

Narrative Works in History

Alun Munslow

Volume 6, numéro 1, 2016

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nw6_1art05

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1925-0622 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Munslow, A. (2016). Narrative Works in History. *Narrative Works*, 6(1), 108–125.

Résumé de l'article

The past is the time before now and history is the narrative historians create about it. The key question, then, is how does narrative work in turning the past into a history? It is unavoidable that only through their history narratives can the historians elucidate a meaning and explanation for the past. While empiricism (stating what actually happened) and analysis (the inference of probable meaning) are two foundations for “doing history,” the third is the creation of a narrative to deliver the historians’ judgments. What this means is that “the history narrative” is the only mechanism available for creating explanation and meaning. So, how does the history narrative create history?



SPECIAL INVITED ISSUE: NARRATIVE ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Narrative Works in History

Alun Munslow
Emeritus, Staffordshire University

The past is the time before now and history is the narrative historians create about it. The key question, then, is how does narrative work in turning the past into a history? It is unavoidable that only through their history narratives can the historians elucidate a meaning and explanation for the past. While empiricism (stating what actually happened) and analysis (the inference of probable meaning) are two foundations for “doing history,” the third is the creation of a narrative to deliver the historians’ judgments. What this means is that “the history narrative” is the only mechanism available for creating explanation and meaning. So, how does the history narrative create history?

At university in the late 1960s, I took an undergraduate degree in history and politics and developed a particular interest in 19th- and early 20th-century American history. I was so engaged by that period of history that in my PhD I addressed the nature of immigrant political assimilation in the USA as it occurred between 1870 and 1920. I was then—in the middle 1970s—a confirmed social science historian. I was never happier than when I was producing “correlation coefficients” and/or “coefficients of elasticity” and delighted in producing “regression equations,” all of which demonstrated how disparate events could be demonstrated to have causal associations in the form of “this happened, then that, because....” I then dutifully wrote up my “findings” as “the most likely history of...” and “here is the evidence crunched as appropriate.” By the time I started teaching nineteenth century American history at university, I was an uncompromising social science historian who believed that the past was history and history was the past.

Then a colleague in literature asked me if I had read Hayden White? Hayden who? Er, well, no, I had not. She loaned me a copy of what turned out to be a rather daunting book called *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (White, 1973). As I was (a) a social science historian and (b) an American historian, and did not wish to waste my time with European history even if the notion of “the historical imagination” sounded moderately interesting, I left the book alone. Anyway, she kept asking me what I thought about the book, so rather than sneaking around to try to avoid her, I read the Preface and the Introduction. I was thus introduced to the theory that informed White’s central argument, which was, of course, a detailed examination of “the historical imagination” and which also introduced me to how narrative works.

The short version of my epiphany is that I came to understand that White treated “the historical work” as a form of a narrative prose discourse. History is thus not a discovery—much less a revelation in the archive—of the story of the past, but is the historian’s narrative about the past. In spite of my social science training for “doing history,” which I dutifully thought of as being empirical, analytical, and representationalist, I was immediately taken with White’s analysis of the deep structure of the historical imagination. Before reading White, I had simply accepted (as I was taught) that “the past” and “history” were synonyms and hence, one could engage legitimately in “the pursuit of history.”

But as I further read White, I was persuaded that, if the past was to be engaged with “meaningfully,” I had to understand the epistemological nature of “history as a narrative” that purports to “explain” by “representing” the reality of the past. Or, as White argued, historians (like me?) needed to understand the deep structure of the historical imagination as a process of narrative-making rather than the discovery of the most likely narrative “back there and then.” His now (in)famous argument was that the historical work is a verbal structure that takes the form of a narrative prose discourse. So, White was arguing that “histories” and “philosophies of history” not only combine data and theoretical concepts for “explaining” the meaning and nature of the past, but are actually a narrative (symbolic) representation of “sets of events” that have occurred in the past.

This (to me, revolutionary) idea was explicated through White’s notorious proposition that historians (like everyone else) possess a deep level of consciousness through which (whether they realize it or not) they choose both conceptual and narrative strategies through which they

(re)present their data and what they think it means. For me, the only surprise in this was (then, and it remains the same today) that in spite of the White analysis the vast majority of practitioner historians continued to believe that history is not a narrative substitute for the past. The vast majority of historians do still regard what they do as the discovery and objective reporting of the most likely narrative of the past.

What this means is that the “common sense” or “practical realist” assumptions of the “properly trained” academic historian requires a further belief that the most likely meaning of “the sources” can be engaged with by and through discovering the most likely narrative of the past as demonstrated in those sources. Hence, we end up with the most likely true (hi)story. It is not surprising, then, that notions such as “discovery” and “accurate description” are the most fundamental features of the process of “doing history.” The key to all this—and which opens the past’s history—is the belief that history does not simply *exist* in the past; it *is* the past.

