

The Aesthetics of History

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[**Abstract:** The discovery and description of 'what happened in the past and why' is simply and surely the definition of history as determined by the available evidence. Understandably this is an awkward undertaking given the often constrained nature of the sources available to the historian, and then there is also the quality of the historian's inferences which can be pitiable or worse, and then there is the problem of aesthesis aka turning 'the past' into that 'past narrative' we eventually call history. Now, the problem with 'doing history' is that the past and history are not the same thing and they cannot be conflated. The past is the past while history is the narrative we write about it. Plainly this is an impossible undertaking because they do not exist in the same ontic and epistemic space. Therefore, discovering and describing the history of the past is fraught with insuperable problems. The critical problem then is turning past reality into that aesthetic we know as history. This unfortunate problem cannot be resolved because history is not the past, and the past is not history.]

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The discovery and description of 'what happened in the past and why' is simply and surely the definition of history as determined by the available evidence. Understandably this is an awkward undertaking given the often constrained nature of the sources available to the historian, and then there is also the quality of the historian's inferences which can be pitiable or worse, and then there is the problem of aesthesis aka turning 'the past' into that 'past narrative' we eventually call history. Now, the problem with 'doing history' is that the past and history are not the same thing and they cannot be conflated. The past is the past while history is the narrative we write about it. Plainly this is an impossible undertaking because they do not exist

in the same ontic and epistemic space. Therefore, discovering and describing the history of the past is fraught with insuperable problems. The critical problem then is turning past reality into that aesthetic we know as history. This unfortunate problem cannot be resolved because history is not the past, and the past is not history. So, what can historians do?

Well, the historian is forced to describe the events in ‘the past’ which ‘materialize’ through the sources they have sifted, selected and scrutinized and from which they infer (conjecture, estimate, appraise, evaluate...) the most likely meaning of what happened in past. This process is delivered by the empirical sifting of data/sources and inferential reasoning that enables that construal we call ‘the historical explanation’. But this well-meaning intellectual endeavour has a rather awkward problem. The past (presumed to be ‘found’ in the sources) has to be (trans)formed into some kind of representation of the past and which the historian believes to be an act of disinterested discovery. Perhaps unfortunately, but history is an aesthetic authorial creation. It is not the past revived or resurrected.

The problem with ‘the history narrative’ is that it is the historian’s ‘aestheticisation of the past’ even though it may be referred to as being ‘discovered according to the sources. While historians may be well-intentioned in their belief that they have discovered the ‘historical meaning of the past in accord with the available sources’ and that they can ‘faithfully (re-)tell the most likely (hi)story of the past’. However, the past is the past and history is history. They exist in entirely unconnected ontic and epistemic universes. The reason is because ‘history’ can only exist as an aestheticization (a description) of the past. The past is the past and history is history.

This failure of the historian to acknowledge that the past has very little to do with how they describe it, means that ‘the presumed narrative back there and then’ (assuming there is one ‘back there and then’), results from ontic and epistemic wishful thinking. Getting the data straight is not history. To be fair to historians, their rendezvous with the past can be engaged only through their aestheticisation of the past. That is what history is and does. While getting the data straight (such as might be available given the supply of sources) the central problem in ‘doing history’ remains. The problem with history is that there is very little traction in either ontic or epistemic terms on the reality and meaning of the past. Of course, acknowledging this situation has nothing to do with any pernicious denying of the empirical reality of the

past. The empirical past is what it was. The central problem with history is that history is the act of the aestheticisation of the past.

Plainly, the past is what the past was in respect of its empirical and evidential remains. However, the problem with the representation of the past then is (its) history. So, what can historians do? Well, all they can do is acknowledge that they author and thus aestheticize their narratives. Unfortunately, knowing ‘truthful things about that past’ and ‘getting the data straight’ cannot be conflated with the (hi)story that they postulate and which surely must exist in the past. Unhappily, however, the historian cannot ‘narrate into existence’ the past as it actually was by ‘telling’ or ‘expressing.’ What this means is that historians (and everyone else) cannot break out of ‘language’ in order to ‘discover explanation and meaning’.

History then is not the past, and the past is not history. The foundational problem with ‘Doing history’ is not that it is an investigative process that in some way instantiates the evidentially construed most likely reality of the past, it is problem of mimesis. But by its nature *as* the aestheticization of past reality, the past has no ontic or epistemic connection with ‘history’ until it is ‘authored’ or in some other form ‘made into existence’ by the historian. To be clear: ‘the past is the past’ and history is that aesthetic (creative, imaginative, resourceful, authorial, ingenious and revisionary) process we call ‘doing history’.

