Negotiating Historical Narratives: An Epistemology of History for History Education

JON A. LEVISOHN

Historians typically tell stories about the past, but how are we to understand the epistemic status of those narratives? This problem is particularly pressing for history education, which seeks guidance not only on the question of which narrative to teach but also more fundamentally on the question of the goals of instruction in history. This article explores the nature of historical narrative, first, by engaging with the seminal work of Hayden White, and second, by developing the critique of White by David Carr. The picture of historical inquiry that emerges is one in which the fundamental cognitive activity is one of negotiating among narratives. Students, like historians, like any of us, come to the work of historical inquiry in possession of prior narratives, which are then thrown into an encounter with other narratives of varying size and scope. Good historians enact the negotiation among narratives responsibly and well, demonstrating the virtues of historical interpretation. History education, therefore, ought to help students improve their historical interpretations at the same time as it fosters those qualities that make them good interpreters.

I INTRODUCTION

In a seminal article in The Journal of American History titled ‘A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative’, environmental historian William Cronon investigates ‘the much vexed problems that narrative poses for all historians’ (Cronon, 1992, p. 1350). Historians typically tell stories about the past, either explicitly or implicitly. But Cronon describes the anxiety, among historians and theorists of history, that is generated by the awareness of the apparently inevitable ideological bias of those historical narratives: ‘I cannot help feeling uneasy about the shifting theoretical ground that we all now seem to occupy’ (p. 1349). The central problem is the way that those biases seem to give rise to multiple possible accounts of
the same historical events. ‘Historians may strive to be as fair as they can,’ he writes, but ‘it remains possible to narrate the same evidence in radically different ways’ (p. 1370). For a conscientious historian—and for conscientious history educators—this problem is both epistemological and practical. How should we tell stories about the past? How should we teach those stories?

Cronon frames his inquiry around the competing narratives that historians have constructed about the history of the American Great Plains. ‘On the one hand,’ he writes,

... we can narrate Plains history as a story of improvement, in which the plot line gradually ascends toward an ending that is somehow more positive—happier, richer, freer, better—than the beginning. On the other hand, we can tell stories in which the plot line eventually falls toward an ending that is more negative—sadder, poorer, less free, worse—than the place where the story begins (p. 1352).

In 1920, for example, the great American historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote the history of the Great Plains as a story of frontier progress (Turner, 1920). A decade later, Walter Prescott Webb replaced Turner’s narrative with an account more attuned to the distinct environmental challenges that the Plains presented to the white settlers—but an account that is no less progressive than Turner’s in its basic plot structure (Webb, 1931).

Later, the calamitous ‘Dust Bowl’ of the 1930s generated a new set of narratives. In some of these new narratives, the plains farmers required the intervention of technical specialists from Washington to save them from themselves. In other new narratives, the New Deal policies of the 1930s actually exacerbated the problems rather than ameliorating them. And further generations of historians—both Reaganite and neo-Marxist—offered their own perspectives.³

‘This vision of history as an endless struggle among competing narratives and values may not seem very reassuring,’ Cronon writes sardonically (p. 1370). Even with disciplinary ‘rules of thumb’ about depth and breadth and coherence, ‘we seem still to be rudderless in an endless sea of stories’ (ibid.). Thoughtful instructors of history, in any setting, are quite familiar with the problem. The more we know about a particular topic, the easier it seems to construct multiple competing narratives—narratives that tell conflicting stories about a politically fraught event or set of events, as well as narratives that tell stories that emphasise divergent aspects. The question of which narrative we should teach would seem to be dependent (at least in part) on the question of which narrative is true. But what could it mean for a narrative to be true?

Nor do the problems end there. The goals of history education are broader and deeper than simply the knowledge of particular historical narratives; they include, as well, the exercise of good historical inquiry and the cultivation of the dispositions to do so. But what does this entail? If, when faced with multiple narratives, we find ourselves incapable of adjudicating among them, then we may reasonably wonder what it might
mean to construct historical narratives responsibly or well. Can we identify the relevant dispositions in a way that makes sense of the reality of multiple incompatible narratives? How can we conceptualise historical inquiry such that the educational goals of teaching particular narratives and cultivating dispositions towards responsible historiography are both plausible and desirable?

The good news is that we now have a robust tradition of empirical research in history education that did not exist as recently as fifteen years ago (e.g. Levstik and Barton, 2008; Ashby et al., 2005; Davis et al., 2001; Wineburg, 2001; Stearns et al., 2000; for reviews of research see Wilson, 2001; Wineburg, 1996/2001; and Seixas, 1996). The research has increasingly focused on the complicated problems of students’ historical understanding and interpretation, rather than simply on how much factual information students do or do not possess: ‘scholarly interest in historical thinking, almost absent a decade ago, increases every year’ (Davis et al., 2001, pp. 10–11). However, when empirical researchers run up against philosophical questions about the nature of historical inquiry, they are ill-equipped to navigate the rocky shoals. It is hard to avoid the epistemological debates about whether and how narratives refer, for example, or what kinds of evaluative criteria are relevant to historical accounts. When faced with these apparently unresolved philosophical disputes, what is the history educator to do?

One can quote a bit of Foucault or Lyotard, attempting to capture a flavour of the postmodern intellectual zeitgeist. Or one can rely on ‘common-sense’ understandings, although common sense tends to be an inherently conservative articulation of tradition and consensus. Alternatively, one can turn to the actual practice of historiography as it is carried out by the experts. Thus, when Sam Wineburg, perhaps the leading contemporary empirical researcher of historical understanding, launched his influential research program, he asked the question, ‘Where should our standard [for judging the comprehension of historical texts] come from?’ His response was unequivocal: ‘To me, there is only one defensible answer. We must look to the discipline’ (Wineburg, 1991, p. 516).

This approach is promising, for it acknowledges that students are participating in a cultural enterprise, a ‘discipline,’ to which they and their teachers are responsible. We might say that the approach represents an implicit commitment to a continuum that stretches from the earliest and most basic educational settings through to the most specialised settings for research and writing in the academic field of history; while there are certainly important differences between the points along the continuum, all who are engaged in thinking and learning about history share an epistemic relationship to the past and its traces.