This logic means that it is both reasonable and necessary to reject White’s understanding of history as a narrative (literary) artefact. This rejection has many benefits. Not least, of course, is that it legitimates the easy belief that “the past” and “history” are the same thing. Obviously, the result of accepting this logic is that historians can be confident that they can write about “the history of...” Further, “doing history” can be objective because it is artless, given its empirical, realist, representationalist, and above all its “common sense” nature. Consequently, when “history” is done properly, it reveals “the most likely narrative of what happened in the past and what it means.” And so “the history narrative” (when done properly, as I have described it) can be relied upon to reveal past reality and probably what it most likely means.

After several years of increasing worry, I came to believe that this logic exposes the major epistemological and ontological problem with history. This problem is summarized in the judgment and working belief that the past and history are—and must be—the same thing. This is revealed in the claim of the substantial majority of academic historians that the(ir) descriptions of the “this happened, then that, because...” can be (re)presented in “written texts” such as a book, a scholarly article, and/or a lecture/seminar. All other forms of history are, of course, *déclassé*, even if upon occasion much more entertaining.

These other forms of history—as is well known—are various as a novel, a film, a poem, a TV programme or a re-enactment. But while they are tolerated by academic historians (generally speaking), these forms are

not “the real deal.” The reason is that “viewers,” “readers of novels,” “listeners,” and “participants” cannot go with an eye movement from the historical analysis to the numbered references through which they can figure out how convincing, credible, and persuasive is the historian’s inferences. This professionalized prioritizing of academic history sustains their belief in the scholarly veracity of the(ir) form of narrative engagement with the past. Hence, the better the alignment with the past, the greater is the veracity of the history and—obviously—the most acceptable form is the print-based.

It follows—and it is hardly surprising—that the “proper nature” of “academic history” remains that of a written narrative translation and/or rendition such as the kind of thing you are reading now. And so we end up with the rather odd notion that while it is ontologically not a substitute for the past, it can still be “the past revisited” (as an academic text). Now, sustaining the primacy of print narrative demands making some very eccentric assumptions. These assumptions are all sustained by assuming that “history when done properly” should/could not allow the smuggling into the history the historian’s philosophy of the nature of change over time and/or ideological predilections—much less their narrative-making decisions. This means that no history could or should be contaminated by crude authorial narrative-making decisions. The historian can thus be viewed as a kind of midwife delivering the most likely meaning of the empirical past.

Unfortunately, there is a major ontological problem with this (almost) universal logic. I say “almost,” because there are some critics (like me) who are not convinced. My judgment (and most academic historians would not agree) is that the past does not possess its own history that is awaiting discovery. The reason for this is that a history narrative is not the past. In ontological terms, “the past” is not the same as a “narrative authored about it.” The logic which produces this unavoidable situation is that the ontology of history is as much a demonstration of how narrative works as it might be considered an insight into the reality of the past. Hence, I argue that in the absence of the past, all we have is the historian’s authored narrative. Given this unavoidable situation, we need to know how the history narrative works as a substitute for the absent past.

Now, as with all forms of description, a history is not what it represents. For the vast majority of academic historians, this argument seems like dangerous nonsense because surely the sources have a (hi)story that is “inbuilt in the data” and it is the job of the historian to

uncover/discover it (Jenkins & Munslow, 2004; Munslow, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). However, for this logic to appear “common sense,” it demands a substantial investment in the belief that language clarifies rather than occludes reality, both past and present. Hence, academic historians generally hold to a faith in narrative representationalism.

But there is a problem with this logic and, obviously, if there wasn't, I would not be writing this. If we acknowledge that the nature of a history is that of a narrative “stand-in” for the past (which I argue it is), then our understanding of what the past means must come as much from our authoring of the “history narrative” as it does in respect of “its empirical content” and/or the detection of “cause and effect” via “inference.” Now, believing they have searched, scrutinized, investigated, explored, surveyed, reviewed, and inferred the most likely meaning of the empirical content of the past, most historians are persuaded to believe they have discovered the most probable narrative of the past. And, of course, when a new narrative comes along, it is usually (and misleadingly?) described as a “revision.” The public and professional need for “history revisions” is rather too obvious to comment upon.