So dear reader, what more can we usefully say about the nature of history that has not already been said in the past half-century of the postmodern assault on history? With that assault (infamously?) led by Hayden White and a number of other ‘postist theorists’, it is useful to yet again engage with the mimetic ‘aesthetics of history(ing)’. I suggest this means rethinking the notion of ‘aesthesis’. Accordingly, what would go into any coherent analysis of ‘the aesthetics of history(ing)’?

Not unreasonably, most academic historians have the desire to ‘tell the past as it was’ through ‘the presently available evidence’ by deploying ever better and increasingly more shrewd inference. Unfortunately, the problem all historians have and which they cannot escape, is the(ir) professional desire to tell it like it was. This aspiration remains (no matter that postmodernists who still lurk in the undergrowth) to make the connection between the past and history through empirical discovery and smart inference. Thus accessing ‘the historical meaning’ aka ‘the historical interpretation’ can only be expressed as a ‘reconstruction’ of the past. However, the

problem that all historians have and can never solve and who very rarely face is that ‘the past’ remains the past while ‘historizing’ is an act of aesthesis.

For me I see no problem in acknowledging the aesthesis of ‘historizing.’ The past, after all, is not history and history is not the past. To be blunt, then, no history formed *as* an inscription, or *as* a film and/or *as* a play version of the past, remains what it is. It is an act of aesthetic representation. Plainly, for academic historians knowing what ‘actually happened’ in the past is possibly going to be useful. But the desire for ‘discovering the past for what it was’ is of minimal utility because no one can re-run the past ‘for what it was’ and the past rarely is a re-run in our perpetual present. Happily, no ‘history’ is an act of ‘recovery’, ‘rescue’, ‘repossession’, ‘retrieval’, ‘reclamation’, and so forth. However, any and all retrievals of the past that depend on a constant process of revision by the historian, has to be aware that ‘the literal description of reality past or present (or future?)’ is hazardous and almost certainly pointless. Knowing that something in the past actually happened is what counts. Its nature *as* history – a literal description - is always a three pipe problem.

What I have just said does no injury to the culturally and critically important belief (and which is especially comforting to the historian) in ‘getting the data straight’. Knowing what happened in the empirical past is essential. Denying past reality is stupid and vicious. But, of course, the meaning(s) of evidentially attested events (what actually happened) can only be ‘defined’ and thus ‘made real’ through the fictive character of any and all narratives. The meaning of the past *becomes* what it was only when it is imagined by the author historian as a romance, tragedy, comedy and/or satire or (more probably?) a mix of emplotments.

The process of ‘aestheticizing past reality’ is – by and large - lost on the very substantial majority of academic historians and almost certainly most every other human being. The greatest foundational error when engaging with the past is to assume the past can be ‘told like it was’. While ‘getting the data straight’ is an absolute duty of care, ‘past reality’ cannot avoid being ‘aestheticized into existence’. Thus: historizing (‘doing history’) is inescapably a fictive act. By that I mean history is as much imagined as expressed.

Unhappily, the vast majority of academic historians cope with the problems of figurative language and fictive expression, by conflating the past with history (and vice versa). Through this sleight of hand and mind the substantial majority of

academic historians can safely ignore the (unrecognized but unavoidable) process of aesthesis. So, given that sleight of both hand and mind that orders and organizes what historian's do by 'telling it like it was', can only be sustained by the truly bizarre belief in getting the facts straight. Remember: getting the facts straight is presumed to be the description of an event. This (silly) notion results in the bizarre belief in 'the facts speaking for themselves'. This is a deeply dubious and debatable notion that leads the unwary (both the historian and consumer) down the path of 'correspondence truth' and 'getting the (hi)story straight'. This only sounds like serious common sense. What you find is what you get? Unfortunately, this makes no sense.

Unhappily, I have come across many academic historians who have never felt the need to go beyond the simplest definition of truth, which is correspondence. In time and if convincing enough this form of truth leads to consensus. Unfortunately for the historian what connects their statements of reality and that reality as evidentially attested invariably fails. A description is not reality after all. In philosophy (generally speaking), truth is taken as a property of statements, propositions and/or beliefs. When the historian insists that something 'is true' it is expressed as a linguistic representation in sentences and statements *as* sustained by a selection of (more or less sound) sources. Plainly, this process assumes and requires (a claim to) a match between a proposition and reality. Now, the basic theories of truth that most affect the work of the historian are threefold: correspondence, coherence and consensus theories. Unhappily, these definitions of truth are not particularly useful. While we may wish to retain the belief that history possesses a truth-value founded on the single statement of justified belief, the 'true meaning of the past as history' remains untenable.