But this approach—and the hypothesis of a continuum on which it rests—is not without its problems. After all, the experts themselves are not in agreement about their own methodologies. In fact, it is not clear who qualifies as an ‘expert’ in the first place. Should we only look to academic historians at elite universities? Even within those universities, should we only look to Departments of History? What about historians who reside in
various other departments, sometimes because of methodological differences? So the boundaries of the relevant community of practice are murky, and the criteria of selection of the exemplars more complicated than we might have initially thought.

Even more fundamentally, is it clear that we want our students to be engaged in a continuum of practice with academic historians at the other end? That depends on what we think the practice of academic historiography looks like. Perhaps we believe that academic historiography is an odd preoccupation with minutiae, an ever-more-specialised effort to document history, in Leopold von Ranke’s famous phrase, ‘as it actually was’. But if we believe that, why would we want our students to be engaged in such an effort? Alternatively, perhaps we believe (following a theorist like Barthes, 1967/1981, or others) that academic historiography is a deceptive discourse that manipulates the unwitting reader, through the employment of a realistic style in an effort to bolster the authority of its own ideologically-driven construction. But if we believe that, then, again, why would we want our students to be engaged in such an effort?

The normative questions are unavoidable: ‘Philosophy of history is necessary in any attempt to arrive at a rational way of teaching history, even if it is not sufficient’ (Lee, 1983, p. 48). Philosophy of history is necessary because we need a defensible theory of historical inquiry, a normative theory that accounts for our best practices while also potentially standing in critique of them. What do historians do when they construct responsible historical narratives, or select among them? What subject-specific dispositions or habits of mind do they employ, and how might these be understood as educational desiderata?

The present paper will engage with these large questions, by exploring the nature of historical narratives. The narrative turn in philosophy of history is typically credited to the influential work of Hayden White. But on my reading, White’s argument relies on a view about where narratives come from that is problematic. Borrowing from and building on the critique of White by David Carr, I will proceed to offer a more defensible account of the origin of historical narratives. That account will also point the way to a parallel account of the evaluation of narratives, that is, a normative account of what differentiates better narratives from worse ones. Throughout, the argument will attempt to show that while the techniques and specialised practices of academic historians are distinct, in fact historians stand in the same epistemic relationship to history as do teachers and students. The conceptualisation of that epistemic relationship, of what it means to inquire into the past, ought to guide our efforts to teach history at any level.

II THE PROBLEM OF THE ORIGIN OF NARRATIVES

Beginning with his influential 1973 book Metahistory, Hayden White emphasises that interpretations of historical events paradigmatically take the form of narratives about the past, and that those narrative interpretations communicate their information not merely through their
individual statements (and cannot therefore be reduced to a series of discrete propositions) but rather they express the meaning and significance of historical events through their organisation of those events into plots of various types. Historians, that is, select the relevant facts to fit the particular narrative and organise those facts into a pre-determined pattern that is familiar to us from our culture. They tell a story, and the trajectory (and ending) of the story shapes how they—and then we, their readers—understand what the story is all about.4

But this recognition of the role of narratives in historiography raises the problem of the epistemic status of those narratives. Can we affirm that a story is true? If knowledge of something requires the epistemic object to be true, what might it mean to know a story? Why is one story better than another? White argues that narrative structure floats freely above the constraints of evidence and argument: there is nothing in the past or in our experience of the past that makes one story better than another: ‘There is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a true story, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions’ (White, 1988/1999, p. 9). Or again, elsewhere: ‘We cannot criticize [a narrative] as being either true or untrue to the facts’ (White 1992/1999, p. 30). And to be sure, the unavoidable pluralism of narrative histories—the way in which we seem unable to appeal to facts to settle fundamental disputes about narrative emplotment—seems to support this view. This is the force of Cronon’s example of the Great Plains, above. Or consider, likewise, a major event like the French Revolution. Any account, White would argue, must be emplotted in one way or another if it is to make sense to us. But should we view the French Revolution positively, as an important advance in democratic freedoms despite its regrettable excesses? Or should it rather be emplotted as tragedy, a cautionary tale about populism and unchecked violence? What evidence could possibly make this decision for us?

It is important to clarify that, in contrast to more radical sceptics,5 White and others who follow his lead do not reject the empirical basis for historiographical inquiry entirely.6 History deals with facts about the past, and White affirms that the historian has a responsibility to get those facts right, on the basis of the best evidence available.7 But once we gather up those facts, there is still the task of selecting the relevant ones and organising them. And the ways that this task is carried out—the choices that the historian makes—inevitably flow from the historian’s ideological or creative predilections. They must, because there is no other source from which they might flow. Emplotment is imposed on the facts rather than emerging on its own, as it were. In fact, White himself characterises the process as one of imposition,8 and this is how others understand his position as well.9 So following Andrew Norman, we can fairly call his position ‘impositionalism’ (Norman, 1991). And because those narratives are imposed on the facts, historical accounts are therefore apparently immune to disconfirmation by facts.10

Now, one might wonder about White’s dichotomy between facts and narratives. For White, emplotments are the means of expressing historical
interpretations, but facts are nothing other than simple statements about events in the past, which unproblematically correspond (or fail to correspond) to aspects of those events. But surely many facts may be re-characterised as compressed narratives, which raises the question of just how clear the line is between fact and narrative. Consider two propositions. First: ‘Luther nailed his Theses to the church door in Wittenburg in 1517.’ Second: ‘In the 16th century, the movement to reform the church split into many competing factions according to ideological differences.’ We might all agree that the first proposition is a fact rather than a narrative, but what about the second?

As a relatively simple proposition, the second sentence looks like a fact. It is a statement that is apparently either true or false; what the sentence describes either did or did not happen. As an event that took place over an extended period of time, however, and with an embedded claim about causation (i.e. that ideological differences led to factional splits), it also looks like a compressed narrative, and one moreover which makes a claim about what is important in the story. From the perspective of the history educator, the second sentence is meaningful while the first is trivial. We might want students to know about Luther and the theses and perhaps even the date—but if we do, it is for instrumental reasons. No one would claim that knowing that the event occurred is a good and aspirational objective for a history lesson. Knowledge of the second sentence, on the other hand, carries a degree of complexity, sophistication, and meaning that would make it a legitimate pedagogical objective. We can easily imagine a thoughtful instructor saying, ‘I want my students to emerge from our study of the Reformation not just knowing that it happened and when, but more importantly, knowing that the ideological ferment that it launched could not be contained in any one denomination. This is an interesting part of the story, and it’s something that reveals an important insight into human nature and society.’

