Synopsis
The following essay deals with the historical inquiry into the semantics of the narrative mode of historical discourse. Specifically, the essay attempts to provide an evaluation of the works of the historiographers Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit and Paul Ricoeur dealing with historical narrativity, and place them within their respective philosophical and ideological contexts, whilst highlighting points of disagreement and debate. After considering a variety of topics, ranging from an analysis of Kojève’s perspective on history, the symbolic present/past discourse of specific archaeological sites and an examination of Fukuyama’s political motivations, I settled on an evaluation of narrativity in history; for, as I believe Nancy Partner correctly noted, the field of study "with the strongest reach into post-postmodernism [is] narrative".

The essay first outlines the development and context of modern narrative theory in history, beginning with a quote from Herodotus, the "father of History", and ironically enough, "the great story-teller". It must be noted here that the words 'story', or 'plot' are not used in a pejorative sense in narrative theory; they are merely features deployed in the communication of historical knowledge, and examined as such. This quote from Herodotus' *Histories* is then examined through the critical theories of narrative proposed by the Annales school, the empiricist school, Carl Hempel, and Louis Mink, and provides reasons why these methods of narrative analysis should be unsatisfactory for the contemporary historiographer. The essay then goes on to examine the narrative theories of the three main theorists aforementioned, using their published works as indices of their methods, and the quote from Herodotus as an illustrative example. Broader discussions, originating both internally to the three abovementioned historians and externally, are used to clarify and discuss contentious aspects of the implications and methods of their studies; and finally the relevance of these studies to the reader and the contemporary historiographer is mooted.

Essay
"When the news of the battle of Marathon reached Darius, son of Hystaspes and king of Persia, his anger against Athens, already great enough on account of the assault on Sardis, was even greater; and he was more determined than ever to make war on Greece. Without loss of time he dispatched couriers to the various states under his dominion with orders to raise an army much larger than before; and also warships, transports, horses and grain. So the royal command went round; and all Asia was in an uproar for three years, with the best men being enrolled in the army for the invasion of Greece, and with the preparations."

The Histories, Herodotus, Book VII, lines 1-11

What is it to analyse the narrativity of history? An analysis of narrativity in history is the analysis of history as history. The narrative is the device narrative historiographers understand as organizing the understanding of historical reality to render it comprehensible to the reader: thus history becomes the story of the past. This form or method of constructing history, whilst widely accepted by practising historians, raises deep concerns for the conventional epistemic status of history; and deep ontological fissures in the classification of history as a science, and the historical past as its subject. These wide-ranging aporetic areas in our understanding of history have engendered widespread debate about the role and meaning of narrative in history. The major contributors to this debate (or at least the debaters who present the
most insightful perspectives) are Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, and Frank Ankersmit. All of these commentators vary in their assessment of where exactly within historical writing narrative subsists: Ricoeur approaches narrative from the hermeneutical tradition, White from Structuralism and the Marxist Existentialism of the ‘50s, and Ankersmit from the aftermath of White’s assault on historical writing, with a distinctly Post-Structuralist understanding of the Author/Text dialectic.

It can immediately be seen that the above quote from Herodotus does not present the past raw and unadulterated, but rather offers a description of it. The form that this description takes is that of narrative, or at least the narreme\textsuperscript{2}, and thus the necessary question for any historian using this description of past events becomes: how does this narrative emplotment affect the information it conveys? It can be seen to reference two epistemologically varying sources; events in the past, from whence it draws its authority as a work of history as opposed to fiction; and the story-like manner that these events slot together. It is this level of referentiality which has been investigated during the past century of historiography, with a plethora of different conclusions being drawn.

The French Annals school, and Braudel especially, have dismissed the narrative format in which Herodotus writes as a pseudo-scientific, and argued for a disassociation of history from the “delusive” mode of narrative representation\textsuperscript{3}, especially the mode of “l’histoire événementielle” in which Herodotus writes. These attacks on narrative, however, have focused on a definition of narrative based on a narrow conception of the pre-Modernist novel\textsuperscript{4}, as an extension of an attack on the ‘great men in history’ thesis; and the story-like manner that these events slot together. It is this level of referentiality which has been investigated during the past century of historiography, with a plethora of different conclusions being drawn.

narrative is simply the best method for communicating the past, and the attitude of the Annales school, in which that position is occupied by socio-scientific quantitative instruments, are insufficient to establish the nature and veracity of the historical narrative.