What this means is that 'history thinking' is a kind of counterfactual activity. Historians are required (and most of them are happy to oblige) to imagine what might have been the cause of something in the past by thinking backwards to a probable and/or possible arrangement of events. But, 'the authenticity of the history text' is not a retro-fitted reconstruction of the past. It is not even a construction. All histories are deconstructions. The past is what it was and not what it is described. No history, then, is a replication, duplication or facsimile of the past. Indeed, if '*the past*' and '*the history*' overlap (correspond?), then that is in all probability just luck 'for all we can tell'. So, all we can do 'in reality' is compare aesthetic representations of the past in order to 'make' sense of the past.

When engaging (with the reality of) the past, historians can do no more than authorially construe, construct and offer an aesthetic act ‘about the past’. Most historians would describe this as ‘a historical discovery’. However, it is never more than ‘getting the data straight’ from which act they infer and construe meanings and explanations. Now, as most historians know all too well, history is much more complex than simply ‘getting the data straight’ and then ‘figuring’ what it might have meant through their ‘tropes and expressions’, ‘figurative aesthetic choices’ and ‘semantics’. However, there is another level of problems in the form of ‘epistemology’, ‘ethics’, ‘metaphysics’ and so forth all of which constitute the nature of ‘doing history’.

Now, social science historians (because they are social science historians) will always bravely sustain ‘techne’ over ‘aesthesis’ in their pursuit of history through the(ir) belief that ‘truthful representation’ is the only path to the recovery of the reality of the-past-*as*-history. Regrettably a history is a narrative representation – no more and nor less. This means our representation of the past is an act both of mimesis (imitation) and an act of diegesis (telling). So: while history is that brave effort to ‘tell the past for what it was’ past reality cannot escape its ontic and epistemic nature as a history. Hence: history is an aestheticisation of the time before now. History is never more than a simulation, imitation and recreation.

Unfortunately, the logic I just outlined still has little purchase in the minds of (far too many) historians especially those of a social science inclination. Such historians find it all too easy (and conveniently stress free) to ‘conflate the past with (its) history’. This dubious short cut is enabled by and then sustained by deploying a substantial range of techniques ranging from statistical analysis and social science modeling to ‘telling it like it was’. Plainly (as much as anything is ‘plain’) historians cannot be ‘objective observers and discoverers of the past’ as they uncover the narrative (thanks to the available sources) that surely must exist in the past?’ However and desperately disappointing for such historians it may be, the past is not history and history is not the past. This means ‘getting the(hi)story straight’ is just another impossibility historians have to live with and generally ignore.

Pointing out this situation of ‘historical impossibility’ is no, of course, to deny the mundane (but very important) attested empirical dimension to ‘doing history’. Historians (in my experience) usually claim that they must and can get the (hi)story straight even though their preferred explanations may not always be in accord with

the sources they have consulted (which is also part of the mix of their ideology, political inclinations, gender, book contract deadlines, the grant running out, marriage break down and death). Nevertheless, the show must go on, inasmuch as the meanings and explanations of ‘the-past-as-history’ can and must be supported in different fortuitously and efficacious ways in and through (the historian’s use of) language. Just think of all those descriptors that historians (have to) deploy such as ‘revolution’, ‘innovation’, ‘discovery’, ‘advance’, ‘rebellion’, ‘breakthrough’, ‘upheaval’, ‘turmoil’, and not least the description of ‘The Age of... (fill in this blank)’ and so on and so forth.

Anyway – but happily - for historians, there are no aesthetic rules and regulations, the deployments of which can ‘sufficiently’ and/or ‘satisfactorily’ describe past events. One historian’s ‘Age of Delight’ is another’s the ‘Decade of Misrule’. Unfortunately, (more often than not) historians catastrophically fail in their ‘historical descriptions’ in their efforts to revivify or resurrect the past ‘as it actually was’. Now, in the unlikely event that their description of the past was absolutely accurate (which of course they cannot know), they just have to cross their fingers that another accurate description of the past is not published before them. Being ‘realists’ (by and large) most historians exist in an intellectual universe of inculpable variety. Their mimetic interpretations are built on the sources they have examined before the grant ran out and/or that competing book got into print before theirs and which overturns their analysis.