Note that, to affirm the second of the two sentences, we need not claim that it tells the whole story, that it encompasses everything (or even everything significant) about the events that it describes. There are surely factors other than ideological differences that contributed to the fragmentation of the Protestant groups. However, if we are going to affirm the sentence, we do need to claim that this is, in some sense, the basic narrative. We need to be able to say that the sentence is true. So, again, is it a fact or a narrative? We might be inclined to say that it is both, or that it is impossible to differentiate, or maybe (in exasperation with the nitpicking of philosophers) that it doesn’t really matter whether the second sentence is really a fact or a narrative! But if we think that there is a significant epistemic difference between them, as White does, then it matters a great deal.11

A second question, closely connected to the question of White’s fact-narrative divide, has to do with White’s claims about the origins of narratives. White makes a great deal of the apparent truism that, while we might affirm that historical facts correspond to states of affairs that obtained in the past, nothing in a person’s experience of time or of history seems capable of generating the complex linguistic structure of a narrative. ‘Does
the world present itself to perception,’ he asks incredulously, ‘in the form of well-made stories?’ (White, 1984/1987, p. 24).

There is a common-sense quality to his point. For White, our experience of events in history, real events, is always only a perception of physical processes in time and space. The example of Luther in 1517 works well for this purpose too: the event is appropriately physical and tangible. We can see, in our mind’s eye, a hammer and a nail and a heavy wooden door, a mild exertion of human effort to swing the hammer, a loud report as the hammer head hits the nail and the wood of the door, a rustle of parchment as the Theses are left hanging in the breeze. So we can affirm that Luther either did or did not nail his Theses to the church door; an observer either would have or would not have perceived these various physical processes. We know what it means to experience an event in this way, and for White, this kind of event is a paradigm: the world is experienced as an unending sequence of discrete, disconnected and hence meaningless moments. That unending sequence is real.

The stories that we tell, on the other hand, weaving those moments together into meaningful narratives, are different. We cannot look around at the world and see the stories that we tell. As Cronon writes, ‘We must eventually ask a more basic question: where did these stories come from?’ (Cronon, 1992, p.1348). Empirical observation does not tell us where to start or end our stories, or which facts to select, or how to emplot them in ways that convey meaning. But where else could narratives possibly come from except the imagination? Narratives, White argues, take ‘real events’ and impose a ‘coherence, integrity, fullness and closure . . . that is and can only be imaginary’ (White, 1984/1987, p. 24). That is why ‘there is no such thing as a real story’ (White, 1988/1999, p. 9), and that is why ‘the best grounds for choosing one perspective . . . are ultimately aesthetical or moral rather than epistemological’ (White, 1973, p. xii).

For educational theorists, and history educators more specifically, this theory poses a particular problem. After all, the teacher of history (at whatever level, from early childhood through graduate school) is just like the historical researcher, trying to select the best and most appropriate historical narrative as the basis for her curricular decisions. But if historical narratives have their origins in the imagination of historians, why should we teach (or teach towards) one narrative rather than another? What might it mean for teachers to adopt an historical narrative on ‘aesthetical or moral [grounds] rather than epistemological’? What happens to the calm confidence with which we were prepared to affirm that the second of the two sentences above—the compressed narrative about the fragmentation of Protestantism due to the development of ideological differences—is true?

Moreover, the teacher, unlike the historian, also has to clarify the purposes of teaching history—both in general and for any particular lesson. If White is correct that emplotments emerge from the creative mind of the historian, and that they are neither defensible nor evaluable on epistemic grounds, then not only is the educator left with a quandary about what to teach but more fundamentally she has no way to conceptualise better and worse interpretive efforts among her students. And when
considering the goals of history education, she is at a loss, since the viable candidates have been compromised: knowledge of historical narratives is nothing other than the meek acceptance of some historian’s made-up stories, and proficiency in the skills of historiography is nothing other than the exercise of aesthetic or ideological predilections. To avoid White’s conclusions and thus to avoid this educational quandary, we will need a better account of where narratives come from.

III DO NARRATIVES COME FROM THE IMAGINATION?

In David Carr’s *Time, Narrative and History* (1986a) and subsequent essays, his strategy is primarily a negative one, arguing against White’s account of the origins of narratives. For White, as we have noted, the world is experienced as an unending sequence of discrete, disconnected, and meaningless moments, events without emplotment. Carr, however, argues that a closer and more sensitive examination of the experience of events—a phenomenological account, building on Husserlian insights—reveals that it is nothing of the sort. Instead, experience of an event is always an experience that possesses something like a narrative structure. This is analogous to the way that our perception of facts are always theory-laden; what we perceive to be a fact is shaped in part by the theories that we bring to the act of perception. Similarly, what we experience is shaped by a larger framework in which we interpret the event. That larger structure includes an awareness of precursors to the event as well as an awareness of something that we expect to happen—an end of the event or a consequence that emerges from it. It is this background, this awareness of the past and anticipation of the future, that generates our sense of what is significant about what we are encountering; it allows us to characterise it as an event of a particular kind.

The argument here is not about historical events, *per se*. Rather, consider any prosaic event or process that one experiences in everyday life. When I go to work in the morning, I experience something that I call ‘going to work,’ a process that I identify as having a beginning, at about the moment when I leave the house and get in my car (as well as precursors when I was at home packing my briefcase and looking for leftovers in the refrigerator), and an end, when I arrive at my office (after which there are consequences of my having gotten to work, like greeting colleagues and turning on my computer). If, in the course of that process, someone were to ask me what I am doing, I would simply say I am going to work. If, at some later point, someone were to ask me to account for my whereabouts during that period of time, I would say that I had been going to work.