But what happens if we accept White's logic that (hi)stories are never “discovered,” never “revealed,” never “laid bare,” and never “realized”? Well, I believe we are forced to entertain the alternative notion that “histories” are, by their nature, authored narrative substitutes for the past and—moreover—they are created through and out of the deployment of narrative decisions as much as the historian's “methodologies,” their “assumptions” as well as “the available sources.” Unfortunate though this analysis may be, for most historians, this problem is then further compounded by “the quality of the historian's inferences as to meanings” and then the “appropriateness of their concepts.” To make matters worse, historians have to struggle with “publishing deadlines,” “revisions,” “well-intentioned” editors and anonymous readers (who occasionally have very large axes to sharpen).

Even if the historians (and their editors and anonymous readers) believe that they have discovered the most likely narrative that has hitherto been secreted in (what is ideally) a previously unknown body of data, the “narrative of the past” (again always assuming there was one in the past and the diligent historian has “found” it) still has to be authored. The next problem then is that there are many ways “to turn the past” into a “history.” The data is always authorially shaped, designed, imagined, calculated, constructed, or even deconstructed, “as a World History” or

“as a Social History of the Labouring Classes” or “as a History of Rock Climbing” or “as a Cultural History of the Boot and Shoe Industry in Westphalia 1890-1910” or “as an Economic History of the Iron and Steel Industry in the United Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century,” or “as a History of the Politics of Motor Cycling, 1900-1940” or as whatever subject or form or carving up of chronology the historian can imagine. And, on top of that, all those narratives are always eventually revised in “the light of fresh evidence” and “smarter inferences” and the often petty demands of “readers.” There is just no end to “the past *as* history,” thanks to the work of narrative-making.

If you are a moderately astute reader, I assume you may have made a judgment as to what I am going to suggest next. If you are such a reader, you will understand that when it comes to engaging with the past, historians invariably imagine many different “ways” to narrate the time before now. What follows on from this is that the meaning and explanation of the past changes with the ways history/histories are authored. The meaning and explanation of the time before now is thus subject not only to the specific body of connected data the historian has “found” and who wishes to investigate, but just as importantly it changes according to how the history “narrative” invests the selected body of sources that apparently turn hitherto unconnected past events into competing and alternative meanings and explanations (Ankersmit, 2005).

As Hayden White, and a good number of other theorists subsequently have argued, because a history is a narrative substitute for engaging with “change over time,” we need to understand how a history narrative is authored into existence. What this means is that while it is entirely reasonable to assume that “the past” once existed, there are innumerable authorial processes and skills that can be deployed in seeking out the most likely “meaning” and “explanation” for “events” and “processes” in the past. One major and persistent authorial decision is to first find and then define a body of “empirical data” as constituting “a history of.” I think in ontological terms this means that “history” remains a narrative substitute for “the past” (White, 1980).

Consequently, or so I would argue, the greatest demand placed on historians is to understand the “content of the form” of their history in respect of how their narrative works in the academic discipline of history (White, 1987). It then behooves their consumers to understand the basic authorial assumptions and narrative-making decisions of historians because it is those decisions that create “the history narrative” and which determine how each history narrative constitutes an understanding of past

reality. Plainly, a history is no more (nor less) than an authored narrative representation, which can be “formed” as a film or stage play, or as an enactment or as an academic text—or whatever. This means that it is essential to understand how the nature of history *as* a narrative works. To do this, I suggest we have to begin with the central concept of the “historian’s narrative story space.”

The “historian’s narrative story space” is a model of *how, when, what, why, where, and to whom* events happened in the past. This works in just the same way as we describe what we take to be the nature of our present (or the future). The history story space is about “the then” but is a creation of “the now” because every history is a present-authored, narrative substitute for the past. This logic applies even though it is (in)formed by the historian’s archival skills and by detailed reference to the extant historiography on “the historian’s topic.” The next problem is that “the historiography” is nothing more (nor less) than a range of authored “story spaces” about the past that are shaped entirely by the historian-author. The logic of creating a history is twofold. It is (a) the rethinking of the meaning of data, and (b) turning it into a narrative. This rather obvious analysis corrects (or it should) the assumption that the historian is a midwife delivering “the (hi)story” of the past “as it actually was.” Getting the data straight is understandably important, because the basic currency of history is “what actually happened,” but it is a long way down the list of things that historians do when they are creating histories.

The historian’s narrative story space has two basic elements. These are “story” and “discourse.” At its simplest, “story” refers to the narrated events while “discourse” refers to how the story is “told.” Plainly, the elements of the history story and discourse work in accordance with classic literary theory—mimesis, synthesis, and theme. This applies whether the historian realizes it or not. Historians, like fiction writers, “create” (even if they would prefer to say “discover”) the history story/discourse defined through an attested but selected sequence of actual events. While a history narrative is obviously about corroborated “real events,” its narrative form unavoidably obeys the rules of all narrative forms. Allow me to be clear on this: “narrative logic” works exactly the same in both historical, factual narratives and non-historical, fictional narratives.