Now, as far as I know, there is (and never has been) any historian who could be regarded as the equivalent of Immanuel Kant. By that I mean no historian has developed a system for getting ‘the (hi-)story straight’. The reason for this should by now be obvious? History is an aesthetic. It is not a science. In ‘confronting’ or ‘accepting’ or ‘tweaking’ the ‘dominant’ present interpretation of ‘the past’, no historian can escape the(ir) (history understood as an) aesthetic. Happily, this argument can, of course, be reduced to a very simple thought (precept): the past only exists under a description. The past is what it once was, but history is what historian’s author into existence.

What I have been suggesting, then, is that aesthetic I call ‘the-past-as-history’ demands an aesthetic sensitivity whether the historian knows it or not. So, and obviously, even the driest as dust ‘telling it like it was’ historian cannot avoid the(ir) experience (involvement in) of ‘aestheticism’. At this juncture I could name a raft of

academic historians whom I have read and whose influence has (in)formed my thinking and rethinking of the aesthetic act of history. Having probably read too many historians, I have come to the conclusion that writing history is far more interesting than engaging with the past. I think this led me to co-founding the Journal *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* (with Robert A. Rosenstone) in 1997. In the first issue I wrote a lengthy editorial in which I explained why the journal was established. I said (short version here) it came into existence to confront what I took to be the bizarre notion that history is and can be an autonomous, objective, representationally accurate and disinterested undertaking. The ‘common sense’ belief that the past is history and history is the past is unconvincing, unpersuasive and, by and large, implausible.

Before I came to this conclusion I had worked my passage by researching and writing an extremely hard-core social science history Ph.D. (peace after pain in 1979). However, when I became a university lecturer a colleague in Literature suggested I read Hayden White’s classic text *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (1973, Johns Hopkins University Press). It was a shock to me, not only because it was 448 pages in length, but it comprehensively skewered most of the (inane?) beliefs of my history colleagues. What particularly stuck in my mind was how White effectively destroyed ‘the(ir) great myth’ that the past is history and history is the past. Okay, perhaps they were not quite so untutored as White suggested, but I soon, after I recommended White to my colleagues their eyes glazed and they quickly scuttled back to the archive claiming the past was history and history was the past.

Anyway, I came to believe that there was very little in common between ‘the past’ and ‘history’. Whitean logic, then as now, insisted that history is an authorial (aesthetic) undertaking. What was particularly significant to me in Hayden White’s analysis was his acknowledgement that I should not (con)fuse the past with history. I had, of course, heard of ‘the historical imagination’ before reading White, but (t)his definition of history as a poetic aka aesthetic *and* scientific *and* philosophical narrative, came as something of a shock.

Whether academic historians understand what they are doing or not, ‘translating the past into its history’ still remains as an act of fictive poesies. The past does not have ‘its narrative awaiting discovery.’ The logic then is that the past is not history and history is not the past. Descriptions such as ‘the process of historical

analysis' are similes, metaphors, symbols, expressions, and plainly, 'writing a history' is not an act of 'historical discovery' and (therefore) history only exists through the historian's act(s) of literary aesthesis. The 'common sense' belief that history is the past and the past is history is absurd. That claim is illogical because the past and history occupy different ontic and epistemic spaces. To be as clear as my language permits: the past is not history and history is not the past.

History then, is not a reconstruction of the past. At best it is a construction of the past or, to be more accurate it is a process of the deconstruction of the past *as* history. To be clear so far: the making (creation and/or intervention) of 'a history' is a compound process that entails a range of emotional and intellectual elements in addition to the process of the 'discovery' of the empirical reality of the past and its representation *as* an aescription. Prior to White the theorists Benedetto Croce and Robin G. Collingwood argued (somewhat bizarrely in my judgment) that historians can and have to 'feel' their engagement with the past. As I have suggested, the crude notion of mimesis is the closest we can get to (the nature of) the past. That 'mimetic (simulated and/or fabricated) process' we call history is plainly 'formed', 'shaped' and 'wrought', but any connection to the reality of the past and history in terms of what it means is entirely fortuitous.