There is nothing mysterious about this, and so it may seem rather trivial. But the point is that it is entirely natural to employ a narrative structure to characterise experience in a holistic way: this is the way we talk about what is happening or what has happened to us (or to others). On the other hand, only as a result of a specific and quite peculiar line of questioning—about, say, what happened at each instant—would I be tempted to describe
the sequence of discrete events that comprise my going to work. To be sure, such a reductionist account is possible. I can break down the process into isolated units. With some technical assistance—a video camera, for example, to help me see myself at a frame-by-frame pace—I can even give a moment-by-moment account. But such a putatively more precise account is not closer to the reality of the process that I experienced. On the contrary: the more ‘precise’ such an account becomes, the further it is from my actual experience.

Recall, however, that on the impositionalist account, narratives spring forth from the imagination of the historian and must be imposed upon the unnarrativised past. So the historian of me-going-to-work, the impositionalist claims, inevitably must invent a narrative that selects among and orders a set of discrete facts. The phenomenological account, on the other hand, rejects this claim, because my actual experience is narrativised. The historian of me-going-to-work (if we can conjure such a person) is inventing nothing at all; in telling her going-to-work story, she is mirroring or building on my experience. On the contrary, it is precisely the absence of narrative structure that does violence to actual experience.

We might notice, therefore, that the account of Luther given above is deceptive. The physicality of the act, and the associated sense perceptions, led us to imagine that there is something basic and fundamental about the event, that it presents itself to us (or rather, it would have presented itself to a contemporaneous observer) as simple and unnarrativised. To be sure, when we compare that event to larger narratives about the Protestant Reformation, there is a sense in which it is a simple unified action, uncomplicated by questions about beginnings and endings and emplotments. But that is only a relative judgment. We might equally break down the single event on that day in 1517 into smaller parts (holding up the Theses, fixing the nail, swinging the hammer). Or, we might equally well describe the event not in sense-perceptual terms, but in narrative ones—as an event with a beginning, middle, and end. Surely that is how an observer would describe it, or indeed, how Luther himself would.

Now, this point may serve well as a critique of White’s argument about the perception of events. But the kind of structured first-hand experience that we have been discussing is surely quite different from an historiographical narrative, a story that is typically told from a perspective far in the future of the events in question. That distance, in fact, is typically considered to be a vital component of historiography, allowing the historian to evaluate the effects or influence of the subject of the inquiry on subsequent events or people. Ankersmit repeats this familiar refrain: ‘Historians,’ he writes, ‘continuously devise new vocabularies in terms of which they propose to conceive of the past that were unknown to the people in the past themselves’ (Ankersmit, 2003, p. 301). But Carr argues that this objection rests upon a ‘mistaken sense of our being ‘confined to the present’’ (Carr, 1986b, p. 124). To correct this mistake, notice that there is a second, extended, sense in which our experience of an event—of every event to which we attribute significance—reaches out into the future: not only do we anticipate a particular end of the event presently being experienced, but more generally,
we have certain expectations of the future course of events. And it is precisely those projections that generate the significance that we place on the event before us in the present.

Consider an historical example, the well-worn example of Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon into Italy, with his troops, in 49 BCE. To a hypothetical observer, sitting on the riverbank of the Rubicon, the event is unavoidably structured as a narrative, with a beginning (Caesar and his troops on one side), a middle, and an end (Caesar and his troops on the other side). Moreover, the narrative has a particular meaning; the observer perceives it as a river crossing. The alternative would be to perceive a series of disconnected steps, random and chaotic, some more watery than others, going nowhere and with no apparent significance. Even trying to describe such a ‘perception’ is hard; our perceptions of events may be accurate or inaccurate, but they are always perception of events.

Beyond this awareness of beginnings and endings, an understanding of the event reaches out, as it were, to the past and the future in a broader sense as well. That is, our hypothetical knowledgeable observer of the event—if he were, say, any adult citizen of the Republic—might well have a broader set of relevant memories and anticipations. He would have retained memories of the power struggles among the Triumvirate of which Caesar was a member; of Caesar’s successful military campaigns from which he is now returning; and of the Senate’s declaration of Caesar to be an enemy of the state due to his accumulation of power. And the observer would have retained memories, too, of the norms and power structures of the Roman republic, including the explicit prohibition against generals introducing their expeditionary armies onto the soil of Italy—a prohibition intended to prevent precisely the disturbance of the balance of powers that Caesar’s action effected.

So much for his knowledge of the past, the precursors that shape his understanding of the meaning of this event that he sees before him. What about the future? The observer does not have knowledge of the future, of course, but he does have certain expectations about what will happen. The event that he sees before him is a river crossing, which ends with Caesar and the troops on the other side of the river. That is one outcome. In another sense, though, the outcome of the event is broader and more significant. Based on everything he knows about the past, and based on his perception of the event, he would anticipate certain future events that would result from this crossing. In other words, in light of his memories and anticipations, he would perceive the (or at least a) correct meaning of the crossing of the Rubicon, namely, the inauguration of civil war.

All this might sound very far removed from the painstaking work of critical historiography, a fantasy about a hypothetical observer over-interpreting an event by making wildly under-evidenced assertions about a future that he cannot know. And yet, consider an event that is parallel to Caesar at the Rubicon: the firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor in April 1861. One might imagine that only a future retrospective analysis would be able to characterise that event as the descent of the United States into civil war. To repeat the well-crafted characterisation by Ankersmit...
introduced earlier, ‘historians continuously devise new vocabularies in terms of which they propose to conceive of the past that were unknown to the people in the past themselves’ (Ankersmit, 2003, p. 301). But in fact, a contemporary journal entry for the day of the surrender of the fort in April 1861 reads as follows: ‘April 13. So civil war is inaugurated at last. God defend the right.’ This observer’s characterisation of the event as the inauguration of a civil war incorporates a set of anticipations of what would ensue, given the observer’s knowledge of the prior conditions and his correct judgment about the nature of the event—the attack—that he is presently witnessing. The observer makes no claims to prophecy or supernatural discernment. Instead, the observer’s anticipations merely represent a reasonably insightful (but otherwise entirely natural) instance of the kind of expectations that always accompany our encounter with events. Contra Ankersmit, the vocabulary of ‘civil war’ as a way to conceptualise the events unfolding at that time was not devised by historians and was not unknown to the ‘people in the past’. In fact, if an observer had anticipated no significant consequence arising from this assault on a Union garrison, then his insight would have been sorely lacking.

