

Cutting Through History: Hayden White, William S. Burroughs, and Surrealistic Battle Narratives

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Do not let yourself be shut up in a revolutionary school
which has become conventional.

– Francis Picabia (1922)

I

In his 1966 manifesto “The Burden of History,” Hayden White reproached historians for their literary backwardness, challenging them to stop writing as if they were nineteenth-century novelists. “When historians,” he said, “try to relate their ‘findings’ about the ‘facts’ in what they call an ‘artistic’ manner, they uniformly eschew the techniques of literary representation which Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen have contributed to modern culture. There have been no significant attempts at surrealistic, expressionistic, or existentialist historiography in this century (except by novelists and poets themselves) for all the vaunted ‘artistry’ of the historians of modern times.”¹

Why would anyone try to write surrealistic, expressionistic, or existentialist history? For two reasons: one epistemological, the other political. Since (according to White) the modern epoch is radically dissimilar to all previous epochs, it requires a radically dissimilar historiography: the materials for such a historiography can be found in *modern science* and *modern art* alone. “The historian serves no one well by constructing a specious continuity between the present world and that which preceded it,” said White. “On the contrary, we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before: for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot.”² Nineteenth-century storytelling techniques were fine for the nineteenth century – but not for the twentieth. “History today has an opportunity” – indeed, a duty – “to avail itself of the new perspectives on the world which a dynamic science and an equally dynamic art offer.”³ These perspectives “have transcended the older, stable conceptions of the world which required that they render a literal copy of a presumably static reality.”⁴ Why can history not transcend these conceptions as well?

The political radicalism implicit in this position was made explicit elsewhere. “History is perhaps the conservative discipline par excellence,” White said.⁵ Contrasting “art’s response to the living present” with “history’s worship

of the dead past,”⁶ White argued that historians had lost their way during the late nineteenth century. Early nineteenth-century thinkers like Hegel, Balzac, and Tocqueville had understood that “the task of the historian was less to remind men of their obligation to the past than to force upon them an awareness of how the past could be used to effect an ethically responsible transition to the future.”

All three saw history as educating men to the fact that their own present world had once existed in the minds of men as an unknown and frightening future, but how, as a consequence of specific human decisions, this future had been transformed into a present, that familiar world in which the historian himself lived and worked. All three saw history as informed by a tragic sense of the absurdity of individual human aspiration and, at the same time, a sense of the necessity of such aspiration if the human residuum were to be saved from the potentially destructive awareness of the movement of time. Thus, for all three, history was less an end in itself than a preparation for a more perfect understanding and acceptance of the individual’s responsibility in the fashioning of the common humanity of the future.⁷

Historians must stop writing history for history’s sake, and start writing history for humanity’s sake. Only then can the yoke of the past be lifted from the shoulders of the present.

This was heady stuff, and very much a product of its time. But surprisingly, White’s call for a new, modernist historiography fell on deaf ears – or perhaps on blind eyes. Historians did not start writing like Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen. Instead, they started writing like social scientists – until recently, when they started writing like literary theorists. This is all the more surprising when we remember that nowadays advanced opinion holds that history is just fiction with rules: for all its theoretical fireworks, postmodernism in practice has been something of a damp squib. Meet the new history, same as the old history.

One of the best examples of the rejection of literary modernism can be found in my own field, history’s tobacco industry: that is to say, military history. Ten years after White’s article fell stillborn from the press, John Keegan published his masterwork, *The Face of Battle*, a comparative history of three battles across five centuries: Agincourt (1415), Waterloo (1815), and the Somme (1916).⁸ According to Keegan, traditional military history had obscured the nature of battle, and his criticism of the “rhetoric of battle history” echoed White’s in many ways. Using the metaphor of painting, Keegan described one battle narrative as “a jolly genre scene” in which the violence was “no more hurtful than the knocks exchanged in a Dutch ‘Low Life’ paint-

ing of a beerhouse brawl.” Another narrative he described as “Second Empire Salon School, a large canvas, highly coloured and animated by a great deal of apparent movement, but conveying no real sense of action.” A third was “Neo-Classical, severe in mood, sombre in tone,” a work whose subjects were “frozen in the attitudes of tragedy to which fate, deaf to appeals of compassion, has consigned them.”⁹

These characterizations may remind us of the Comic, Romantic, and Tragic modes of which Hayden White wrote in his own chef d’oeuvre, *Metahistory*, published in 1973: but White’s work is not mentioned in Keegan’s bibliography. Furthermore, Keegan’s approach to the writing of battle narratives owed nothing to modernist literature. Instead, Keegan dissected his three battles into ‘categories of combat’ – for example, infantry versus artillery, infantry versus machine-gunners, and infantry versus infantry on the Somme – then studied each category separately, using evidence from eyewitness accounts to write realistic descriptions of the common soldier’s experiences. Keegan’s narratives are like a series of anatomical drawings: analytic rather than synthetic, structural rather than functional – in every way typical of constructionist social history. In spite (or perhaps because) of its methodological conservatism, *The Face of Battle* became a classic, and a paradigm for the ‘war and society’ school of military history, which predominates (at least among academics) to this day.

Now, I count myself as a ‘war and society’ historian. But I am not always hostile to new ideas, and when I first read “The Burden of History” four years ago, Hayden White’s article got me wondering: was it possible to write surrealist history? Was it possible to write surrealist *military* history? Could I write a battle narrative that would have reminded John Keegan of paintings by Francis Picabia or Salvador Dali? And if I could, what would it reveal that conventional battle narratives cannot? And most importantly, would it help ease the burden of the war-torn past on the present?

I settled on surrealism for a couple of reasons. For one thing, I know little about expressionism or existentialism. For another, though the movement is long past its interwar peak, surrealism has not yet vanished into history’s landfill. The post-war United States produced a major surrealist writer, William S. Burroughs, author of *Naked Lunch* and the Cut-Up Trilogy – about which more later. Surrealism continues to flourish quietly in the undergrowth of painting, where we can find both the fairytale dreamscapes of Daniel Merriam and the biomechanical nightmares of H. R. Giger. Filmmakers like David Lynch have produced surrealist films and television programs, like *Lost Highway* and *Twin Peaks*. We can even listen to surrealist music, like Spanish-American composer Leonardo Balada’s recent *Folk Dreams*. In a more popular vein, vocalist Nivek Ogre wrote surrealist lyrics for the Canadian group

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Skinny Puppy, while his band mates used electronic sampling to create a form of sound collage; indeed, one of their songs, "The Choke," features a long quotation from OGRE's favourite book, the early surrealist novel *Maldoror*, by Lautréamont.¹⁰

In addition, surrealism seemed especially suitable for military history. War and fighting are driven by the same unconscious fears and desires that fascinate surrealists, and both observers and participants have described battles in dreamlike (or nightmarish) terms. "I can well imagine one of these frightful scenes," wrote Joseph de Maistre, in the *St. Petersburg Dialogues* of 1821.