A more considered approach to the question of narrative was begun in the Anglo-American philosophical community by Carl G. Hempel in 1942, with the publication of The Function of General Laws in History.\textsuperscript{5} This article and the Covering Law Model (CLM) it promulgated for the understanding of narrative instigated wide-spread debate amongst philosophers of history. In this model, narrative statements a, b and c are related causally by the historian in the form:

\[ a \rightarrow b \rightarrow c \]

with the symbol “\( \rightarrow \)” being used to represent some change in the state of affairs a, b or c.\textsuperscript{6} According to Hempel, the historical narrative functions by appeal to “general laws”, of the type:

\[ A \rightarrow B, B \rightarrow C, \]

wherein “A” is the equivalent to the universal type of phenomenon of which “a” is a part, and so on. This model of the historical narrative has provided the impetus for the discussion of narrative in Analytic communities for over 70 years, but its main fault as an explanation of how historical narratives are constructed are obvious to the reader investigating the epistemology of the narrative form. The modifications to the Covering Law Model promulgated by Louis Mink will be considered, but suffice the reader to note that Hempel’s “general [empirical] laws” in actual history writing are undermeth, as he himself describes, the ‘gravestones “hence”, “therefore”, “because”’\textsuperscript{7}. As such, these ‘laws’ become so ill-defined as to make a mockery of the term ‘universal conditional law’ as it is used by Hempel and the practitioners of the physical sciences. In addition, Hempel does not seem to suggest any advantage of the narrative form; in fact, his article would seem to eschew the weakness and undesirability of the nebulous narrative mode of discourse in favour of a more explicitly law-referencing medium. Such a dismissal of the narrative form does not indicate any reason for the overwhelming use of narrative in the historical profession, nor does it attempt to account for the specifically historical nature of “states of affairs” and importantly, it does not explain narrative as a whole.

The response of Louis Mink to Hempel’s doctrine was characterised by his understanding of Hempel’s general laws as merely the method for relating “the notes of a
melody... one after the other”¹¹, and his emphasis on the totality of narrative and its role in historical understanding. Mink disputed, along with A.C. Danto, the Hempelian assertion that “all claims to knowledge must... have the same logical structure”¹². Mink emphasised the constructed nature of historical knowledge, and argued for an awareness of narrative as having its conclusions latent in its own structure. This was what allowed narrative historiography, for Mink, to distinguish itself from the chronicle-form that he maintained Hempel had been describing; narrative allowed for disparate a – b relationships to be unified and understood synoptically by an audience. Mink’s arguments foundered, however, when he attempted to understand the relationship between historical narrative and a determinate past, based on the aggregation of historical narratives about the same aspect of the past, for as Mink noted, “narrative histories should be aggregative, insofar as they are histories, but cannot be, insofar as they are narratives”¹³.

The first American attempt to tackle the problem of narrative qua narrative was begun by Hayden White. The formalist critique of the 1976 *Metahistory* sought to correlate historical narrative with Fryeian poetic tropes – for example, the Herodotean narreme above constitutes a Comedic emplotment of its sequence of narrative statements, and on White’s tropic matrix fulfils a Mechanistic, Synecdochal and Liberal function. By associating literary tropes and historiographical writing, White destabilised the chronicle-like understanding of historical narrative espoused by Hempel, in favour of an understanding of the totality of the narrative form and its figural relation to historical reality. White, in his later writings,⁴⁶ went on to adopt an attitude toward the past based on the 19th century Romantic understanding of history as the study of a sublime object. As a corollary, he drew attention to the subsequent supersession of this attitude as history-writing became a professional endeavour.⁴⁷ This supersession, necessary for the Rankean disciplinisation of history, associated historical knowledge with the narrative writing of history in a direct epistemic relationship, whilst sublimating the recognition of the essential creativity of such linguistic employment. To illustrate, White sees Herodotus’ narrative as conveying profoundly different information to its audience than if it were a table of all the relevant facts; White believes, citing Hegel, that the *res gestae* themselves are allegorically or figurally reconstituted out of an infinite assortment of possible, non-linguistically organised, non-hierarchised events, and structured so that the narrator disappears into the *historia rerum gestarum*⁴⁸.