Of course, the empirical question of whether actual observers of these events did or did not possess a level of insight sufficient to anticipate future events correctly is not relevant for our purposes. We need not be concerned, at present, whether the story that any particular observer tells turns out to be the right one. In general, more proximate anticipations are more accurate and more distant ones are less so. The epistemological point is that the event is narrativised from the very first description, the very first characterisation, indeed from the very first experience of the event as an event. Experiences come packaged, as it were, with a beginning and an end, and with memories that draw upon the past and anticipations that reach forward into the future.

If this is so, then White’s picture of the invention of narrative in the mind of the historian is inaccurate. As Carr writes, ‘It is not the case that we first live and act and then afterward, seated around the fire as it were, tell about what we have done, thereby creating something entirely new thanks to a new perspective’ (Carr, 1986b, p. 126). Narratives do not come from the spontaneous creative imagination of historians. The image of the campfire in this quote is ambiguous; it might be intended to invoke ancient, pre-literate primitive peoples creating myths to explain their experiences, or it might rather be intended to invoke contemporary Boy Scouts telling tall tales. Both images suggest an ex post facto effort to invent a story for particular aesthetic, moral or psychological purposes. But that is not what interpreters of history do. Instead, the historian-narrator, assembling events into a coherent story—with a beginning and an end and a meaningful plot structure—is engaged in an activity that is structurally parallel to the first-person experience of events or of a life.

Yet the concerned historian or history educator may well wonder: is this negative argument enough? Even if we accept the point against White, that narratives are not always the product of the imagination, but rather that they are sometimes products of experience, how can we tell the
difference between those narratives that are accurate and those that are not? Even if we agree that historians, indeed any of us when we relate to the past, create something that bears a structural similarity to the way that events in the past are experienced, and even if we then question White’s scepticism about the epistemic basis for historical narratives, what guidance is available for historical inquiry or history education? What, in other words, does this tell us about the evaluation of or selection among historical accounts, which after all are rarely if ever the accounts of the actual participants, neither as individuals nor even as groups?

IV THE ORIGINS OF NARRATIVES: A POSITIVE ACCOUNT

The negative argument is not enough. What we need is not just an account that undermines the claim that all narratives come from the imagination of the historian, but a more robust account of where narratives come from that can help explain how some narratives are empirically guided or grounded in ways that others are not, and how to tell the difference. And we need this not merely because we have an academic interest in the epistemology of historical narratives; rather, we need it because we need an account that can guide our educational efforts.

So where do narratives come from? The answer is deceptively simple: Narratives come from other narratives. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, it is narratives all the way down.\(^{17}\) Students of history, whether professional historians or relative novices, are always dealing with events that are already narrativised by others. Typically, in fact, the events in question are over-narrativised; the story has been told many times, in many ways, implicitly and explicitly, by those close to the event and by others more distant from it. The constructive work of the historical inquirer, then—the creation of historical narratives—is always a product of a negotiation among multiple narratives, both ‘first level’ primary-source narratives and ‘second level’ historiographical narratives. ‘The cognitive activity of the historian [may] be described as that of grappling with other narratives of various sorts and at different levels’ (Carr, 1994, p. 131).

This is a rather bold descriptive claim about how historical inquiry works—and it is bolder still to claim not just that professional historians work in this way, but that all students of history do so. So we will need to examine the claim carefully. One can immediately see that this kind of negotiation occurs in the academic historiography of major and controversial events, events like the French Revolution or the American Civil War that are marked by continual re-examination and re-interpretation in every generation of historians. Each new interpretation must take the previous or reigning interpretation as its point of conceptual departure, explicitly or implicitly accounting for all the old sources (if they are still relevant) even while it sometimes introduces new ones. And at the same time, each new inquiry effects changes, either subtle or dramatic, in the larger narratives in which it is embedded. Indeed, it is precisely these projected modifications that make the new story worth

\(^{12}\)
telling, for no historian is interested in repeating a story that has already been told. This is true for professional reasons, of course—one does not make a mark in the field simply by repeating the scholarship of others—but is also true more generally. The desire to tell a story about the past is motivated by some inadequacy of understanding, some question, either in oneself or in others.\(^\text{18}\)

But what about events that are not already narrativised, in any literal sense, because they are too obscure or simply because they have been overlooked by academic historiography? Carr offers a hypothetical example of the story of a ‘hitherto unknown heretical sect in some remote corner of medieval Europe, [constructed] on the basis of some newly discovered inquisitional records’ (Carr, 1994, p. 130). The sect is unknown; their story has never been told. Is the historian of this sect also negotiating among multiple prior narratives? In fact, here too we can answer in the affirmative. Even prior to her encounter with the inquisitional records, the hypothetical historian is in possession of an understanding of her topic on the basis of the larger narratives in which it is placed. She has encountered a more general narrative of the particular region (that ‘corner of medieval Europe’). She has studied the general history of the Church and its heresies. She holds, in her mind, a set of story-archetypes\(^\text{19}\) for the emergence of religious sects. Regardless of the obscurity of the specific topic, without such pre-existing narratives, the historian would have no framework for understanding the significance of the newly discovered archives; she wouldn’t know what she is seeing.\(^\text{20}\) In this looser sense, even the most obscure topic—the kind of topic chosen for doctoral dissertations, for example, precisely because nobody has ever researched it—is already narrativised. In this case too, therefore, the constructive work of the historian is produced by a negotiation among narratives.

And what about contemporary events, or events so recent that no historian has written about them? One might wonder whether such an event is already narrativised, if no historians have yet told the story. But once we choose any particular event as an example, we quickly see that this is not so. Indeed, the very act of choosing—of exercising judgment about historical significance—brings that narrativisation close to the surface. Consider the recent election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States. Since it is a contemporary event, we might imagine that it is not yet narrativised. But of course that is not correct: it has been endlessly and exhaustively discussed in the media, and every account carries with it a characterisation and implicit narrativisation, whether a narrative about race in America or about the triumph of a certain style of political rhetoric or about political reform. Any of these narratives may be more or less insightful, of course, and may be more or less successful in persisting over time. But any inquirer into a recent (or ongoing) event encounters not only first-person narratives, in primary sources or in journalistic accounts, but also the larger contemporary narratives that give significance to the event in question.