On a vast field covered with all the apparatus of carnage and seeming to shudder beneath the feet of men and horses, amid the fire and the whirling smoke, dazed and befuddled by the din of firearms and cannons, by voices that command, howl, or die away, surrounded by dead, dying and mutilated corpses, possessed in turn by fear hope, anger, by five or six different passions, what happens to a man? What does he see? What does he know after a few hours? What can he know about himself and others? Among this host of fighting men who have battled the whole day, there is often not a single one, not even the general, who knows who the victor is.¹¹

Leo Tolstoy's battle scenes in *War and Peace* were influenced by Maistre's ideas, as well as Tolstoy's own military service in the Caucasus and the Crimea. His chapters on the Battle of Austerlitz include the following bizarre scene:

Prince Andrew and the battalion were already within twenty paces of the cannon. He heard the whistle of the bullets above him unceasingly and to right and left of him soldiers continually groaned and dropped. But he did not look at them: he looked only at what was going on in front of him – at the battery. He now saw clearly the figure of a red-haired gunner with his shako knocked awry, pulling one end of a mop while a French soldier tugged at the other. He could distinctly see the distraught yet angry expression on the faces of these two men, who evidently did not realize what they were doing.¹²

Furthermore, surrealism (like its predecessor, Dadaism) arose in the wake of my favourite subject, the Great War, whose battles were (if anything) even more surreal than their nineteenth-century counterparts. On the first day of the Battle of Loos (25 September 1915), for example, the British generals were even more helpless and ineffective than Tolstoy's Napoleon at Borodino. One staff officer, Paul Maze, recalled how the British assault had looked from the rear:

The actual front line was completely blurred. The middle distance between the front-line and our slag-heap was now in constant convulsion, rising in columns of black earth and smoke. The gas which we had released was drifting heavily down across the left of our front, obviously in the wrong direction. We peered and peered through our glasses, trying to catch sight of anything where the smoke had drifted away. Through a gap the horizon showed up like a sinister purple streak. Suddenly someone shouted ‘What’s that near Fosse 8?’ We all focused our glasses on the slag-heap and for a second figures appeared, as one might see bathers surge up in the troughs of rough seas.

Our telephones buzzed feverishly; messages were coming in on the wires, all more or less confused. Someone caught a visual message and spelt the words out to another who took it down, repeating every word with that slow cadence that gives special significance to tidings, and leaves an indelible impression on the mind: ‘*We – have – no – officers – left –*’ Then something happened. The shutter flashing the message had closed. Contact was lost.¹³

Robert Graves, then a junior officer with the 2nd Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers, was taking part in the same attack, off to Maze’s left. In Graves’ war memoir, *Goodbye to All That*, the Battle of Loos became a nightmare farce. As Graves and his men advanced up a communication trench toward the front line, they came under German howitzer fire, and were shelled with both high explosives and tear gas.

This caused a continual scramble backwards and forwards, to cries of: ‘Come on!’ ‘Get back you bastards!’ ‘Gas turning on us!’ ‘Keep your heads, you men!’ ‘Back like hell, boys!’ ‘Whose orders?’ ‘What’s happening?’ ‘Gas!’ ‘Back!’ ‘Come on!’ ‘Gas!’ Wounded men and stretcher-bearers kept trying to squeeze past. We were alternately putting on and taking off our gas-helmets, which made things worse. In many places the trench had caved in, obliging us to scramble over the top.¹⁴

Many writers would agree with Hayden White that modernist art alone was capable of representing such battles. “Modern art came closest to telling the unpalatable truths about the Great War,” says Fraser Bell; “it was there to be seen for those who could change their angle of vision, who could see that the old figurative world as portrayed in art had come unglued, had become obsolete as far as describing the new realities of 1914-1918 and the age to which it gave birth.”¹⁵

Passages like these made me think that surrealism could indeed offer a fresh alternative to realism in military history, and provide a new and revealing way of writing battle narratives from the soldier's perspective. I could even think of cinematic precedents, like the helicopter assault in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, for example. In this sequence, the napalm-loving Colonel Kilgore's air cavalry swoop down on a Vietnamese coastal village like birds of prey, to the tune of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." The battle itself is filmed as a rock-video montage, and ends with an absurd scene of American soldiers surfing under mortar fire; but its most surrealistic images come before the end, when the director and his cameraman make a cameo, urging the support troops to "keep going, act like you're fighting, don't look at the camera!"

However, once I decided to try writing surrealistic military history, the question became: how? In his first manifesto, published in 1924, André Breton defined surrealism as "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought."¹⁶ Breton first put this principle into practice in 1919, when he collaborated with Philippe Soupault on a novel: *Les champs magnetiques* (The magnetic fields). Their technique was described as follows:

After you have settled yourself in a place as favourable as possible to the concentration of your mind upon itself, have writing materials brought to you. Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else. Keep reminding yourself that literature is one of the saddest roads that leads to everything. Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing or be tempted to reread what you have written.¹⁷

Automatic writing produced the most famous piece of surrealist verse, Paul Eluard's aphorism 'elephants are contagious.' However, 'pure psychic automatism' hardly seemed appropriate for history, which is generally written with a preconceived subject; we will return to this important point later.

Other types of surrealist writing were just as problematic. Exquisite Corpse, for example, is a surrealist parlour game. The players choose a sentence structure: then, each player takes it in turn to write a word on a piece of paper, folds the edge of the paper over this word, and then passes the paper to the next player. Once each player has taken a turn, the paper is unfolded, and the complete sentence is revealed. The results are generally bizarre: the game is named after its first product, 'the exquisite corpse will drink the new wine'. When I played Exquisite Corpse with my housemates not long ago, we discovered that 'the meek bone raped a frightening knife,' that 'crass cats are lick-

ing a bleeding water bottle,' and that 'a turgid abacus will spank the electric chimney sweeps.' However, the writing of history is a generally solitary activity, which rules out this type of collective creation.

