorists of the linguistic turn are, in my view, mistaken in attempting to cover up this seepage by appealing to the unavailability of the past and arguing that epistemological uncertainty permits creative and artistic liberties with the presentation of this material. If disruption and disorientation are accepted as desiderata for historical writing then the achievements of the linguistic turn should be compounded with an improved understanding of the benefits of including embodiment and the corporeal dimension in discussions of the non-verbal of historical representation.15

[12] Conclusion: Narrative as experience and communication. The incorporation of a mass of disparate material, the "details", into a unified narrative, "the tale", has been the task of history as conventionally understood. For a history celebrating confusion and indeterminacy, the task is one of making the details available as experience, permitting us -- the readers -- to incorporate them into a personal, and hence subjective and embodied, understanding of and involvement with the world. It is through such exercise of agency that readers can be engaged.

It is through agency, in other words, that we come to experience ourselves as protagonists in an unfolding, rather than as characters in a preordained, fated play. Of course, at the same time, it is in our formation of identities in retrospect that we narrate our pasts to ourselves as involving some larger-than-life plan or direction, a meaning to it all. (Given different sensibilities and levels of fatalism, different people do this differently of course.) Similarly, it is by this production of a sense of agency that readers of historical accounts (if that term can still be applied to the kind of history this would entail) can be given an experience of reality, and it is by narration and the synthesis involved that this experience can

15 This returns us, again, to the distinction to be made between textualism and poststructuralism. While a narrowly conceived textualism detaches meaning from world, poststructuralism immerses and grounds us in a world (and experience) of irreconcilable interpretations and undecidability. As John Tamborino notes, there is a one-sidedness to Nietzsche's contemporary legacy: despite the latter's simultaneous emphasis on the corporeal, the linguistic turn dominates debate. For Tamborino, Nietzsche's "corporeal turn is more fundamental than his linguistic turn and is something that discussions of Nietzsche, and of corporeity and politics, often neglect." (Tamborino 2002, 94)
also be stifled. It is thus in the interests of any historian hoping to affect readers to attempt to move away from the textualism implicit in much recent historical theory. The place to move to, however, does not involve a return but a going beyond. The consolidation of our experience of uncertainty in relation to representation is the central insight of the linguistic and ethical turns and a (re)turn to empiricism or objectivity would undo this fundamental contribution. To go beyond textualism does not signify its abandonment, only its curtailment to the area in which it is relevant: namely the emphasis of uncertainty. To go beyond textualism means that we need to look at uncertainty in terms of lived experience and not only in terms of understanding and representing -- we need to look to the experience of the physical and the way in which this too imparts a communicative knowledge so often neglected by narrow theories of linguistic representation. What we need to recognize, then, is that, like the verbal, the non-verbal is more tightly controlled in literature than it is in history: all meaning in literary fiction is controlled through semiotic overdetermination. In contrast, history -- as disturbed narrative -- is open to the world, and the verbal fails to pin down meaning as comprehensively as it does in literature (where everything -- every detail -- can be oriented toward meaning-making). Hence appeals to the non-verbal can be more significant for historical representation than has so far been acknowledged.

If it is to have any significance for historians, then, narrative should not be studied as separate from communication. The main danger is the textualist abyss such one-sidedness leads us to. The author, intentionality, and meaning are all lost when communication is not at issue. Yet, despite the popularity of textualist literary theory, the attitude adopted by readers remains generally pragmatic one of attributing meaning to the text, and even of allowing it to influence their beliefs and behaviour. Following this more pragmatic course, the introduction of embodiment expands the terminology by which we can communicate, taking - - I argue -- historical representation outside of the strict story space that linguistic theory has relegated it to. The strong focus on literary forms in recent theory and a simplistic reliance on the linguistic turn has left history confused regarding what it really is. Once this becomes clear we will again be free (theoretically speaking) to talk of agency, authorship, and meaning. Even in the study of narrative.

References