Unsurprisingly (perhaps?), the concept of the historian’s “history story space” is not referred to as such by historians. I assume this is largely because they are not aware of how narrative works. Artlessly (ingenuously and innocently), the vast majority of historians simply

assume/presume they are offering a retelling or reconstruction or—at best—a construction (according to the available data plus smart inference) of the most likely (hi)story “back there and then.” Nevertheless, an inconvenient situation exists and persists. This is that “history” is not “the past” and “the past” is not “history.” This reveals the unavoidable certainty at the heart of every history that “doing history” is an act of narrative constructivism even if “the history” is assumed to be “in accordance with the evidence” and thus appears to constitute “the discovery of the most likely narrative that surely must be back there.” Thus, even if they are unaware of the existence of the concept of “history story space,” historians must refer to who did “what” and “when” and then “why” by inferring possible “meanings” through the proposing of explicatory “arguments” and “theories” and “testing” them “in the data.”

Obviously, this is not necessarily the case when it comes to experimental history (Munslow & Rosenstone, 2004). This form of history demands a different narrative approach that confronts the “telling it like it was” form. While this situation does not apply to fiction, the logic of the history story space unavoidably applies to historians as they purport to explain what they take to be the most likely narrative of past reality. This situation may not be acknowledged, but it is demonstrated by their offering the meaning and explanation of the past through what they believe they have provided: the most likely (hi)story according to the available sources.

Unfortunately (if not unsurprisingly), those historians who are unaware of the nature of their narrative intervention in (re)presenting the past continue to endorse the idea that they are reconstructing *the* narrative of the past. All reconstructionist and constructionist historians are, by definition, condemned to entertain the rather odd belief that the(ir) history is a demonstration of the logic of the discovery of “the story that must surely exist in the past.” There simply has to be a narrative “back there and then” to be unearthed and described for what “it really” or at worst “most likely” meant. Hence, the substantial majority of academic historians are happy to invoke and endorse the correspondence theory of truth. But “in reality,” every history, regardless of its form, is “authored.” This situation exists even if historians choose to believe they have discovered the (hi)story of the past in their interpretation of “what once happened.”

The substantial majority of academic historians continue to claim that they have reconstructed the past “as it actually was,” and consequently, they can in all probability know “what it most likely

means.” This logic constitutes the foundational irony in the “common sense” and “practical realist” empirical, analytical, and representationalist mode of history. The irony in this is that that substantial majority of historians who sustain this argument believe the past can only be engaged with “through the revealing of its history.” Unhappily, to sustain this logic, they have to ignore their authorial act in creating the(ir) narrative story space.

The authored history narrative story space, then, is a discourse that is inhabited with people, actions, events, and locations as “inserted” and “interpreted” by the historian as being “significant” to the presumed narrative that must have existed in the past; i.e., they have “discovered in the data.” By trawling the archive, they are happy that they can “demonstrate the historical significance” of a series of past events by referencing the “meaningful” consequences of “agent intentions” and “actions” in terms of “where” and “when.” Eventually, the historian will then “infer” and/or “make” judgments as to “meanings” with the aspiration of ultimately offering “the most likely” explanation(s) for what actually happened.

But as an authored narrative, a history is not only a “story space”; it is also a “discourse.” The concept of the history discourse is unassumingly defined by how its content is given *a* voice by the author-historian. Without perhaps a wilful ignorance, what should become apparent to author-historians and their readers, is that no history can hide how its “narrative works.” This is most plainly revealed by addressing the foundational concept of *emplotment*. It is fairly well known that there are only four basic kinds of emplotment: tragedy, farce, romance, or comedy, and emplotment is the most basic feature of any narrative story space. In emplotting “the-past-as-history,” the author-historian has to do two things. The first is to provide levels of *information* in order to emplot (i.e., offer meaning) by selecting which historical agents get to speak (the voices of the past). The second is to endeavour to explain *motivations*. “Evidentially,” these selected voices are those “embedded narrators” that the historian allows a speaking part: i.e., through “references” and direct “quotations.”

The historians’ authorial decisions “evidentially” include “what happened” and “what was said.” Such authorial decisions are constantly accompanied by “inferences as to likely meanings.” It is not unreasonable to assume that “historical meaning” is inferential. However, inference of meaning, while it is basic to every history, is nothing more than the authorial decision of historians as is operationalized through their

authorial narrative decisions. This remains the situation even if it is claimed (either subsumed and/or assumed) that, in accord with the available evidence, they are telling the most likely narrative of past reality.