At last, I hit upon the 'cut-up' method, invented by painter Brion Gysin and used by William S. Burroughs in a trilogy of surreal science-fiction novels: *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*, published in the early 1960s.¹⁸ In his original 1959 manifesto, Gysin announced that, "Writing is fifty years behind painting. I propose to apply the painters' techniques to writing: things as simple and immediate as collage and montage."¹⁹ As Burroughs later explained:

The method is simple. Here is one way to do it. Take a page. Like this page. Now cut down the middle and across the middle. You have four sections: one two three four. Now rearrange the sections placing section four with section one and section two with section three. And you have a new page.²⁰

In principle, the cut-up method resembles automatic writing, along with painting techniques like frottage and decalcomania, sculpting techniques like coulage, and photographic techniques like the Rayogram: in each case, creative control is abandoned, and art works itself. "The artist is a spectator," said Max Ernst, "indifferent or impassioned at the birth of his work, and observes the phases of its development."²¹ And for a historian who just wanted to satisfy his curiosity, this very simple, even mechanical technique seemed ideal. As Burroughs also said:

Cut-ups are for everyone. Anybody can make cut-ups. It is experimental in the sense of being *something to do*. Right here write now. Not something to talk and argue about.²²

So I went ahead and did it – right there, write then.

II

Not wanting to offend anyone by mutilating their work, and uncertain of the copyright status of cut-ups, I decided to slice up passages from my own Master's thesis: as the old saying goes, 'let experiment be made upon a worthless body.' My thesis was a reassessment of the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) offensives on the Western Front in the second year of the Great War. Chapter Five was a case study of a single battle, Festubert (15-25 May 1915). Let me begin with a brief operational history of this rather obscure battle's opening days.

Festubert was an offensive by the British First Army, led by General Douglas Haig, who would later command the whole BEF. The British were attacking in low-lying French Flanders, south of Ypres and north of Loos, in

support of a French offensive in Artois, further south. The British battle plan was a simple pincer movement. The Meerut Division of the Indian Corps would attack on the left of the British line, along with the 2nd Division on the left-centre: the right-centre would initially be left alone, but the 7th Division would attack on the right. The 2nd and 7th Divisions would begin the battle six hundred yards apart, but the two columns would converge as they advanced, enveloping and destroying the enemy forces caught between them.

After the British artillery had bombarded the German lines for three days, the infantry of the Meerut and 2nd Divisions went over the top on the night of 15/16 May: this was the first British night attack of the war. Their assault was a partial success. In the left-centre, the 2nd Division took the Germans by surprise, and captured the German front and support trenches. On the left, however, the Germans were on the alert, and the Meerut Division's advance was quickly stopped by rifle and machine gun fire.

The 7th Division attacked three hours later, at dawn. Unlike the night attack on the left, the dawn attack on the right was preceded by thirty minutes of intense artillery bombardment, during which six field guns hidden in the British front line shelled the German front line at point-blank range. Aided by this supporting fire, the infantry of the 7th Division fought its way forward and captured all its objectives by 7:00 AM. Attempts to renew the attack on the left at dawn failed: the troops of the Meerut and 2nd Divisions could not advance in the face of severe German artillery and machine gun fire.

After their defeat on the left at dawn, Haig ordered the Meerut Division to remain on the defensive while the 2nd and 7th Divisions closed the gap between them. When the British efforts to join the inner flanks of the two divisions failed, Haig ordered them to try again at dawn on the second day, 17 May.

While the British reorganized and prepared to resume the offensive the next morning, the Germans prepared to retreat. During the afternoon of 16 May the Germans had made a few unsuccessful counterattacks on the flanks of the British break-in; but by 9:30 PM they gave up counterattacking and began digging a new line of trenches in their rear.²³ Finally, at 1:25 AM on 17 May, the German commander gave up any hope of recapturing his original front line and ordered his men to fall back to the new line at dawn.

The German withdrawal was partly disrupted at 2:45 AM, when the British artillery began bombarding the gap between the two British columns. The British guns had carefully registered their targets on the previous afternoon, and their fire was accurate and devastating. The Germans in the gap were trapped and demoralized by the British bombardment, and soon surrendered.

Everywhere else, however, the German infantry withdrew to their new line unobserved. Rain had begun to fall on the afternoon of 16 May, and rain and mist prevented any flying until 20 May. Until that date, the First Army, blind

without aerial surveillance, did not realise that the enemy had taken up an entirely new position.

The British, unaware that the Germans were falling back in disorder on a hastily prepared retrenchment, spent the morning of 17 May closing the gap between their two columns. The British tried to advance again in the afternoon, but failed everywhere; a further attempt to advance on the far right, in the evening, failed because the ground was intersected by deep drainage ditches which made it impassable. By nightfall the new German line was complete, and occupied by almost double the number of troops who had held the original German front line.

The attacking troops were reinforced by the 4th (Guards) Brigade on the third day, 18 May. New assaults were organized and delivered by the Guards in the centre and the Indians on the left, but both were thrown back with heavy losses. Finally, there was a pause in the battle: the 1st Canadian Division relieved the 7th Division on the night of 18/19 May, and the 51st Division relieved the 2nd on the following night.

From 20 to 25 May the 1st Canadian Division clawed its way forward trench by trench. Canadian officers (including the future commander of the Canadian Corps, Brigadier-General Arthur Currie) obeyed orders under protest, complaining that their men were being thrown away in hopeless assaults. Subsidiary attacks were made on the far left by the Lahore Division on 22 May, and on the far right by the 47th (London) Division on 25 May. Finally, on the night of 25/26 May, General Haig ended the British offensive. The British had driven the Germans from their heavily fortified front line, but advanced only three-quarters of a mile. Over 16,000 British, Indian, and Canadian soldiers were dead, wounded, or missing. The Germans, who had spared their men by not counterattacking, lost about 5,000 men. Although the Germans rushed reinforcements to the Festubert battlefield, none of these troops were drawn from the forces opposing the French in Artois.²⁴

III

My first cut-up was an ambitious affair. I took a pair of scissors, cut each page of my chapter on the Battle of Festubert into quarters, mixed all the pieces together, selected four at random, arranged them as a page, and began writing. My goal was nothing less than a surrealist narrative of the whole battle. "The assault of the 6th Brigade was an exceptional forty minutes," it began.

It consisted as before of field guns used as a force multiplier, transforming the trenches, strong points, and counter-battery fire weapons. The failure of the Garhwal and 5th Chapelle over again was much more successful than surprise alone: the attacking infantry, lacking what to avoid this time.