Perhaps the only consolation for historians is their ability to conflate the past and history and vice versa. The problem with this is that the past is not history and history is not the past. Hence: while 'the past' constantly changes (fortuitously for the employment of historians thanks to new sources and smarter inferences) 'the historical truth' remains far more complex than 'getting the data straight'. As far as I am aware there are at least four forms of truth historians can deploy (whether they know it or not). These forms (of truth) are consensus, coherence, construction and correspondence. Unfortunately, no aesthetic (mimetic) representation of truth is, plainly, not the real thing. This problem is particularly difficult to resolve when all the historian has is their 'historical representation(s)'.

Somewhat ironically, then, the historian has a serious problem with 'past reality'. That problem is describing it. Yes, stuff occurred in the past. It can be attested. But the much bigger problem is not the past, it is its (re)presentation. This ontic situation is compounded (hence it being a bigger problem) by the problem of 'aesthetically turning' the past into history. Plainly, history is not the past and the past is not history. A history is a construction as speech, film, writing, acting and so forth

and it is also always deconstructed as it is revised/re-visioned/re-presented. To be plain then: the obvious problem with a representation is that it is a representation.

The tiresome problem than, is that ‘a history’ can be aesthetically ‘useful’ in the way it stimulates a pleasure as it generates meaning/explanation. However, for (most?) historians ‘the history aesthetic’ is either not fully understood or simply unknown. Still today, far too many historians create a history largely ‘cleansed’ of its aesthetics. But the status of a history as an aesthetic is impossible to cleanse. So, what aesthetic rules are there for academic historians and also for the history consumer, which enables access to the past without the burden of history? Now, if push comes to shove I could fairly quickly list what pleases me most in terms of the aesthetics of history: a history should not to long and it should have just enough sources to make a sensible argument, the history should stimulate enjoyment when one comes across a particularly rancorous historiographical debate, the history should have a hefty bibliography, and eventually the conclusion to the narrative ought to be informing and novel.

I do not know if it is true, but as far as I can tell, a (or the) history aesthetic exists although most historians cannot recognize it. Plainly: in the absence of the past all we have are the mimetic histories we create i.e., author into existence. The past can only be accessed in a form of some kind: a school class, or a TV programme, or in a newspaper, or a chat in the local pub. Further, and perhaps unfortunately (or fortunately), the historian cannot exist in the past only in the(ir) present and they be aware of the nature of the aesthetic which they fashion and design of and for their access to the past. And this, I suggest, means that the shaping power of the past is never more nor less than its aestheticised character and form *as* provided by the (witting or non-witting) historian.

But surely, regardless of the form of the history what really counts is the content in terms of ‘getting the data straight’. But it is, of course, not that simple. The history aesthetic exists regardless of the desire to ‘tell it as it was’. Hayden White (infamously) argued history was an aesthetic. It could be deciphered in any and all of its forms. History exists in and through its forms - statues, books, Ph.D. manuscripts, radio and TV programmes, films, photography, museums, heritage sites, re-enactments, graphic novels, school lessons, discussions in the pub and so forth. Each mimetic form creates a history for the past through its form. But, regardless of the

form, ‘turning the past into a perpetual and present history’ remains what it is – the past in the present.

Is there any element in ‘historizing’ that is elemental to all history forms? Yes. It is getting the data straight? Well, no. Yes, that event occurred. Yes, the evidence demonstrates it. But meaning and explanation does not exist in the past. It only exists in a history. The past can be demonstrated as an empirical reality but everything else (like knowing what the past meant) is a fictive construal even if claimed to be mimetic. This means that notions such as ‘historical objectivity’, ‘historical truth’ and/or ‘past reality’ have to be treated with suspicion. Getting the data straight still has to be turned into a narrative form. ‘History’ is always subject to much more than ‘getting the story straight’. How many stories are there in (hi)stories?

All this suggests that there could be a standard set of aesthetic ‘rules’ for historians (and everyone else) when engaging with the past and, obviously, the present and future as well. But there will never be one for the obvious reason that there is no set of aesthetic measurements which historians can deploy in order to judge the utility and value of ‘history’. Moreover, I have no idea if the past can be ‘understood’ and ‘defined’ as an aesthetic beyond ‘the written history’. The old problem of content will always win over the problem of ‘the history aesthetic’.