As could be expected, such an attempt to link history writing to fiction quickly came under attack from members of the profession. Historians such as Kantzner criticised White’s perceived relativism; there seemed no place in White’s system for differentiating between narratives based on truth, and White’s description of a narrative’s need to “negotiate between diverging tropological structures” and to “test the capacity of a culture’s fictions to endow real events with... meaning” nineteen as being in a certain sense contradictory, and at the very least an excessively presentist approach to historiography. The arbitrariness of his formalist matrix has been criticised by both traditionalist and Post-Structuralist historiographers (such as Barthes and Ankersmit) who stand opposed to a metaphysical or humanistic grounding of the trope system to establish secondary referentiality. White’s notion of the sublimity of historical reality is criticised on primarily moral grounds by Ricoeur, as for the hermeneuticist such a historical past, devoid of essentially human action, appears to the reader as being “radically Other” – its sublimation of models of human action prevents an understanding for the reader of their own “historiality”⁴⁸. It is also unclear within White’s writing whether the narrative tropes organise the gathering of historical evidence *a priori*, or whether in fact the tropes function solely as guides during the writing process.

In both *The Metaphysics ofNarrativity*⁴¹ and *The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory*²⁴, White points towards the philosopher Paul Ricoeur for a deeper understanding of the ontological way in which historical narrative and the historical past function. Ricoeur attempts to provide an ontological explanation of the epistemology of narrative, through an analysis of the way “lived time” “comprehends” historical time within the historical narrative. For Ricoeur, human action has an essentially narrative character – that is, a clear, plot-like structure. Ricoeur asserts that history, and being-in-the-world more generally, are experienced by individuals living in a three-fold distended present. To write a narrative account of history, this being-in-the-world must be turned into a written plot, or *muthos*, following Aristotle, which then must be understood historically. This process he terms “the 3-fold mimesis”. For Ricoeur, the main function of the historical narrative is to aid the individual in understanding their “historicality”, or being-into-death. To this end, Ricoeur makes clear that all forms of historical writing reflect temporality – even the attempts at non-narrative history, such as those attempted by the Annales school, deepen the reader’s sense of

4 "One can narrativize without dramatizing, as the whole of modernist literature demonstrates, and dramatize without theatricalising, as the modern theatre [shows]. Therefore we must conclude that the reasons [the Annalistes] adduce for their dissatisfaction with narrative history are jejune"; H. White, 'Narrative in Contemporary Historical theory', The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore and London, 1987, p. 33.

5 A reference to von Ranke- 'The is of 'the past as it was'".


8 E.g. a (news of the battle of Marathon reaches Darius) — b (Darius becomes angry with the Greeks) — c (preparations for an invasion of Greece begin).

9 E.g. A (an army is defeated) — B (the leader of said army with personality x becomes agitated), B (the leader of an army with personality x becomes agitated) — C (the leader of an army with personality x undertakes to punish those who agitated him).

10 Ibid., p. 43.


13 L. Mink, op. cit., p. 197.


18 I.e. so that the "things that were" disappear into "the history of things that were"; see: H. White, op. cit., pp. 27-57.


22 Ibid., pp. 26-57.


29 The other codes being the symbolic (SYM), the semantic (SEM), the proairetic (ACT) and the hermeneutic (HER); ibid., pp. 17-18.

30 A form of history writing in which 'events' are selected and arranged into a narrative; the sum of the group of narrative statements therein.

31 Ns singular, Nss plural; Ankersmit, loc. cit.

32 Ankersmit describes the Ns using propositions 1-9, I 1, 12, 18, 38, 47, 51, 57, 58, 61 of Leibniz's confessions-bod.html


Bibliography

Journal Articles


