

Forum: *Writing History*

Editorial Introduction: The Burden of Writing

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History became an autonomous discipline of study in the nineteenth century, at least partly, by challenging the perception that it was merely a literary genre. Professionalizing historians argued that their practice of history was underpinned by an inductive scientific method, one that promoted the study of the past for its own sake. The new task of the historian would be to tell what actually happened. This was a critique of Romantic history of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that not only drew moral lessons from the past, but also narrated a history that was based primarily on the self-education of the historical author. Lord Acton, an important figure in the professionalization of history in England, believed that the Romantic historians, such as Macaulay and Thiers, “project[ed] their own broad shadows upon their pages”; their work, in other words, was overly burdened by the presence of the author himself. For Acton, the historian was at his best when he disappeared into his own narrative as if it was history itself that spoke:

[T]here is virtue in saying that a historian is seen at his best when he does not appear. Better for us is the example of the Bishop of Oxford [William Stubbs], who never lets us know what he thinks of anything but the matter before him; and of his illustrious French rival, Fustel de Coulanges, who said to an excited audience: “Do not imagine you are listening to me; it is history itself that speaks.”¹

Objectivity was key for this to be possible, but it was a particular type of objectivity created out of the demands of the practical scientist looking to not only apply knowledge to industry but also to communicate that knowledge to others in the field. Lorraine Daston refers to this as “aperspectival objectivity,” the ideal in nineteenth-century science that individual or group idiosyncrasies had to be eliminated in order to create scientific knowledge. It was believed that individual viewpoints would have to be transcended in order to create a coherent scientific community. “The existence of such a community, stretching over time and space,” argues Daston, “in turn seemed a precondition for – or even an eventual guarantee of – reaching scientific truth.”² Professionalizing historians were quick to pursue this scientific method for a discipline that could not adhere to the strict law-making demands of a natural science.

It was this precise attempt to make the referent (i.e. history) speak, rather than the historian, that gave history its most powerful argument in favor of scientific status. “[W]here the utterer means to ‘absent himself’ from his discourse,” while substituting an “‘objective’ persona”, argues Roland Barthes, a “realistic effect” is produced. This is because the referent is external to the historical discourse, creating a “referential illusion” that disguises the historian as History itself. Not only are the individual and emotional personas of the historian suppressed in this situation, the historian no longer speaks: the only voice heard is that of the past. History becomes what actually happened rather than the story of what actually happened, a subtle distinction that has immense consequences.³ It was precisely the erasure of the presence of the historian that provided the basis for a professional community, and, further, a professional discipline of history. This translated into a conservative writing style, one where the historian was masked behind an omniscient narrative. Add to that the inherent authority of such a narrative style and we can begin to understand why historians have been reluctant to experiment with literary techniques in their writing.

David Leeson’s article, “Cutting Through History,” which provides the focus of our forum on the practice of writing in historical analysis, takes up Hayden White’s challenge to historians to benefit from the work of modernist literature and write “surrealistic, expressionistic, or existentialist” history. White condemned historians for their conservative writing style: “It is almost as if the historians believed that the sole possible form of historical narration was that used in the English novel as it had developed by the late nineteenth century. And the result of this”, White believed, “has been the progressive antiquation of the ‘art’ of historiography itself.”⁴ This is problematic, Robert Stein tells us in “Fictional Plots and Historical Representation,” because “plots and the protocols of representation that produce them are neither cognitively indifferent nor value neutral.... When historians continue to use the protocols of nineteenth-century fiction..., they bring with them the same presuppositions and assumptions about historical agency, about social action, and about human psychology that make the great nineteenth-century novels possible as plausible representations of reality.” Nancy Partner in “Reading, Writing, Getting It Right,” puts White’s work in a similar political context: “History, White charges, is thus complicit with anti-liberatory forces of every kind because its very ‘way of looking at the world’ validates the continuity of the past, and it does this with redoubled effect in thoughtlessly adopting deeply traditional and conventional literary forms as its mode of expression.” Partner has to admit that “[w]hat White wants is something very difficult, probably impossible to ask of an institutionalized practice...: that historians use their historical awareness to dismantle the deep complacencies of their discipline and try to reconstitute it at ‘a higher kind of intellectual inquiry,’ closer both to art and to sci-

ence, and yet without giving up entirely on its special cultural work of producing knowledge of the past to a high standard of evidentiary rigor.” Being aware of the way in which the past is represented through the act of writing is an important step in challenging the conservative epistemology that has underpinned professional historical writing since the nineteenth century.

Experimenting with different writing styles, then, can be a revolutionary activity for the historian looking to undermine the outmoded forms of representation and the corresponding conservative values of the historical discipline. Despite the general reluctance of professional historians to experiment in this regard there have been some recent steps in the right direction. For instance, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, since its inception in 1997, has openly called for work that pushes the boundaries of historical writing beyond the confines of the nineteenth century and the editors have since published a volume that includes the best of these experimental narrative histories.⁵ As well, a recent issue of *History and Theory* was devoted to exploring the theme of “unconventional history” in “order to reveal new conceptual resources and novel forms of representation that might be useful in deepening the possibilities of history as a discipline, and for shedding light on what understanding the past involves.”⁶ Leeson’s article is a part of this renewed interest in the way we, as historians, represent the past through the act of writing.

Leeson experiments with a form of surrealistic writing (the cut-up technique invented by Brion Gysin and used by William S. Burroughs) and attempts to apply it to a battle he initially wrote about for his MA thesis in hopes to “capture the manifest confusion and meaninglessness of trench fighting in the First World War, and achieve something sublime by doing so.” While Leeson is forced to conclude that his experiment fails in achieving this goal, and that, more boldly, modernist literary techniques are not well-suited to describe modern events, there is no question his article itself is a success in a different, and perhaps, unintended way. Leeson’s article is not really about a battle but it is not entirely about the application of a surrealistic literary technique either. Centrally, I think, Leeson’s article is about trying to write a history paper. It is not only the experiment or Leeson’s argument or even the battle itself that makes the article interesting, though all of those elements certainly help. Instead, it is the fact that Leeson structures the article in such a way that the reader follows him from the conception of the article through the experiment and to the conclusion as if taking a seat in a chair beside him and watching him “cut-up” his coherent thesis while also trying to make sense of the confused mess that results. We become virtual witnesses, not to the battle that Leeson wanted to adequately represent, but to the writing of history and to the work of the historian. Leeson’s self-reflexive writing style not only makes the article interesting and engaging; the historian’s intentions and activity in

the creation of historical knowledge are also made apparent to the reader. Indeed, Leeson's self-reflexive, self-conscious historian is the antithesis of the absent one created in the nineteenth century in order to make history real. Leeson gives the historian his/her voice back.

Notes

¹ Lord Acton, "Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History," *Lectures on Modern History*, ed. John Figgis and Reginald Laurence (London and Glasgow: Collins Press, 1960), 27.

² Lorraine Daston, "Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective," *Social Studies of Science* 22, 4 (November 1992), 607.

³ Roland Barthes, "The Discourse of History," trans. Stephen Bann, in *Comparative criticism: A yearbook*, vol. 3, ed. E. S. Shaffer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 11, 17.

⁴ Hayden White, "The Burden of History," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 43-4. Originally published in *History and Theory* 5, 2 (1966).

⁵ Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone, eds., *Experiments in Rethinking History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

⁶ Brian Fay, "Unconventional History," *History and Theory* 41, 4 (December 2002), 1.