Instead, Aubers Ridge was to advance once they were discovered. Two factors were everywhere on 9 May, for two reasons. First, the Garhwal and 5th Brigades, which Edmond blames, and had spent the intervening two months. The Lahore Division, northwards of the front of attack, was piled to a height of six or seven throughout the bombardment in order to mislead the enemy, proof against all but the heaviest shells. The wire had been directed to open fire in controlled bursts, which made the effect of this abnormal stouter wire so formidable at 22:30. Machine-guns were sited in the fortified La Bassée Road on the alert fate of the direct hits. Salients were defended by strong points, delivering a night assault according to the attack with enfilade fire. Finally, the support deployment was great, and no adequate midnight had also been wired and fortified. Instead of light units for a simultaneous assault, synchronization of guns will be tried, as well as the 15-inch. Nine point two-inch, and 6-inch, wiped out by a local German and arranged so as to make sure of flattening out the supporting companies of Scots Guards. What Haig meant by the 1st Royal Welch Fusiliers, long like the Scots Guards, also in May. The First Army had assembled 433 pieces of defenders of the second German line, overcoming the horse and field guns, and twenty long-range guns across a dyke. The leading companies of the Welch cut the German wire and bombarded the support; companies of the 2nd Queen's, however, were used to demolish the German breastworks. The German parapet commander of the 2nd Queen's points behind the German front line for a further fifteen minutes' bombardment. Instead of a forty-minute whirlwind of fire, the supporting companies moved forward, lasting three days from 12 to 15 May on the German front breastworks, and reached their objective. Each of two battalions of the 22nd Brigade exploited the initial observation of fire. Intermittent shelling of the German front defences was sent to reinforce the Welch Fusiliers. By this means the First Army dropped ninety-four bombing parties of the 1st South Staffordshire (watches had not then been instituted). The German barbed wire and breastworks were minutes short of the "zero" hour – 23:30. On the other hand, the slow and deliberate British rose to their feet with a chorus of wild Irish firepower behind the German defences. As illuminating flares shot upwards all along the German heavy

machine-gun and rifle-fire, the Inniskilling companies dashed forward. The bombardment, with its weapons and morale largely intact, rose to its feet and plunged forward through the artillery: the expenditure of ammunition lit up the scene and the companies had some two hundred guns of doubtful value. In the changing light of the flares adequate provision could not be made for the disordered enemy: officers and men fell in rapid succession, keeping them from maintaining fire. The sky was over little groups up to the German wire entanglements. The frontage of the 5th and 6th Brigades was dark as the dawn attack of the 7th Division went ahead a few paces, but the Germans in front of the assault were preceded by a quickening of the flares.

And so on, and so on, for six pages, after which I stopped, out of disappointment and boredom. This was not going well. Notwithstanding some interesting and undoubtedly surrealistic passages, my 'narrative' was almost unreadable. Perhaps, I thought, I had gone too far, too fast: perhaps, instead of cutting up the whole chapter, I should start with a couple of paragraphs.

Accordingly, my next cut-up was less than two pages long, consisting of my narrative of the attack by the 4th (Guards) Brigade on the afternoon of 18 May. With my scissors, I cut pages 114 and 115 of my thesis into quarters, rearranged the pieces just as Burroughs directed, and recorded the results. The first sentence was promising. It said: "First Army issued orders at 19:35 for the attack to be lost."

Six officers and 102 others, including mist, prevented observation in the early morning. Ponsonby, as he watched the attack from the British after consulting his corps commanders, ordered No. 2 Company to reinforce No. 3 at 14:30, quickening between 14:00 and 14:20. It would be practically impossible for his infantry assaults all along the line, unfortunately. A bullet would be necessary to pass the enemy's machine-guns under the conditions then prevailing; his orders were issued, merely throwing men's lives away to ask them just before zero hour.

The bombardment itself began. Lord Gort came up to investigate the situation and had not yet been located – only isolated points in the new attack until darkness gave the battalion. Some predictable platoon was mowed down before it had covered the assault. The 4th (Guards) Brigade was Lord Cavan, who ordered this situation. The attack of the Grenadier Guards, on the other hand, did not give up so easily, and was made by No. 3 Company in short quick rushes

by 461 men. It was magnificent, writes possible cover from the machine guns: the men never brought up reinforcements on reinforcements. The distance was about six hundred yards, and the ground was even as far, and the third shared the same fate.

The attack was postponed. Lieutenant-Colonel Smith was hit in the head by a new bombardment beginning at the front trench. Major Jeffreys was now in command, but Captain Clive represented that two and a half hours was not enough time for the company to cross over the exposed ground, so the orders did not reach a brigade absolutely undamaged. The second melted away before it commanded the ground, and only reached the battalions in the line. Jeffreys was forced to the conclusion that it would be half an hour late, and, since the German retrenchment advanced at this moment, the enemy line was bombarded. The results, Major Jeffreys told him, were that he did not propose to renew the 2nd Grenadier Guards and the 1st Irish chance of reaching the objective.

Lord Gort reported in detail. In their regimental history, the Grenadiers were to dig in where they were. The Irish Guard platoons suffered, as the ground was very flat, but with no terrible casualties as a result, losing eighteen officers. The gallant manner in which the second company melted away before it had any real chance of reaching the German trenches, unfortunately with no success, intersected with ditches full of water.

That was better: arranging the text into paragraphs helped, even if this arrangement was arbitrary. In any case, the results were encouraging enough to continue.

These first experiments had been simple cut-ups, written from the pieces of a single document, by a single author – me. Of course, it's also possible to make complex cut-ups, written from the pieces of more than one document by more than one author. My next cut-up was complex. I chose the old *Times History of the War* as my second source, for no particular reason – it was on my desk at the time, and thereby became a found object, of sorts. I didn't own the volume that describes the Battle of Festubert, but I found a colourful and appropriate passage in the chapter on the Battle of Neuve Chapelle (10-13 March 1915). I typed out the passage, and cut it up. Then I chose another couple of pages from my thesis – the ones describing the attack of the 7th Division on the morning of 16 May – and cut them up too. Finally, I mixed them all together. They said:

There was no great distance to traverse, but its further advance was hindered in some places by the British and German enfilade machine-gun fire. So near were they that during the Quadrilateral they were driven into British trenches bespattered with companies of the 2nd Scots Guards, apart from the human bodies flung from the Orchard on its left. When the Borders next to the fire of 350 artillery next to the fire attempted, but the right dropping on its shrapnel and high explosive was surrounded and wiped out by an effect annihilating. The deluge of counter-attacks was almost entirely swept away, and consolidated a line abreast of the British bombardment, while at the same time the high explosive shells were halted by the six field guns opening fire on the line of entrenchments, who blew them the shreds and tatters of shell.

Finally, at 3:15, once the bombardment lifted, which took the few Germans who survived, the commander of the 20th Brigade lost all power, his assaulting troops to advance almost entirely without resistance to our No Man's Land. Before the bombardment gave themselves up the majority in the Border Regiment pressed on toward the lyddite explosions, faces for the end of the bombardment, and off their backs. Equipment and British high explosive shell shattered. They appeared *as if in a dream* before the first assault, for despite capturing the German front breastwork, trenches were only a short distance from another deep drainage ditch, then stopped by the bombardment men in the German trenches known as the Quadrilateral, with earth and blood and fragments to bomb their way northward toward the German trenches by the terrible trench mortar fire [emphasis added].