I have already alluded to ‘narrative archetypes,’ so it should be clear that the narratives among which the historian negotiates are not a tidy collection of stories, each neatly packaged, with coinciding beginnings, middles, and ends. Nor is the historian simply faced with a choice between
two divergent stories about the same event. Instead, narratives come in different shapes and sizes, including secondary historiographical accounts, implicit background narratives, and the events themselves as experienced by (and described by) the participants. It is precisely this variety that allows them to work against each other in the process of negotiation.

To return to the hypothetical medieval sect, imagine a background narrative about the Church and its heresies, perhaps a general account that interprets those heresies as motivated primarily by doctrinal differences. Prior to the engagement with the historical material about this particular sect, the historian is in the position of assuming that this heresy conforms to the pattern. It is not hard to see, then, that close inquiry into a specific case may bring up a competing narrative, about (say) the role of class in the prosecution of that heresy in that particular village. The smaller scale narrative gains a certain amount of traction precisely because it is smaller scale—precisely because it can take up the position of saying that the larger narrative may be generally true, but is not true in every case. So while it is true that larger narratives condition the way that we understand smaller-scale narratives (or events), it is also true that our historiographical findings can reverberate back and influence the larger narratives as well—the hermeneutic circle of whole and parts, as applied to historical inquiry.

Alternatively, perhaps this hypothetical historian does not assume that heresies are motivated by doctrinal difference. The primacy of doctrine may be the traditional conception, the general narrative archetype found in the scholarship of the previous generation. But perhaps this historian is convinced that social phenomena in general have more to do with class differences than doctrinal ones, and that heresies conform to this pattern, and so sets out to prove her conviction. Thus, she is in the position of negotiating between the traditional narrative about heresies and a new theory about social phenomena, a new story-archetype. She then arrives at her research with criteria of relevance shaped by this understanding. And then, of course, whether or not the historical record—the primary source narratives—corroborate that view is (or should be) an open question.21

Furthermore, the narratives among which the historian negotiates are not only the stories about human actions on which Carr focuses. Consider, for example, physical evidence, which obviously plays an important role in certain kinds of historical inquiry, but which does not take a narrative form; a tablet or a stele or a document is not, itself, a narrative. On the other hand, that evidence does not display its own significance; it does not tell its own story. It must always be interpreted. So we might say that there is a narrative that the historian tells about that evidence, that text, that data, in order to make it meaningful, which then has to be integrated into the larger narrative about the events in question. Or consider the way that the historical terms that we use as labels for times and places and processes are, apparently inevitably, bound up with implicit narratives. Steven G. Crowell makes this point about terms like ‘the Enlightenment’ or ‘the Cold War’ (Crowell, 1998, p. 231).22 And Cronon makes a parallel point about the variety of labels for the Great Plains, labels such as ‘the Land of the Buffalo’, ‘the Dust Bowl’, and ‘the Breadbasket of the World’.
Thus, just as observation terms in science are unavoidably theory-laden, it seems right to say that historical terms are unavoidably bound up with implicit narratives.

Or consider historical inquiries that are motivated by a sense that an important story has not been told. The obvious examples, here, are the multicultural historiographical approaches that have proliferated in the last generation of historians, including various feminist historical interpretations, either those that tell the story of women or those that tell a story in which gender plays a central role. A naïve justification of such methodologies resorts to an argument about a kind of historiographical distributive justice: why should 100% of historical narratives be told about 50% of the population? Gary Nash writes approvingly that ‘historians, archaeologists, and other social scientists have together reconstructed more of human history in the past twenty-five years than at any time since the birth of history as a modern discipline’ (Nash et al., 1997, p. 76). But what quantification or enumeration is available to justify the claim of ‘more’? Nash proceeds to legitimate new scholarship on the Colonial period in American history on the basis of the fact that ‘the majority of the inhabitants of the thirteen colonies were either women, African Americans, or Native Americans’ (p. 84). But this approach is misguided, for historical relevance is not a matter of proportional representation.

A stronger justification for feminist historical narratives will argue not that stories about women have gone untold (because after all there are infinitely many untold stories) but rather that the implicit stories about women—those stories that are embedded in prior narratives—are wrong. They are inaccurate in some specific way. Thus, it is not the case that one should write, say, the history of the role of female saints in the development of medieval Church doctrine simply because it is a story that has not yet been told. Rather, one should write that history (if one should do so) because the standard history of the Church incorporates an implicit narrative about those women in which the role that they played in that development is judged to be insignificant. To make the methodological case for his inquiry, the feminist historian has to offer not a general argument but only a particular one; he has to show only that a particular narrative, the implicit or embedded or assumed narrative, is false.

Finally, we must focus more directly on the non-professional. I have claimed that there is a parallel between the epistemic position of the professional historian and the student (even the novice). Can we say that all events are already narrativised for the student as well? Isn’t it precisely the student’s lack of knowledge of the event that makes her a novice? In certain respects, this is of course true. A nine-year-old may well know nothing of medieval Europe, much less what a ‘heretical sect’ might be. But we have long ago abandoned, thankfully, the Piagetian conceit that children lack historical understanding. Our hypothetical nine-year-old may have only fuzzy ideas about, say, how her church came to be the way that it is—but she surely does have some ideas.