For me, history is a matter of deploying understanding (concepts), observation (investigation), insight (perception) and representation (exemplification). If that is correct it leads me to my judgment that the ‘historical imagination’ is a ‘mimetic’ mental re-imagining of what the past was (probably) and which can be tested through the available evidence (such as is available). Reduced somewhat, then, I am led to believe that (at some point) the historian cannot avoid the extremely embarrassing situation that their judgments as to the reality, meaning and explanation of the past can only be reduced to the strictures and structures of the historian’s inferential inference and processing of the past.

What this means, then, is that no historian can be defined as either ‘explorer’ or ‘discoverer’ whose function is to find out the true nature of the history of the past. Getting the data straight is actually a fairly simple minded undertaking. What is awkward for historians is that they author ‘the past as history’. Engaging with the empirical past became the stimulus for my engagement with the aesthetics of ‘the-past-as-history’ thanks to historians such as Benedetto Croce, Robin G. Collingwood and Hayden White. So, I came to acknowledge that historians are unable to escape

those processes through which they create the past as history. Hence, the historian's 'historical aesthetic' is *their* historical imagination.

Of course, 'the-past-*as*-history' is a precept that has little appeal to the vast majority of historians because it immediately requires an understanding of history as an aesthetic. Hence: for the substantial majority of historians 'the past is history' and 'history is the past'. This very bizarre notion is sustained by the outlandish belief in the notion of 'telling it like it was'. Unfortunately, a description is not the reality it describes. This odd belief is sustained by 'the historian's powers of inference'. Hence: for historians (and lawyers also) getting the (hi)story straight is all that counts and thus 'content is form' and 'form is content'. Somewhat awkwardly, of course, all academic historians (and lawyers for all I know) have ideological preferences and political desires and various other 'bees in their bonnets' such as race, class, gender, nationalism, politics and so forth. Nevertheless, the notion of objectivity through mimesis is sustained (bizarrely) by fervently ignoring its existence.

I suspect, then, that very few academic historians will acknowledge that they deploy an 'emotional aesthetic' in their dealing with the past. Nevertheless, and despite the central notion of objectivity, impartiality is impossible. It is impossible because history is a representation - it is neither an art nor a science. History is a mimetic aesthetic discourse and like all such discourses, it cannot dispense with its heavy levels of ideological, ethical, conceptual and philosophical baggage. Obviously the notion of revealing what happened in the past is fundamental to 'doing history' and denying the reality of the past is a pointless and purposeless undertaking. Ironically, then, the most awkward issue in engaging with the past is that cultural and intellectual process we call history.

Thus: to engage with the past – and revise it as they see fit – historians have to constitute (aka compose, represent and characterize) the past *as* history. This undertaking is fortunate especially for those historians who are desperate to 'revise the history of the past'. Indeed, that is what historians do – they sustain the analyses and interpretations they like best among the numerous ones available. But that act of analyses and interpretations has a price. It demands (pre)revisioning. Now, this process is (probably?) feckless and (probably) pointless in the sense that historians are only rethinking and refashioning an already extant aesthetic (and) mimetic representation of the past. 'The history', aka the aestheticization of the past,

has no certainty in terms of what it was. Referencing ‘what happened’ and what it might have meant, is never enough if we want to understand the aesthetic nature of history. As I have suggested getting the data straight is not a particularly hazardous enterprise for the diligent historian. But what is really awkward and important about history (in my view) is how it creates a space for its own de(con)struction. History can only usefully exist when it is constantly being re-aestheticised, i.e., reconstructed, constructed or deconstructed.

All too often historians fail to address and/or acknowledge how their approaches to the past will never be more than an aesthetic undertaking in respect of methodologies, tactics, approaches, intentions, proposals, designs, strategies, and so forth. Ironically, ‘historical transformations’ are not actually about the past. They are about how their aesthetic ‘absorbs’, ‘measures’, ‘is listened to’, ‘seen’, ‘read’, ‘thought’, ‘emotionally engaged with’, ‘performed’, ‘written’, ‘painted’, ‘wall graffiti’, ‘tub thumping ideology in the local newspaper’ and so forth. The form of ‘the history’ is always more than its content and, fairly obviously, the content of the form, as Hayden White argued, constitutes our understanding of the history aesthetic through which we can engage with the now non-existent past.