This classic ontological error unavoidably leads directly to the further odd claim that they are telling the truth about “history.” Hence, the central problem is neatly avoided, which is that “the past” can only be engaged with as it is narrated and hence, every history is a practical demonstration of how “realist” narrative works as much as it may reveal explanations about “what happened in the past and what it probably meant.”

What I think follows on from this is (or it ought to be) obvious. It is that the historian’s authorial decisions are unavoidably (in)formed by the nature of the(ir) history story space narrative. Like all other coherent narratives, a history also requires the deployment of the authorial concepts of *mimesis* (“imitation”) and *diegesis* (“telling”). Unfortunately, the act of “telling” by historians is predicated on the flawed assumption that they are “telling the truth” in, and, or about their preferred narrative “history.” The discomforting and fundamental ontological error in this logic should be clear. It is that the act of “telling” is presumed to be an act of *mimesis*. Unfortunately, the act of telling is not a demonstration of *mimesis* (“imitation”) but *diegesis* (“telling”). The uncomfortable situation that follows is that no attested data can provide its own meaning. Hence, all histories are interpretative narrative substitutes for “the one-time real thing.” Accordingly, it is the nature of the history narrative to always fail to deliver on the desire for *mimesis* through “telling.”

I am not sure how much of a problem it is that historians cannot escape this situation. Although every history refers to past reality in terms of its “truth telling,” it is always authored as a story space. If there is a problem with this, it is the historians’ and the consumers’ joint failure to acknowledge that the past is never accessible except *as* or *through* its form as an authored narrative. So, the next question (or so it seems to me) is: how do historians and their consumers navigate their joint situation that all they have is history? The basic recognition they should share is that the further fundamentals for “delivering history” are the historians’ authorial decisions in terms of their deployment of the concepts of “voice and focalization.” These concepts are basic to the historian-authors’ fulfilment of their role as narrator-focalizers who deliver the (probable?) meaning of past action.

Voice concerns the audibility in the text of author-historians. As is well known, historians tend to use the third person. The history is thus delivered as a report of findings. But in reality, historians plainly have a voice defined as, in, and through their “point of view.” Historians are not objective. This notion never was convincing, despite the claims of many historians to the contrary. Authorial self-consciousness may stretch to not understanding the nature of authorship, but the act of “doing history” is often demonstrated, in that historical meaning must be transmitted through historians’ interpretation of agent intentionality. However, the historical interpretation to which “agent intentionality” is basic cannot be “delivered for what it was.” Even if the evidence offered suggests that the agent decision made in the past “most likely reveals their intentionality” and thus offers “most likely meaning” of what happened, historians cannot retell (in a mimetic sense) “the most likely narrative back there.”

Even if historians honestly believe that they have discovered “the most likely narrative back there” (given their living in “the archive”) the valorization of “the meaning” which they have “inferred” requires three further narrative decisions. These three “how the history narrative works” decisions are the narrative “tense/time” elements of *order*, *duration*, and *frequency*, which are authorially deployed when referencing past actions. According to professional convention, “history” is understood by the substantial majority of academic historians to be a “privileged form of narrative” because of its claim to “facticity,” which, in turn, sustains the(ir) belief in the presumed existence of “the story back there” that has hitherto been awaiting discovery. But for historians, the cheerless irony in this “history discovery” process is that it is impossible to deny that every history is an authorial fictive narrative construal. Arguably this is the most basic function of historians. Reduced to its basics, the historians’ fictive narrative construal is what allows “the past” to be “historied.”

Unavoidably, this “narrative logic to doing history” generates some very important (and often ironic) consequences. Not least among these is that it permits and perpetuates the ontological error of believing that “the meaning of the past” can only emerge through “doing history properly”: i.e., through empiricism, inference, and its representation defined re-presentation. What this means is that the act of historicizing cannot be construed as most historians like to think it should be, to the effect that the(ir) history is “interpreted” into (a fresh) existence. The convolution in this is that the new and better “most likely narrative” is “more convincing” because of the previous “inadequate data” and/or “poor inferences” of earlier historians’ efforts. Even if this were true, the

ontic nature of all histories remains that of fictively construed narrative substitutes for the past that can only be compared with each other as much as they may be compared with the past.