Even if she does not have ideas about particular institutions, she is surely in possession of the narrative archetypes that (in part) shape our
understanding of the past. She has ideas about what it means when a group breaks away from another group, because they have a different conception about what is good or what is right. She has ideas about the way that people behave, and where things come from. She may well already have a basic conviction about an optimistic, progressive story of the Church, or a pessimistic story of decline (not so different from the way that the historians of the Great Plains are in possession of one or another of these basic narrative emplotments). The lack of precision and even lack of coherence among her ideas need not worry us; with the right kind of education and the right kind of experiences, that will come. But as in other subjects, we should not assume that children are historiographical blank slates. Once we are willing to acknowledge that larger and more general stories and story-archetypes are also part of the epistemic landscape, we can discern that students too are always in the position of negotiating among narratives. Thus, when we affirm that narratives come from other narratives, we need not endorse a fantasy about the historian or any inquirer into history confronting a handful of pre-existing full-blown narratives. Instead, narratives come in various shapes and sizes. Some are explicit, and many are implicit or embedded in larger narratives. Some are specific stories, and some are more like story-archetypes. Some are proto-narratives that offer only a bare-bones sketch, and some are fully elaborated historiographical accounts. Some are first-hand eyewitness accounts, some are narratives about physical evidence or other historical data, and some are secondary sources. The student of history must make sense of the entire bewildering array, as she encounters it, weaving the various stories together into a narrative that tells the story of the event or period or epoch, with the degree of specificity and documentation appropriate to the particular audience and venue. \(^{25}\) This is not to say that all these stories must be explicitly contained in the historical narrative that emerges from the inquiry; such a task is obviously impossible. But in negotiating among narratives, the historian—and the teacher of history, and the student of history—has a responsibility to account for them all. Her intellectual integrity compels her, as it were, to fit the various accounts together into a larger and more consistent account. \(^{26}\)

Thus, the answer to the question of where narratives come from is that narratives are generated by a negotiation among prior narratives, and that those narratives come from still other narratives. At every stage, narratives are altered and adjusted in light of the contradictions and gaps among and between them, and in light of the new inquiries that are motivated by those contradictions and gaps.

V CONCLUSION: THE EVALUATION OF NARRATIVES

If this description of the work of historical inquiry is an accurate one, then how are we to understand historiographical success? What does it mean for historians, teachers, or students to get it right? In the fuzziness of negotiating
among narratives, how can we claim that some narratives are better than others, and on what basis should we select one rather than another?

The first answer is a negative one: the historian is not attempting to reconstruct a narrative inherent in the past itself, and neither is the teacher or student. And so, the criterion of success cannot be accuracy or fidelity of reproduction, neither the reproduction of some agent’s first-hand experience nor the reproduction of the past’s own story (whatever that might mean). In this respect, White is surely correct. Nothing that we learn from Carr about narrativised experience should delude us into thinking that the goal of the history educator is to reconstruct a pre-existing narrative. Historical narratives inevitably evolve over time; every generation brings new questions, perspectives and insights to bear on the telling of stories about the past.

So on the one hand, the historian and the history educator should not attempt to reproduce a pre-existing narrative; they do not merely seek to obey the voice of the past. But on the other hand, as we have been arguing against White, the historian and the history educator also do not impose an imaginary (imagination-generated) narrative on a passive and submissive past. Rather, the answer to the question of what story we ought to tell resides in the successful negotiation among narratives. But success must necessarily be a quality of the activity of historical inquiry rather than a quality of the historiographical product. When we ask whether we got the story right, we are implicitly asking whether we carried out the task of negotiating among narratives with responsibility, with the right kind of creativity, with openness to disconfirmatory evidence, and with the particular combination of boldness and modesty that marks good historiography—boldness that accompanies a story that we believe others ought to endorse, together with the modesty that derives from our knowledge of the ways that historical interpretations change over time.27

Each of the qualities just mentioned—responsibility, creativity, openness to disconfirmatory evidence, boldness, modesty—can be understood as a virtue of historical inquiry. Each deserves a great deal of attention (which I cannot give them here but which I intend to pursue in future work). This is not because precision about these qualities will somehow provide us with a reliable mechanism for the evaluation of narratives. It will not; as Gadamer (1960/1989) taught, we ought not to imagine that we will discover or develop a method that will guarantee truth, neither a method to generate interpretations nor a method to evaluate interpretations already generated. Or as Frank Ankersmit writes in a discussion of the work of Arthur Danto, ‘If we worry about whether we should or should not believe a historical account, we should listen to the arguments that historians have for their views and not to epistemological speculation’ (Ankersmit, 2003, p. 297). Other historians will evaluate the historiographical efforts of their peers, rather than entrusting philosophers to do so. The notion that epistemological clarity will yield methodological certainty has never been very promising.

Nevertheless, gaining some insight into these interpretive virtues will contribute to our efforts as theorists of education, who aspire to provide
guidance to practice—not the practice of history, but the practice of history education. If these virtues of historical interpretation are appropriate ones, then we will have gained a set of lenses through which to evaluate the development of students, and perhaps also will have undermined the scepticism that threatens to paralyze the thoughtful teaching of historical narratives.

I have argued that historiographical inquiry is appropriately characterised as a negotiation among narratives; that historical narratives, rather than emerging from the inventive mind of the historian, are generated by a process of negotiation; and that this conceptualisation enables us to escape from a picture of historical narratives being imposed by the historian on an unnarrativised past. This descriptive account applies to all of us, in whatever settings we find ourselves: professional historians and amateurs, experts and novices. Instructors of history, like historians, are always in the position of constructing a narrative out of narratives for themselves, and, in their scholarship or their pedagogy, of intervening in the negotiation among narratives of others.

Moreover, the descriptive account also contains the seeds of a normative account of what makes one narrative better rather than worse. The quality of a narrative is a function of the quality of the negotiation, of how successfully—how artfully, seamlessly, elegantly, insightfully—the historian negotiates among and integrates the various elements that she encounters or introduces into the inquiry. As we conceptualise the goals of history education, the cultivation of these interpretive virtues is a good place to start.

**Correspondence:** Jon A. Levisohn, Brandeis University, Mailstop 049, Waltham MA, 02454, USA.
E-mail: jon.levisohn@post.harvard.edu

