

## History and Aesthetics

As Donald Preziosi said in his P(AF) Inaugural Lecture in October 2011, his brief was to ask questions about the ways we characterize the relation between art objects and their contents which meant for him calling into question the distinction commonly believed to exist. Indeed he went on to extend this to interpretative activity of any kind. He suggested that interpretation is essentially entailed with the effectiveness or lack thereof of its expressions; its forms of enunciation; the artistry, in fact, of its artifice. So, what if we think of history as what for me it plainly is – in ontological terms – the nature of its artifice as a literary artefact?

This important question has been variously addressed – though not commonly in British seminar rooms - by history theorists from Benedetto Croce and R.G. Collingwood through to in 1974 the philosopher of history Hayden White who published his infamous article "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact". Drawing on much of the material in his 1973 and now classic text *Metahistory* White posed his disruptive question, why do historians persist in failing to consider historical narratives

...as what they most manifestly are - verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in science.<sup>1</sup>

I wish to now very briefly revisit this logic with a few thoughts on history understood as an ontological category – specifically as belonging to that category of the aesthetic. So, I do not apologise for returning to the very recent past and specifically Preziosi's question /comment that interpretation is essentially entailed with the effectiveness or lack thereof of its expressions... its artifice.

In 2010 I argued at perhaps tedious book length that history should be considered as an aesthetic form or perhaps as a wide variety of aesthetic forms, *through* which – and only through which - we can re-imagine past realities. Since Hayden White published his "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" very few practitioner historians have pursued his insight, preferring instead to continue to plough the empirical-analytical-representationalist furrow. But at its most basic pursuing White's insight would mean a fundamental change in what historians think and do.

So, just what do the vast majority of professional, salaried and state funded historians do? Well, what they do follows on directly and functionally from their basic epistemic beliefs that what they do is not an act of aesthesis. This is defined in five basic precepts.

- First: the historian's statements of justified belief about the past - the facts - are empirically defensible and hence factualism demands the primacy of empirical scepticism. This can lead to the descent into what elsewhere I have called reconstructionism. While the past is 'interpreted' it is that peculiar form of interpretation that reveals reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978), pp. 81-100, first published in *Clio*, vol. 3, no 3, June 1974, pp. 277-303.

- Second: to ‘discover’ the meaning of the facts, the historian must truthfully and realistically infer the causal connections presumed to exist between them. This usually takes the form of a hypothesis that is ‘tested’ in order to understand ‘what the facts all add up to’. Historians have a technical name for this process. It is colligation.
- Third: as a consequence of this empirical scepticism-colligation process historians are expected to advance as objectively as possible ‘historical explanations’ aka ‘interpretations’ which, other things being equal, should generate the most likely ‘truthful meaning’ aka the most likely narrative (story) of (from among those shortlisted in) the content of the past.
- Fourth: what this adds up to (so far) is that the most likely ‘truthful meaning (aka the most likely narrative) of the past’ can then be offered courtesy of a further belief which is a belief in the adequacy of the mechanism of textual representationalism (mimesis). A realist picture if you like.
- Fifth, the decisive consequence of all this is the belief that ‘the past’ and ‘history’ are effectively the same thing and if done properly the history can be defined as the most likely narrative of the past that is either reconstructed or at worst constructed again. Hence ‘the past’ and ‘history’ can and have become interchangeable terms.

So, how can this five element process be regarded in any way as producing an aesthetic understanding of the past-as-history? Well, it can’t. And this is precisely the problem to be overcome – the empirical-analytical-representationalist problem. Overcoming this epistemic understanding which I perceive to be a debilitating problem is to rethink history as an aesthetic act.

Thanks to White’s article in particular, the 37 years since witnessed - in my history narrative at least - a revivifying of interest in the narrative basis of history as a discipline and more recently the wider notion of history as an aesthetic creation. In other words – or actually not in other words but in other forms – the creation of histories off the referenced scholarly page.

This is a major move not just to understand the aesthetics of literary composition but of history’s possible multiple forms. So, there is a debate to be found in professional academic history today on the extent to which history as a discipline can accurately recover and represent the content of the past not just through the form of a textual narrative of a particular representationalist kind, but as an expressive act of aesthesis in a variety of forms from re-enactment to canvas, collage to digital game, first person interpretation to statue, or in whatever expressive forms we can come up with by reforming our forms for engaging with the now absent past.