The leading guns pouring an unceasing hail advanced to their objective, back by the road. The din was deafening, and the company was driven back by British shrapnel bullets from our field artillery's position, and the left company was wire entanglements in front of a local German counter-attack. This intensified at 2:45, and the supporting companies of the Scots Guards at the German breastwork with high explosive directed against the German second line; the infantry attacks began into mere shapeless pits filled with the enemy's first living men.

Brigadier-General Heyworth ordered this awful devastation by surprise, and so shook them that, to give them time to cross the 25th and Garhwal Brigades of resistance, the front line fell: but the first lines lifted, particularly the infantry. The few who were left to the German parapet without waiting showed plain evidence of the effect of suffering considerable loss from yellow with the fumes, clothes torn by these losses, the 2nd Border Regiment's weapons destroyed and nerves.

IV

I made a number of other cut-ups, some with paper and scissors, and some with a computer.²⁵ In one case, I mixed my work with a description of hogs being killed and butchered in a packinghouse, combining one form of industrial mass slaughter with another. The results of this last experiment were especially disappointing and revealing, and I will return to them shortly: but I think the passages in Section III are sufficient for the moment, and I'm sure that many readers will appreciate a break from cut-ups, however momentary.²⁶

So, then: so what? I'm glad I asked: I think my cut-ups raise questions about Hayden White's whole project – that's what. The results of these experiments do not seem to conform to the predictions of White's theories: first, because cut-ups have no meaning; second, because cut-ups have no historical subject; and third, because cut-ups lack sublimity.

The first point may seem strange at first: after all, surrealistic writing isn't supposed to be 'meaningful' in the conventional sense; what could we possibly 'mean' when we say that 'elephants are contagious'? However, the word 'meaning' has a number of meanings, and when I say that surrealistic history is 'meaningless,' I mean 'pointless'. This is important because Hayden White has argued that 'meaning' – that is, a point of some kind – is essential to history, even if it cannot be found in the past.

In *Metahistory*, and elsewhere, White has argued that historians add value to history's raw materials in at least three ways: they first arrange events in order of occurrence, creating a chronicle; next, they choose a sequence of events from this chronicle, and make it a story, with a beginning, middle, and end; finally, they give meaning to their story by giving it a plot structure. In White's view, the stories which historians tell have no fixed meaning: historians can emplot the same stories in different ways, and thereby give them entirely different meanings. White himself has examined four emplotments closely: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire.²⁷ But other plots exist, even within the Western story-telling tradition, like the Epic, the Pastoral, or the Farce.

Take the Battle of Festubert, for example. The story of this battle could be told as a Tragedy, which emphasizes factors like bad weather and communications breakdowns: my Master's thesis was emplotted this way. However, the same story could also be told as a Satire, which emphasizes factors like poor generalship – 'lions led by donkeys'. Moreover, the very same story could be told as a Romance, which emphasizes the skill and courage of the defenders. I confess – I cannot think of a way to write the Battle of Festubert as a Comedy: but this may be just a failure of imagination on my part.

If we dive with Hayden White below the surface of historical discourse, we will find historians using formal arguments and ideological implications to give their stories even more profound meanings. In addition, White is notorious for holding that these various modes of explanation – emplotment, argument, and ideological implication – have often been consistently combined in historiographical styles, and that these distinctive styles reveal a weird ocean-floorscape of poetic tropes – Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony. But these murky depths need not detain us: let's return to the surface in our theoretical bathyscaphe, and ride the waves and currents of emplotment once again.

White has argued that emplotment is an *essential* element of *any* historical discourse.²⁸ But *cut-ups have no plot*: the cut-up technique precludes emplotment. This is a fatal flaw, because, according to White, stories that have no plot have no meaning, and stories that have no meaning are not history. A cut-up has no plot; therefore, a cut-up is not history.

Even worse, it seems that cut-ups don't fit anywhere in White's analysis. Cut-ups are not 'stories' as White defines them: they have no discernible beginning, middle, or end. A cut-up is not even a 'chronicle,' since its events do not occur in order. Cut-ups, it seems, are neither historical accounts, nor even the 'primitive elements' of such accounts. Paradoxically, by following White's advice, and experimenting with a modernist form of historical writing, I wound up writing something that White himself would not accept as history.

Indeed, it's not easy to square White's continuing enthusiasm for "the kinds of antinarrative nonstories produced by literary modernism"²⁹ with his own structuralist analysis of Western historiography. In "The Burden of History," he criticized historians who continued to act "as if they believed that the major, not to say the sole purpose of art is to tell a story." "It is of course true that the artist's purpose may be served by telling a story," he continued: "but this is only one of the possible modes of representation offered to him today, and it is a decreasingly important one at that, as the *nouvelle roman* in France has impressively shown."³⁰ White went on to praise the work of Jacob Burckhardt, "because he broke with the dogma that a historical account has to 'tell a story,' at least in the usual, chronologically ordered way."³¹ "And once he was freed from the limitations of the 'storytelling' technique, he was liber-

ated from the necessity of constructing a ‘plot’ with heroes, villains, and chorus, as the conventional historian is always driven to do.”³²

That seems clear enough. Yet within a few years, White was writing the following passage in his essay “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact.” “The historian shares with his audience *general notions* of the *forms* that significant human situations *must* take by virtue of his participation in the specific processes of sense-making which identify him as a member of one cultural endowment rather than another,” he says.

In the process of studying a given complex of events, he begins to perceive the *possible* story form, which such events *may* figure. In a narrative account of how this set of events took on the shape which he perceives to inhere within it, he emplots his account as a story of a particular kind. The reader, in the process of following the historian’s account of those events, gradually comes to realize that the story he is reading is of one kind rather than another: romance, tragedy, comedy, satire, epic, or what have you. And when he has perceived the class or type to which the story that he is reading belongs, he experiences the effect of having the events in the story explained to him. He has at this point not only successfully *followed* the story: he has grasped the point of it, *understood* it, as well. The original strangeness, mystery, or exoticism of the events is dispelled, and they take on a familiar aspect, not in their details, but in their functions as elements of a familiar kind of configuration. They are rendered comprehensible by being subsumed under the categories of the plot structure in which they are encoded as a story of a particular kind.³³

If that’s the case, then historians who write ‘antinarrative nonstories’ – who break with the ‘dogma’ that an historical account has to ‘tell a story’ – who free themselves from the limitations of the ‘storytelling’ technique – who liberate themselves from the necessity of constructing a ‘plot’ – will end up writing something that’s incomprehensible, both to their audience, and to themselves – something much like my cut-ups. To his credit, White seems to have noticed this problem: in *Metahistory*, published seven years after “The Burden of History,” Burekhardt was reclassified as a Satirist. And in some of White’s most recent essays, modernism appears more evolutionary than revolutionary. Instead of repudiating narrativity, he says now that, “literary modernism revealed new or forgotten potentialities of narrative discourse itself, potentialities for rendering intelligible the specifically modern experiences of time, historical consciousness, and social reality.”³⁴

This brings us to the second problem with cut-ups – a problem that I should have anticipated, before I put scissors to paper: namely, their lack of a historical subject. Historians look for evidence of the past – usually documents, but sometimes artefacts – and this evidence compels us to believe certain things. When I was researching the chapter in my Master’s thesis on the Battle of Festubert, for example, I read numerous documents, of whose nature I was aware: these documents had a certain character, which they could not now possess unless a number of events had happened in the past; I therefore felt compelled by this documentary evidence to believe that those events must have taken place.