What does all this come down to? Well, I think it means that all histories are no more or less than ‘ready mades’. They are mass-produced commodities made by historians who are works of art as a discovery of pastness. The French artist Marcel Duchamp famously chose to describe the works of art he made from manufactured objects and, I suspect, that isn’t a bad way to describe history. As artwork all histories are intentional arrangements that are constructed and/or deconstructed and/or reconstructed for the mimetic purpose of engaging with that, which no longer exists. Histories are not copies of the past. Histories do not pre-exist in the past awaiting discovery. Histories only exist in our perpetual present so we can engage with the future past. It is not much of an insight, then, to acknowledge that our access to past reality is entirely through symbols (aestheticized objects and substances of some kind or another) through which we ‘make history’ rather ‘than discover the past’.

History, then, as an act of mimesis, is at best an act of denotation and is only one of many forms we can ‘aesthetically reference’ the past. Plainly then, the problem historians have is not getting the story straight; it is turning it into a new version of the past. No history is more than a brief repossession of the past. This means the past cannot be saved for what it was except *as a* changing and evolving representationalist

history. The historian's aesthetic expression of the past, then, is nothing but figurative exemplification of what once probably happened – and which can and certainly will be revisited (and re-visioned). And, of course, this (ingenuous?) process is the essence of any and all representations. Historians cannot escape the(ir) past.

Because all histories are representations, no single one can claim to be a direct correspondence with that which is purports to refer. So, all 'common sense' histories acquire their meaning by their representational alignment with the presumed (evidentially supported) reality of the past. However, it is only when they are experimental histories – rather than 'telling it like it was' - do they become more than the past. At that point, then, we have the problem of aesthetic eminence and artistic excellence over 'telling like it was history(ing)'. Given this unavoidable ontic and epistemic situation only the nature of the 'history aesthetic' ('brilliant', 'magnificent', 'outstanding') can have any intellectual traction on the past? Oh, I forgot, there is also the intervention of advertisers, publishers, other historians and so forth. Anyway, all I can say with any personal surety is that the four horsemen of cognition – the 'aesthetic', 'meaning', 'epistemology' and 'ontology' - allow us to construe what we think is worthy, poor, average or simply bad history. I think this means that the representation of the past is all we have.

What I have suggested then, there is such a thing as an aesthetics of 'doing history'. Nonetheless, as dear reader you may have realized, I have not indicated or revealed what the aesthetics of doing history are. The reason I have is because I do not know what they are. I have a sense that history is an authored undertaking (I am no aesthete) and so all I can do is suggest that historians need to understand how they turn the past into that aesthetic we call history. I shall now conclude with a very brief reference to what I call 'aesthetic empiricism'.

In my experience academic historians (writing for other academic historians and a few students thrown in for good measure) gauge (each other historian's) 'histories' in respect of originality of *interpretation*, delivered through an engaging *style* and, most importantly, *a really long list of sources*. But, still today for the substantial majority of historians, the past is history and history is the past and aesthetics just get in the way of getting the (hi)story straight. Hence, and however, the very substantial majority of academic historians continue to fail to understand the most elemental feature of 'historying'. Far too many academic historians still fail to

get to grips with the nature and possibilities both ontological and epistemological in ‘doing history’.

Still today then, rethinking the discipline of history in terms of its ontology and epistemology remains a very narrow niche activity. I suspect it will remain so until the majority of academic historians wake up from their epistemic and ontic slumbers. To be blunt: the nature of our approach to the past requires historians to understand that history is as much an aesthetic as it might be regarded as anything else. ‘Getting the data straight’ and ‘inferring new judgments’ as to the nature of the past remains a central feature what historians do. But that is quite simply not enough.

It is a literary and intellectual convention to end with a conclusion. What remains for me (as your all knowing author), after academic historians have got down and dirty in the archive, most historians still fail to engage with the concept of the aesthetics of history(ing). Plainly, aesthetic discernment in engaging ‘the-past-as-history’ demands a substantial sensitivity to the process of the process of history aesthesis. A history is a dialogue between the historian and the past *in* a chosen form. When the form of the ‘content of the history’ is a written text, the historian is required to deploy tropic devices in the same way might a filmmaker or author or TV director or politician. But in addition the historian has to be sensitive to ‘academic taste’ as well as their own control over their deployment of language. And most importantly the notion of objectivity must be preserved. Well, no, that makes no sense because the aesthetics and form of historying remains largely unrecognized. Anyway, I will stick now with the convention of ‘the conclusion’. The nature of the past only exists through the aesthetic and mimetic representation we call history. Yes, it really is that straightforward. Anyway, academic historians would do well to remember Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous duck-rabbit. Polished up somewhat: is the past a duck or a rabbit? It all depends...

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