Happily I am not a lone voice in wanting historians to push on with what they do in rejecting classic practical-realist understandings.

I can point, for example, to the experimental historying of Richard and Sally Price and especially Richard Price’s *Alabi’s World* (1990), which used four different typefaces to emphasize the inevitable perspectivalty of his various historical sources and then their co-authored books subsequently produced which took on a fragmentary form, mixing diary, memoir and line drawings with one –*Two Evenings in Saramaka* (1991) being written in the

form of a screenplay, with designated voice and stage directions. Another – *Equatoria* (1992) – was in the form of a diary set off against excerpts and fragments from other people's writings, combined with Sally Price's pen and ink sketches, the whole taking on the form of a collage or montage.

I would suggest that one might not know it from the epistemologically non-experimental history of those historians who teach in schools, universities and unhappily in other forms where experiment might be considered such as TV and radio. However, the emergence of expressive history has been developing in the past twenty years although one might be forgiven for not recognising it in England in particular. This is in large part thanks to the intellectual tyranny of the Research Excellence Framework which awards national government funding for research at the university level in history (as well as all other disciplines) but only for a highly constrained empirical-analytical and textually representationalist understanding of the nature history thinking and practice. The REF knows what it likes and likes what it knows.

For me so called postmodern or experimental history is of course here and is epistemically self-conscious demanding that history can be legitimately construed not simply as an aesthetic act but by being so construed must revolutionise the nature of our engagement with the past. Now I believe this means (obviously and definitionally I do not know if this is what it means) that 'doing history' is always self-conscious about its own manufacture.

It is my argument that the historian can create their histories however they choose which can of course be epistemically 'straight' (empirical, analytical, and textually representationalist) or 'experimental' in a variety of forms. I have just noted the work of Richard and Sally Price and there are many other experimental historians working today. These include Marjorie Becker, Chris Ward, Jonathan Walker, Bryant Simon, James Goodman and Greg Denning who is no longer with us. And there are theorists as well but not least Robert A. Rosenstone whose multi-voiced text *Mirror in the Shrine* was path breaking when published in 1988.

However, the undergraduate student and most of their tutors, not to mention the general public, plainly has a problem. This is how to understand the fictive nature of history as what it plainly is – a literary artefact. Rejecting the belief that the past and history do not belong in the same ontological category is akin to jumping off a cliff blindfold.

But, as I have argued following the logic of White, it requires acknowledging the narrative artifice of history understood as a narrative form. But I believe it also necessitates rethinking it more broadly to distinguish between the past and history understood as an aesthetic activity. This entails rethinking or deconstructing the nature of epistemological construed representation. This not only opens up the past to historical experimentalism but demands it. My argument is thus simple. It is time to think of history as a literary act but also as a multi-formed aesthetic creation perhaps as we might consider the relationship between expressionism/surrealism and realism.

So, it is a matter of pushing on from the rather obvious Kantian insight that we impose an order on what we perceive as reality – past or present. So, in respect of the time before now the historical imagination creates 'the past-as-history'. So it follows that the historian can either be interested in the reality of the past as they epistemically assume it actually was (aka the 'historical' narrative back there) and be some sort of utterly crude realist or reconstructionist, or a slightly more sophisticated constructionist or alternatively the historian and history consuming public can just enjoy and live with what they have which is the

representation without worrying about whether what it represents really once existed. So, be happy, all we have is history because we cannot know if our narrative representation is the one time real one.

Okay most of us (well, the realist in or among us) will immediately say ‘well, that won’t do as we want realism and objectivity in our history - aka ‘the facts’’. We desire to access past reality for what it really was. This seems very important because our investment in epistemology tells us we must know the past for what it really was because we are directly influenced by ‘the reality of what came before’. Without the reality of the past being known to us we cannot learn from it. The so called lessons of history! The future depends on knowing the reality of the past which in turn depends on realist representation. And so, if we mess about with the representation of the past we become lost in time and we end up contemplating our navel or unable to make moral decisions. So, the notion of an imagined or somehow self-consciously aestheticized history – that which I enjoy - makes no sense and it is utterly irresponsible. Historians and our culture, we are told by epistemologists, demands disinterest and objectivity – and representationalism.