For example: after I read certain passages in two books – the relevant volume of the British Official History by Sir James Edmonds, and *The Seventh Division 1914-1918* by C. T. Atkinson – I felt compelled to believe that a Scottish battalion, the 1/4th Cameron Highlanders, had attacked a section of the German defences at Festubert on the evening of 17 May; that this attack had failed; and that the reasons for this failure were several. What I wrote in my thesis reflected these beliefs:

Meanwhile, on the far right, the 21st Brigade attacked at 1930, attempting to capture the South Breastwork. The two battalions involved in this attack, the 1/4th Cameron Highlanders and the 2/Bedfordshire, had an unpleasant surprise:

There had been no time for reconnaissance and the four hundred yards of ground that had to be crossed could only be examined from the front line. With grass twelve inches high, it looked easy going and without obstacles, but it proved unfavourable to movement, being intersected by a number of broad dykes in which some men were drowned.³⁵

The Camerons struggled forward and captured part of the South Breastwork, but were bombed out of their position and forced to retreat by a German counter-attack: most of their hand-grenades had been lost or rendered useless as they were wading and swimming across the dykes.³⁶

Historians are divided on what writing like this represents. Some would argue that, if true, this passage describes what actually happened to those men, in that place, at that time. Others would argue that this passage is just one possible explanation for the nature and existence of a couple of documents: who can say what ‘actually’ happened? But no matter where you stand on such issues, my point is this: cut-ups do neither of these things: they describe noth-

ing; they don't explain anything. The events they describe never happened, and they refer to no documents at all: to me, that sounds like fiction, not history.

Even those who believe that history is a genre of fiction will agree that it's fiction with rules. But cut-ups break every rule in the historian's book: they're neither true to life, nor true to their sources. Instead of describing an historical battle, fought by the British and German armies in French Flanders in May 1915, my cut-ups describe a fictional battle, fought by no one, at no place, at no time. Any resemblance between my cut-ups and the actual Battle of Festubert (if such a battle took place) is purely coincidental.

What's worse, any resemblance between my cut-ups and the documents that I consulted when I researched and wrote my thesis is equally coincidental. Once the text is cut to pieces, the content drains out, like blood. You can sew the pieces back together, like Frankenstein did with his corpses, but the results are equally monstrous. I'm pretty sure Burroughs would agree with me on this point: in a brief history of the cut-up technique, Gérard-Georges Lemaire argued that anything produced by this process *automatically* presents itself as fiction, regardless of its source material.³⁷

Another aspect of this problem springs from the nature of surrealism, rather than from the nature of history. Recall that I thought surrealistic narratives might better convey the soldier's experience of combat than realistic narratives. What I forgot was that surrealists are not concerned with *other* people's experiences. Surrealist art is objective – that is to say, not abstract: but its objects are mental, not physical; conceptual, not perceptual. Man Ray “wanted to photograph ideas instead of images, and dreams instead of ideas.”³⁸ Dali described his paintings as photographs (“by hand and in colour”) of imaginary worlds.³⁹ Heraclitus of Ephesus said that “the waking have one world in common, whereas each sleeper turns away to a private world of his own.”⁴⁰ Surrealists understand this, and as a result, the styles of the great surrealist painters are as distinctive as thumbprints: a painting by Miró looks nothing like a painting by Magritte, and a painting by Giger looks nothing like either. I see now that my cut-ups could not possibly represent a soldier's experiences: they could only represent the mumblings of a sleeping historian – or perhaps, the ravings of a historian gone mad.

This brings us to the final problem with cut-ups: their lack of sublimity. In his essay “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,” White argued that historicism is a kind of aestheticism: just as aesthetes practice art for art's sake, so historians practice history for history's sake. Both aestheticism and historicism are justified by an aesthetic which privileges the beautiful, and marginalizes the sublime. The difference between the two can be defined as the difference between that which charms, and that which terrifies: the first encourages passivity, the second, activity. And

because it encourages passive contemplation rather than active participation, beautiful history, like beautiful art, is essentially conservative: it creates a historian who is “receptive to a genial pluralism in matters epistemological, suspicious of anything smacking of reductionism, irritated with theory, disdainful of technical terminology and jargon, and contemptuous of any effort to discern the direction that the future development of his own society might take.”⁴¹

In place of this domesticating aesthetics of the beautiful, we should embrace a liberating aesthetics of the sublime, which White sees ready to hand in twentieth-century literary modernism. “Prior to the nineteenth century,” he writes, “history had been conceived as a spectacle of crimes, superstitions, errors, duplicities, and terrorisms that justified visionary recommendations for a politics that would place social processes on a new ground.”⁴² To make such visionary politics possible once again, we must give up attempts to make sense of the past, and recognize “the sublimity of the historical process,”⁴³ as eighteenth-century Enlightenmenters did. Above all, we must reject ideologies which impute “a meaning to history which renders its manifest confusion comprehensible to either reason, understanding, or aesthetic sensibility. To the extent that they succeed in doing so, these ideologies deprive history of the kind of meaninglessness that alone can goad living human beings to make their lives different for themselves and their children, which is to say, to endow their lives with a meaning for which they alone are fully responsible.”⁴⁴ This includes ideologies of the left as well as the right: “however radical Marxism may be as a social philosophy and especially as a critique of capitalism,” White says, “in its aspect as a philosophy of history it is no more visionary than its bourgeois counterpart.”⁴⁵

Surrealism’s relationship with communism seems to provide evidence for White’s argument about Marxism’s lack of vision. Breton was a Trotskyist, and his relationship with the Stalinist French Communist Party was always difficult: instead of “painting with a social subject,” the surrealists wanted “painting whose latent content was revolutionary, whatever the subject expressed.”⁴⁶ Their leader was expelled from the Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists in 1933, after the surrealist magazine *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* published a letter denouncing “the winds of systematic cretinism blowing from the USSR” in artistic matters.⁴⁷ Two years later, after Socialist Realism became the Soviet Union’s official artistic and literary style, surrealism’s alliance with communism was over.