This unavoidable ontic and epistemic situation brings us back yet again to the situation that a convincing “historical meaning” is dependent as much as upon its narrative construction as its empirical nature and the quality of the historians’ inference(s) of meaning. Plainly, the past can only be engaged with as an authored history even though it is deeply evidentially attested. Of course, given the widespread desire to unite (i.e., conflate) “the past” with “its history,” the unavoidable inimitableness inherent in the nature of “the history narrative” remains. This is (thinly?) disguised by the deeply flawed and profoundly ironic assumption that a history is not a narrative substitute for the past but “it is the real thing.” Nonetheless, this luckless logic of authorial resurrectionism seems to make sense because of the historians’ bedrock (and non-negotiable) claim that “the history” is the rendition of attested agent intentionality as evidenced through direct quotation. Unfortunately for this argument, quoting “from the sources” cannot save “the history narrative” from its nature as an authored “history narrative.”

It is profoundly ironic then, that the very first move historians makes in their reification of the past is the decision to treat what is deployed in place of the past as a heuristic explanatory concept—the(ir) narrative—which, obviously, is not “the reality of the past.” This is the epistemological mistake the vast majority of historians are both required and happy to make. This epistemic and ontic error is compounded by the belief that not only must there be a narrative “back there,” but it is possible to discern what it is and thus venerate it as the “true” narrative, which is usually the “most likely” one of several alternatives. The interminable irony in this is that despite “all the available evidence,” the history narrative cannot be tested and measured by past reality. “Descriptions” of “historical events” are ontologically not at all the same as “narratives that can be assumed once existed.” Thus, reference to attested past reality is of little purpose in a history if “correspondence truth” is demanded—and what is worse, expected.

Thus, the ontic status of a history defined as “the most likely narrative of the past” emerges and can only be sustained through the historians’ epistemic and narrative-making choices. You will recall that the “past,” as I have argued, is not “history.” Given this awkward situation, many further problems arise. Not least among these is the persistent assumption of most historians that the(ir) history narrative can

be objective and truthful. This belief demands that they have to make—wittingly or otherwise—the further assumption that the(ir) “authoring of the most likely narrative” is not obscured, nor does it “get in the way” of the “realization” of the (hi)story—or, as it is more often described, of “getting the story straight.” Consequently, in the urgency to “sustain objectivity” the assumption of “telling it like it was” avoids the uncomfortable ontic situation that history is a literary aesthetic constituted (authored) as some kind of a narrative emplotment. That individual events in the past can only be “interpreted” from the emplotment “pick and mix” menu of romance, tragedy, irony, comedy, or whatever combination rather gives the game away. But then we ought not to be surprised. A history narrative is always emplotted by the author.

Given the authored nature of “the history,” I suggest it is entirely reasonable to define historians first and foremost as narrator-focalizers, i.e., authors whose function is to explain change over time *through* the(ir) narrative-making process. But what is rarely obvious in this obligatory “history authorial process” is that historians must—like any other narrator—deploy certain necessary narrative concepts that both form and inform their narratives. These are those of *order*, *duration*, and *frequency*, which constitute the elementary concepts deployed (wittingly or unwittingly) for narrating change over time. Quite plainly, no claims to mimesis (“what I am writing is what actually happened”) can alter the ontic nature and structure of the authored historical narrative. This means that the history constitutes meaning and explanation just like any other “fictive narrative” (i.e., an authored literary construction). Hence, “meaning” and “explanation” in histories is as much “fictive” as “found.”

The narrative concept of *order* is the author-historians’ narrative device for describing change over time (whether they know it or not). Now, *order* applies to all narratives, and in histories this is demonstrated by the deployment of narrative figures such as *analepsis* (retrospection) and *prolepsis* (anticipation). Although history is factualist, being defined as a “this is what happened and which then was followed by that” kind of discourse, “historical meaning” is never simply the result of past events. What this means is that “the (most likely) meaning of the past” can only be offered both under and through the assumption that the past possesses its most likely “historical” meaning. Every history, then, is a description and analysis of change over time. But—as I have suggested—this does not get us very far if we fail to acknowledge that our understanding of change over time is the product of how the history narrative works, rather than being merely the result of the past.

The way the history narrative works in describing change over time is also sustained and structured through the narrative concept of *duration*. Duration is the authorial turning of “actual time” into a “timed narrative.” This is recognizable in all narrative forms, not just histories, and it is demonstrated through narrative effects such as *ellipsis*, *pauses*, *summaries*, *scene setting*,” and—most significantly for histories—in the narrative concept of *stretch*. I take *stretch* to be the historians’ most significant authorial device/element in their authorial management of change over time, because a past event that may have taken a second or one minute can take up several chapters in a textual history, or one hour in a documentary, or fifty minutes in a lecture, or five minutes in a chat over a cup of coffee.