However, if we stand back and assume – as I do – that ontologically history is always an act of aesthesis then we can engage with the past far more responsibly by acknowledging its nature as a representation. That the past cannot be accessed should be our starting point. Yes, we have justified belief. We can know pretty much what happened factually. We can know how this and that most likely fitted together causally. But beyond that the past is as much imagined as found. Once we come to terms with the situation that the past is past and we are not passive receptors (or even complex interpreters) we open up numerous exciting possibilities for widening and deepening our historical imaginations.

We can address key cultural concepts like justice, honour, war, truth, failure not as inhering in past and hence future sets of events but as emanating from our ethics – as Kant suggested we make our connections between the aesthetic and the morally good and that takes history out of the realm of private belief that, say, the holocaust did not happen but makes it just more complex an understanding. Understanding history as an aesthetic form forces us to make moral decisions rather than just learn those seemingly available from the past.

So, once we assume history is a representation then we not only can, but we must open up its aesthetics. And this means recognising that our enjoyment of history understood as an act of aesthesis, differs entirely from our enjoyment of our justified beliefs about past reality. Our enjoyment of history differs from our enjoyment of the past. The logic of this is that historical representation is an aesthetic act while past reality is well past reality. So, unless you believe it is possible to think of the past as being susceptible to laboratory analysis all we have is history.

But aesthesis is an act that relies on the creation of a narrative whether it is smudges of paint on a canvas or a mausoleum. I am with Croce on this. I believe that historical representations are what they are because they are expressions. History for me is thus a form of aesthetic expression.

Without this understanding the past is just a listing of what happened which is inscribed causally. But as soon as we change our description from ‘the queen died and then the king died’ to ‘the queen died and then the king died of grief’ we have created a narrative and turned events into a work of art. This is because we have constituted a perspective by which we can ‘see’ the past world. We are creating a perspective? A vision? An understanding? A meaning? An explanation? We are seeing things in a different way.

So, I will now conclude by reference to Benedetto Croce and his argument that the aesthetic is a science of expression. The past is known factually but also ‘intuitively’ (Croce’s term) as an aesthetic representation. Historians intuit the meaning of the past. They ‘feel’, ‘perceive’, ‘sense’, ‘understand’, ‘have a feeling about’, ‘get an impression of’ or ‘become aware of’ the nature of the past. And then they have to give ‘expression’ to their intuiting process. History is the expression that results from this intuiting process. Or it can be a range of expressions.

The past is blind, deaf and dumb and has no physical presence today. All we have today is past stuff. It is us, you and I who invest this stuff with insight ‘into the past’, or we hear the voice of the past or we feel its presence. These are only made manifest as we aestheticize the past *as* history. History, as Croce suggested when understood as a representation is what results from the operation of the historian’s aesthetic intuitive mind. Hence I argued in my book *The Future of History* that history is best understood as an act of expression.

What the vast majority of historians fail to understand is that they create representations that impose a form on the content of the past. The experience of creating a historical form is central to history. The historian creates an expression for their empirical impressions. These expressions can be in words – often using the words of people in the past - but the aesthetic act of history exists in the overall expressionist form of the history. So, there is the epiphany of the *lux facta est* – let there be light. And briefly – at least until the next revision of this *lux facta est* experience – behold we have the history. Every history is an instant of pleasure and beauty. The history is pleasurable and beautiful because it is an expressive activity that triumphantly ‘unfolds itself’.

The historical forms we can give to this pleasurable and beautiful expressive activity are multifarious. The forms are chosen for many different reasons but all are connected to history expressed as righteous indignation and sorrow, hope and glory, fear and loathing. And there are, I suggest, no given rules (well, there are for empirical-analytical-representationalist historians) for historical expressionism. For me there are no authorised recipes for ‘doing history’. So, we need to ask not what our history can do for us, but what we can do for our history. How shall we express the past today? The upshot of Croce’s analysis is radical. It allows experimental history. The past is dead. Yet it twitches?

What are we doing in creating histories? Is it a matter of choice? Is it to retrieve and explain the most likely meaning of the past in a textual and deeply empirical interpretational description? Yes, for most it is. This is what the Research Excellence Framework forks out millions of pounds to finance every six years in the UK. But also no. For me the concept of history is not just the professionally audited and authorised addressing of the now inaccessible past but it can and should be allowed to express that address as oxymoron, ideology, alliteration, verse, film, text, adaptation, colour, pastiche, argument, marble, personal taste, figuration, first person interpretation, digital games, diaries, biography, invention, play, Japanese Shisa Lions, invention, gallery openings or art fairs...

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