As a result, I was hopeful that my cut-ups would capture the manifest confusion and meaninglessness of trench fighting in the First World War, and achieve something sublime by doing so. It even seemed like “objective chance” was on my side: books on the sublime are shelved alongside books on surrealism in the library. But my hopes were not fulfilled. My cut-ups were not sublime, in any sense of that word. They were confusing and meaningless,

to be sure. But they were neither terrifying nor disgusting, and they didn't inspire me to rid the world of war. If anything, they were just boring. One of this article's original reviewers commented on this fact: "I wondered about the desirable extent of the detailed illustrations of the consequences of applying the cutup [*sic*] method, which quite frankly are a bit tedious," he writes: "but this may be necessary to make the author's point."⁴⁸

Indeed, it is necessary – so necessary that I must include one last example. I mentioned earlier that my last experiment involved mixing my work with a contemporary description of animals being slaughtered. I thought for sure that such a cut-up would achieve something sublime: just the thought of such a combination made one of my colleagues wince. I thought for sure it would come close to the surrealist ideal – a piece of writing that resembled "the fortuitous encounter upon a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella."⁴⁹ But in practice – well, see for yourself.

On the far left the Sirhind Brigade rested in as normal a condition. Support of the Guards Brigade with even less to the killing pens they should be handled were so heavily shelled that movement was as much as possible. At most of the large of the 1st Highland Light Infantry and 4th King's cooling pens are provided, directly the attack died away. Willcocks provides some rest after being driven from he writes. The Sirhind Brigade reported that animals to rest in these pens for short bombing parties and troops intended for the excitement and fear is gotten rid of leaving and shortly after communication with the front they are taken to the slaughter house.

Willcocks received a report at 17:40, so that the hogs will not crowd, or climb upon one another. Men shackling rushes, and urged Brigadier-General Walker's hind leg next to the revolving wheel, so get his attack forward also twisting effect as possible at 18:00. As fast as the hogs made three assaults and failed. As the attack run on the rail, they are stuck and bled. Men sticking hogs telephoned Willcocks that if it could not attack them just as fast as hung up. They should be and further artillery support was promised. The neck, three or four inches long, in order to consider the German position round the order to be careful to see that they sever the veins.

An attack was very doubtful, and the problem cut into the shoulder, as in that instance the present position could be consolidated, and necessary to trim at considerable loss. Willcocks left the final decision to use every possible endeavour to try and always be made to shackle the report

that his bombing parties. When the hog is raised it appeared quite unable to advance, writes with as little are hoisted and run on the object by day. It must do so by night, and should be made to keep up close, instructed to make sticking at 23:00.

However, Walker represented that a good large opening in the Ferme du Bois was such that to give the blood a good free flow. They should probable loss of life would be great and until our arteries at the same time that they do, and at 21:30 the attack was definitely blood settles there, and it becomes the front from which to advance was assured. Hogs should never be killed until the Indian Corps made a subsidiary attack as it is possible to have them. In taking the front line and ground in rear carefully, and crowding and piling up success avoided impossible, and after some desperate efforts packing houses in the great hog killing centres get a few men forward.

The subsidiary adjoining the killing rooms, where the animals interesting details about the attack: at 16:20, storage or receiving pens. By permitting the heavy German artillery fire, the abnormal amount of heat caused by the attack were held up in their original trenches, in much better condition for killing before. Owing to all wires being gates and openings into closed pens should all the Guards were getting forward by short became difficult.⁵⁰

This is just more of the same. Indeed, it's *less* interesting and effective than my simple cut-ups, which were in turn less interesting and effective than their source material. My thesis was clearly guided by an aesthetic of the beautiful: indeed, its pastiche of the British official history's understated style, in which attacking soldiers receive 'unpleasant surprises' and suffer 'serious disappointments,' is embarrassing to me now. Nonetheless, I think my description of the 1/4th Cameron Highlanders attacking the South Breastwork on the evening of 17 May 1915 inspires more disgust and horror than any of my cut-ups. Imagine trying to advance four hundred yards through twilight and enemy machine-gun fire. Imagine having to jump or wade or swim across deep drainage ditches, under fire, while carrying a full load of weapons and equipment. Imagine missing a jump, or falling down wounded, floundering in the water below, calling for help over the noise of gunfire and explosions, hoping that someone will hear you, hoping someone will save you before you drown. Imagine capturing the German position, only to realize that most of your hand grenades have been ruined or lost. Imagine trying to resist a German counter-attack, in the close quarters of a captured breastwork, with rifles and bayonets

alone – and all for nothing. The more I learn about battles like these – the more I *understand* what happened in these battles – the more disgusting and horrible they seem.⁵¹

Once again, it's not easy to reconcile Hayden White's prescriptions for a meaningless history with his descriptions of history-writing. It's also not easy to see how literary modernism will serve White's intended purpose. Modernists, after all, are open to charges of aestheticism. "The work of art," said Breton, "must remain detached from any kind of practical aim, if it is not to cease to be itself,"⁵² and it was exactly this bourgeois commitment to art for art's sake that French communists found unacceptable.

Finally, it's not clear how the spectacle of a meaningless past will serve Hayden White's purpose either. There was one modernist movement which came close to White's vision of history: Dada. "Dada was a detonation of anger which showed itself in insults and buffoonery," says Alexandrian. "Dada began not as an art form but as a disgust" was Tristan Tzara's definition: disgust with a world wracked by war, with boring dogmas, with conventional sentiments, with pedantry, and the art which did nothing but reflect this limited universe."⁵³ But the Dadaist project was far from utopian; if anything, it was dystopian. "Dada filled its statements with incoherence, on the grounds that life itself was incoherent."⁵⁴ Dadaism was nihilism: its goal was the "total negation of everything,"⁵⁵ and art as meaningless as life. In early 1920, André Breton and Philippe Soupault discussed ending their Dada play *S'il vous plait* with a one-time-only fourth act: one of its authors, chosen at random, would commit suicide onstage. "The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd."⁵⁶ Such negative responses to a meaningless world would seem just as reasonable – and just as likely – as the positive response for which White hopes.

V

Another *Left History* peer-reviewer thought I should have provided "a few other instances of possible modernist history – because after all the surrealist mode is on the extreme end of such possibilities, as opposed to other versions of modernist writing one might imagine deploying and appropriately reworking for the purposes of constructing historical accounts – Woolf, Joyce, Döblin, Dos Passos, etc.?" That was a good suggestion, but I rejected it, for four reasons.