Beyond the broad concepts of *duration* and especially *stretch*, the history narrative also works through the authorial process of *frequency* (i.e., repetition). Consumers of written history especially are all too aware that historians have a strong tendency to reference the same single event a number of times. Indeed, history consumers are very likely to accept that duration and stretch (even if these literary terms are not understood, acknowledged, or even overtly known to the history consumer) are perhaps the most significant aspect of “the history” understood as “a narrative.” The broad authorial concept of *frequency* is basic to understanding the *significance* of “the past.” According to the literary theorist Gérard Genette (1980), there are four forms of frequency: *singulative*, *repetitive*, *iterative*, and *irregular*. Although most historians (well, probably all historians?) are unaware of Genette’s arguments, their authorship conforms to and confirms his literary analysis.

Put briefly, the form of the historian’s narrative determines the meaning and explanation of the content of the past. Thus, history cast in forms such as graphic novels, comics, and history magazine articles, lectures, academic papers, and textbooks are all demonstrations of how narrative shapes, forms, and figures the nature of both our engagement with the past and its meaning and explanation. Hence, the description of agent intentionality is always “characterized” through the form, rather than only the contents, of the past. What this means is that the failure of academic historians to understand the nature of their narrative-making (which is so widespread) is deeply ironic, given that historians know they deal with “change over time,” which is plainly demonstrated as they “authorially time the text.”

Further, given the nature of history, historians have to deploy a wide range of other textual devices (again whether they realize it or not) such as the *singulative* and *repetition* forms of frequency through which they describe and endeavour to explain what *they* take to be the meaning of what *they* decide—although defined as some sort of discovery—were the significant events. Ironically, this process of “authorial discovery” is so obvious “in the sources” as to be not recognized for what it actually is: a self-conscious authorial decision of selection and disposition. In straightforward ontological terms, the past does not generate what is important and what is not. Only historians do that. Accordingly, the *iterative* is deployed as a single statement of an event that happened in the past a number of times, and/or the *irregular* is the “telling” of an event in the past that happened several times but is only narrated once. Thus, “historical meaning” inheres in the narrative *as authored*, rather than the narrative which is presumed to have once existed. Ironically, given that we cannot live in the past, this means that all histories are narratives for the perpetual present and anticipated future.

Consequently, what about agent intentionality—discovering motivations—in the past? Accordingly, when pressed to define the point of “doing history,” academic historians tend to say that their “discipline” provides the explanation of (and for) change over time. Logically, this requires engaging with the authorial concept of agent intentionality, e.g., what it was that drove the historical agent to do what they did. But here again, the notion of agent intentionality remains a function of how the history narrative is “authored to work.” Hence, I would suggest that it is not much of an insight to acknowledge that we need to understand what the consequences are of how we author “agent intentionality.”

The actuality of past action is offered through reference and quotation as attested in the sources. Hence, the event “exists and has meaning” and also acquires “an explanation” when historians narrate “agent intentionality.” While historians can believe they have a grasp of “agent intentionality,” there remain many histories of the same events. This, of course, raises the ontological situation (or is it a problem?) of what kind of history—and thus, what kind of past—the individual historian wants. If events are described as a tragedy then they cannot have the ontic status of a romance.

From what I have said so far, my (obvious?) next question is to ask what “legitimate” or “appropriate” forms can be created which will satisfy our “desire for knowing the history of...” How many different forms or modes are there to “legitimately author the past”? Plainly, the

vast majority of histories are written texts (even if they subsequently transmute into other forms). As I have suggested, and almost regardless of form, histories are materialized (literally) from the preferred ontic, epistemic, and methodological choices made by the historian. Hence exists the situation that “the past” never “exists” except as a history; the form selected by the historian (or anyone else) always determines the meaning and explanation not of “the past” but of “a narrated past.” That narration we call “history”—to repeat—can come in any form.

As I have argued, this is a complex process that both reflects and mediates the historian’s “professionalized” epistemological and methodological choices. However, because historians generally fail to recognize the central issue in what they do (as Hayden White argued), “the content of the form” remains the key question. The answer determines if there is only one legitimate or primary form for a history. Today—regardless of the form they eventually take—the vast majority of histories remain empirical, analytical, and (despite other modes) written (print-based). This situation results from the embedded thinking and practice of contemporary professionalized “academic history common sense.” There is no way to escape the self-sustaining demand that the academic text (book, journal article, lecture) is the “real deal.”

Nonetheless, this “judgment” of what historians think they do and how to “most appropriately” do it does not have to be rendered as a written academic text. Today, however, the representation of the past is still predicated on the convenient self-fulfilling prophecy that ‘the academic written history narrative’ with “references” is the only “proper” mode for the recovery of the time before now. The academic policing of the past is ensured by “obvious” professional demands to write in coherent paragraphs, illustrate generalizations by specific references, test the coherence of arguments, start each sentence with the subject, use the rhetorical question sparingly, deploy the “telling” metaphor appropriately, avoid the passive voice, keep sentences short, do not over indulge in adjectives and adverbs, and write history in the past tense (except when referring to the extant historiography). By so doing, the past will be readily accessible (Marius, 1989).