**NOTES**

1. Cronon cites and discusses Paul Bonnifeld’s *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (1979): ‘Bonnifeld’s is a tale of ordinary folk needing nothing so much as to get government off their backs’ (Cronon, 1992, p. 1363).
2. Cronon’s example here is Donald Worster’s *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (1979), in which the disaster in the Great Plains is taken to foreshadow ‘the future environmental cataclysm when the [capitalist] system will finally collapse’ (Cronon, 1992, p. 1363).
3. As part of his analysis of the variety of narratives told of the Great Plains, Cronon also notes the diverse beginning point and ending points, as well as the assumptions made about which actors are relevant to the narrative (white settlers) and which are not (native peoples).
4. White was not the first to emphasise the centrality of narrative in historiography, of course; Arthur C. Danto had already been working on the problems of narrative sentences for some time (see, e.g. Danto, 1962). But White is typically acknowledged as a seminal figure, and *Metahistory* as ‘the book around which all reflective historians must reorganize their thoughts on history’ (according to Louis O. Mink, as quoted by Vann, 1987, p. 12).
5. See, for example, Jenkins, 1997, p. 7.
6. Frank Ankersmit, for example, recreates something like White’s fact-narrative distinction in his own description-representation distinction. ‘A true description identifies an object in reality … Though historical representations are built up of true descriptions, a (historical) representation itself cannot be interpreted as one large (true or false) description’ (Ankersmit, 2001, p. 281).
7. See, for example, White, 1976/1978, p. 121; 1986, pp. 487–9; 1988/1999, p. 2. Kansteiner explains this as follows: ‘On the level of the single event/fact, White retains an element of positivist stability which stands in contrast to the epistemological arbitrariness that he posits on a second level, the level of the conceptual framework of the historical writing’ (Kansteiner, 1993, p. 284).


9. Cronon, for example, paraphrases White as saying that ‘we automatically impose [narrative] on a reality that bears little or no relation to the plots we use in organizing our experience’ (Cronon, 1992, p. 1368).


11. I discuss this critique of White, and others, in Levisohn, 2002.

12. While White typically makes this claim in terms of perception, he sometimes broadens the claim to include experience (White, 1984/1987, pp. 8, 21).

13. Carr himself does not distinguish these two (slightly different) senses of the way in which our experience incorporates an aspect of expectation of the future. This is one reason that he is sometimes misread.

14. Naturally, one would not be able to do so if one did not already possess such a concept (‘river crossing’). Note that the concept of river crossing is, itself, a kind of story-archetype, possessing a beginning, middle, and end.

15. My use of ‘meaning’ here is intended as an equivalent to my earlier use of ‘characterisation’. The meaning of historical events is nothing mysterious or metaphysical; it is simply an expression of what we take the event to be, an expression which at the same time articulates what we take to be significant about the event. And the event, any event, can be accurately described in multiple ways. It is no less correct to say that the observer perceived the start of the civil war than it is to say that he perceived a river crossing, nor is the latter more accurate than the former. Theorists are sometimes tempted to call the former more interpretive and the latter more descriptive; as relative terms, this is unproblematic, but as an epistemological distinction, it does not hold up.

16. This journal entry is cited in the Ken Burns documentary film The Civil War (2004). The phrase ‘God defend the right’ is from Shakespeare’s Henry VI, but it is used in many literary instances to mark the initiation of far-reaching military conflict.

17. Geertz repeats the story about the world resting on the back of an elephant, which rested on the back of a turtle, and ‘after that, it is turtles all the way down’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 29). Carr himself has recently used the phrase ‘narratives all the way down’ as well (Carr, 2008, p. 30).

18. There is an implicit claim here about narrative as a mode of explanation (see Carr, 2008). Historical narratives, like more common and simple ones, explain something that is surprising or curious by telling a story that make that surprising or curious event or action reasonable—in the sense of having reasons (either motivations or causes) for why it occurred.

19. The idea of a story-archetype would seem to capture at least some of what W. H. Walsh called a ‘colligation,’ or sometimes, a ‘colligation under appropriate conceptions’ (Walsh, 1967). While colligations for Walsh are typically labels of concepts, it is not too hard to re-characterise them as narratives; consider an example such as ‘the rise of the gentry’.

20. This conception of inquiry is clearly influenced by Gadamer (1960/1989) who, while not discussing narrative specifically, contributed the insight that all interpretation proceeds on the basis of preconceptions (‘prejudices’) of various kinds.

21. It hardly needs to be said that, on this account, the accusation of ‘bias’ is misplaced. But this does not protect the historian from critique, because the critics certainly have recourse to the charge that she did not account for contrary evidence in a satisfactory or responsible way.

22. Crowell’s discussion of these terms, borrowing from the work of Frank Ankersmit, is in the service of his thesis that historiography is unavoidably ‘heterogeneous,’ incorporating both normative (i.e. evaluative) and cognitive (i.e. factual) discourses. The point is well taken—but in fact, all language is similarly heterogeneous. To use Hilary Putnam’s term, facts and values interpenetrate.

23. This aspect of language sometimes gives rise to outrage, as when representatives of a discipline are remonstrated for their acceptance of certain assumptions about cultures, embedded deep within their language. But since it is inevitable, the outrage can only be justified in a particular case, by showing that the narrative is false or by the proposal of a counter-narrative.

24. Note that there are two (related but distinct) ways in which the narrative may be false. It may be the case that the larger history of the institution is false, because it ignores the particular and
significant role that female saints played. Or, it may be that the smaller narrative, the implicit narrative about those women, is false.

25. The depiction of the negotiation among narratives that I offer in this paragraph builds on the analysis offered by Maurice Mandelbaum: ‘No historian,’ he argues, ‘is confronted at the outset of his inquiries with an unprocessed historical record. [Instead,] every historian will, from the outset, be confronted not by raw data but by earlier accounts of the past . . .’ (Mandelbaum, 1980, pp. 43–44). Mandelbaum was a staunch opponent of the narrative turn, and offers his analysis in terms of data and accounts rather than narrative; nevertheless, I believe he would approve of the use to which I have put his argument.

26. I do not intend to make a psychological argument here. Nor is it necessary to claim that all persuasive accounts are entirely free of contradiction. Nor is there a necessary correlation between coherence and accuracy; what seems most coherent to us now, in light of the present evidence, may certainly be wrong. Still, disciplined inquiry demands integration over disintegration. Otherwise, we would have no need to reconcile discordant accounts at all!

27. The argument of this paragraph, to which the paper as a whole has been leading, is thus an instance of the more general trend by some epistemologists to turn away from a ‘concentration upon products, end-states of cognition [and to turn,] instead, to an examination of process, of efforts to achieve these end-states’ (Code, 1987, p. 8). This ‘change in the direction of analysis’ (Axtell, 2000, p. xiii) is the central contribution of the movement known as ‘virtue epistemology’ (see Axtell, 2000, and Zagzebski and Fairweather, 2001).

REFERENCES


Bonnifeld, P. (1979) The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press).