Unfortunately—for me—this mantra fails to convince. History is not primarily about content *over* form. History is about content *and* form. In addressing the past, histories formed *as* film, *as* TV, *as* radio, *as* graphic novels, *as* museology, *as* heritage sites, *as* lectures, *as* journal articles, and *as* books are legitimate forms even if academic historying is “the gold standard” for academic historians when engaging with the past.

This “professionally demanded” assumption bears little scrutiny. It is typically obscured by the “common sense” belief that the epistemic and ontic universality of narrative generally works pretty well in (re)presenting the nature and likely meaning of the past. But as I have argued, it is necessary to understand the nature of how narrative works (in *all* its forms) in order to understand that the past is the time before now and history is a multi-form narrative representation. I shall now conclude my narrative by offering five very brief comments on the nature of how I would argue narrative creates history.

My first is that, by its nature, the history narrative is the locus for the construction of historical knowledge and for its truth claims about the past. My second is that its nature as an authored narrative means that any correspondence between history and past empirical reality cannot exist in terms of “given meaning.” My third is that historians should be willing to examine and work with the understanding that history is a fictive narrative. My fourth is that what this suggests is that what the past means is in some degree always relative to the nature of its authorship. And finally—given the way that narrative works—the historian should encourage and be willing to engage in “experimental historying” as a mode of engaging with both “the past” and “history.”

My brief analysis has offered and defended substantial doubts about the possibility of “discovering the most likely narrative of the past.” I suggest that the nature of conventionalized empirical, analytical, and representationalist historical understanding ultimately fails. This may sound apocalyptic, but it is not. It is simply the acknowledgement of the essential nature of history as *a* narrative even if its practitioners presently and almost universally understand it as *the* most likely realist referenced narrative as built out of or upon the presently available data. Like it or not, history is a narrative representation of the past because historians cannot know “the past-thing-*in-itself*.” In addition, as a narrative discourse, “the-past-*as*-history” can be articulated and communicated in as many different modes or forms of expression as the historian (and everyone else) can imagine—even experimental historying (Munslow & Rosenstone, 2004).

Acknowledging how narrative works in creating *a* history thus licenses and requires the rejection of what I take to be the rather odd assumption that we can separate the knowing subject from the observed object. The historian can, of course, go into denial with regard to this situation, and most do of course. But it seems to me difficult to deny that history is not “the real thing” in that the past is not history and history is

not the past. Accepting this (rather obvious?) ontic situation demands understanding that the acquisition and representation of knowledge about the past is always an act of “history authorship.” To put my conclusion as plainly as language permits: the logic of history derives from the way narrative works.

References

- Ankersmit, F. R. (2005). *Sublime historical experience*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Jenkins, K., & Munslow, A. (Eds.). (2004). *The nature of history reader*. London, England: Routledge.
- Marius, R. (1989). *A short guide to writing about history*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Munslow, A. (2006). *Deconstructing history* (2nd ed.). London, England: Routledge.
- Munslow, A. (2007). *Narrative and history*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Munslow, A. (2011). The historian-author. *Spiel*, 30(1), 1–16.
- Munslow, A. (Ed.). (2012). *Authoring the past*. London, England: Routledge.
- Munslow, A. (2013). *A history of history*. London, England: Routledge.
- Munslow, A. (2014). Fiction, imagination and the fictive: The aesthetics of historying. In A. L. MacFie (Ed.), *Fiction and history* (pp. 31–39). London, England: Routledge.
- Munslow, A. (2015). Managing the past. In P. G. McLaren, A. J. Mills & T. G. Weatherbee (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to management and organizational history* (pp. 129–142). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Munslow, A., & Rosenstone, R. A. (2004). *Experiments in rethinking history*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- White, H. (1973) *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. (1980). The value of narrativity in the representation of reality. *Critical Inquiry* 7(1), 5–27.
- White, H. (1987). *The content of the form: Narrative discourse and historical representation*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Alun Munslow, PhD, is Professor Emeritus of History and Historical Theory at Staffordshire University, Visiting Professor at the University of Chichester, and Research Professor at St. Mary’s University, London. He is the author of a number of texts on the philosophy of history, such as *Deconstructing History* (1997), *The New History* (2003), *Narrative and History* (2007), *The Future of History* (2010), *A History of History* (2012), and *Authoring the Past* (2012). He is UK editor and Founding Co-Editor of the journal *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*.