First: because I don't like Joyce and Woolf, and I don't know Dos Passos and Döblin. If someone else knows and likes their works, then I would encourage them to conduct experiments like mine, and I wish them better luck than I had.⁵⁷ But I try to write history that I would enjoy reading myself. I like sur-

realism, and I like Burroughs, and I wanted to write a historical *Naked Lunch* – without first having to shoot heroin for inspiration. I’m sorry that I can’t. Write a historical *Naked Lunch*, I mean.

Second: because my search for literary models has led me away from elite culture, towards popular culture – from ‘literature’ to hard-boiled crime novels – from Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen to Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James Ellroy. Like surrealism, the hard-boiled genre flourished from the 1920s to the 50s, and yet, like surrealism, it remains a living tradition, spawning even computer games like *Grim Fandango* and *Max Payne*: Victor Gischler’s recent novel *The Pistol Poets* will appeal especially to academics.⁵⁸ These experiments have been much more successful than their surrealist counterparts: the plain-spoken style of hard-boiled crime fiction is a good cure for theorria, while a detective’s no-nonsense epistemology helps cut through the knotted problem of whether historical facts are discovered or constructed. In his novel *Playback*, for example, Raymond Chandler offered the following synthesis: “There are things that are facts, in a statistical sense, on paper, on a tape recorder, in evidence. And there are things that are facts because they have to be facts, because nothing makes any sense otherwise.”⁵⁹

Third: because I’m not convinced that surrealism *is* on the extreme end of such possibilities. There’s a whole world of non-objective art beyond surrealism. Surrealist art, after all, was not abstract: in the postwar period, surrealist painters tried to combine surrealism with abstraction, in the form of tachism, and failed. Yet at one point in “The Burden of History,” White suggested that it might be possible to write actionist history. I can’t even imagine what actionist history would look like – perhaps ink dripped on paper, the way Pollock dripped paint on canvas? Or perhaps ink allowed to flow down a vertical piece of paper, in the style of Romanian surautomatism? The mind boggles. Or consider another, even more outrageous example: body art. I own a British Pattern 1907 sword bayonet. If I took this weapon to a conference, and used it to cut and stab myself during a paper presentation, would that constitute body history? I’m not anxious to find out, and I suspect I am not alone. If it’s impossible to write surrealist history, then it seems to follow that it’s impossible to write these even *more* extreme forms of history.

Fourth and finally: because modernism is pretty much over. In “The Burden of History,” White consistently confused modernism with modernity, writing of “contemporary modes of literary representation” and “the more significant advances in literature, social science, and philosophy in the twentieth century”;⁶⁰ of “the distinctive characteristics of contemporary literature”, “those strata of human experience which it is *modern* art’s peculiar purpose to disclose”, “the modern writer’s hostility towards history”, and “the charge levelled against historians by modern writers”;⁶¹ of how “the modern artist does not think very much of what used to be called the historical imagination”;⁶² of

“the techniques of analysis and representation which *modern* science and *modern* art have offered”; and how “the historian can claim a voice in the contemporary cultural dialogue only insofar as he takes seriously the kind of questions that the art and science of *his own time* demand that he ask of the materials he has chosen to study.”⁶³

Furthermore, White made it clear that in his mind, “contemporary” and “modern” and “of our own time” were all synonymous with postwar ‘high modernism’: with “action painters, kinetic sculptors, existentialist novelists, imagist poets,” and “*nouvelle vague* cinematographers.”⁶⁴ He praised Norman O. Brown for achieving “the same effects as those sought by a ‘Pop’ artist or by John Cage in one of his ‘happenings,’”⁶⁵ and suggested that, by judging explanations in terms of the richness of their governing metaphors, historians might “conceive of the possibility of using impressionistic, expressionistic, surrealist, and (perhaps) even actionist modes of representations.”⁶⁶

Historians might indeed have conceived of writing history by dripping ink on paper – in the late 1960s. But this all seems rather quaint nowadays – like Stanley Kubrick’s vision of the year 2001, or a Che Guevara poster. Clearly, White’s 1966 manifesto was influenced by the postwar period of modernist hegemony over the arts – a period which has long since ended. Modernism’s grip on classical music, for example, began to loosen soon after “The Burden of History” was published: its loosening can be traced in the career of a single individual, the Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki. In the 60s, Penderecki was one of Europe’s most avant-garde composers, producing ‘sonorist’ works like his *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* (1960), *St. Luke Passion* (1963-65) and *The Devils of Loudon* (1969). By the mid-70s, however, he was abandoning modernism for neoromanticism. “The avant garde gave one an illusion of universalism,” he later said.

The musical world of Stockhausen, Nono, Boulez, and Cage was for us, the young – hemmed in by the aesthetics of socialist realism, then the official canon of our country – a liberation. It opened a new reality, a new vision of art and the world. I was quick to realise, however, that this novelty, this experimentation and formal speculation, is more destructive than constructive; I realised the Utopian quality of its Promethean tone. I was saved from the avant garde snare of formalism by a return to tradition.⁶⁷

When his *First Violin Concerto* was criticized by avant-gardists after its premiere in 1977, Penderecki replied: “We can still use old forms to make new music.”⁶⁸ Nowadays, in music, modernism is just another style, and even ultra-modernist Karlheinz Stockhausen has used an old form to make new music, by composing a string quartet – albeit one written for performers flying in separate helicopters.⁶⁹

Now, for the record: I *like* modernist music, including the aforementioned Helicopter Quartet. But I like other styles as well: and when Hayden White argues that we *need* modernist literary techniques to *properly* describe modern events, this claim sounds distinctly hollow to my polystylist ear; when I was reading “The Modernist Event,” I felt like kicking a poem by Wilfred Owen and saying, “I refute him thus.” In “The Burden of History,” White described “anyone who studies the past ‘as an end in itself’” – that is, the traditional historian – “as either an antiquarian, fleeing from the problems of the present into a purely personal past, or a kind of cultural necrophile, that is, one who finds in the dead and dying a value he can never find in the living.”⁷⁰ When White wrote those words, modernism was already dying. In my view, that makes him just as much a cultural necrophile as the traditional historians he criticized: he just prefers his corpses warm instead of cold.

Methodological Appendix

Readers may wish to see how the cut-up technique works in practice. The passages in the main text were cut into quarters, as Burroughs directed, but here we’ll use Gysin’s own method⁷¹ to manipulate the Hayden White passage at the beginning of this article.

First, cut the text into three columns:

Column A:	Column B:	Column C:
When historians try to relate their ‘findings’ about the ‘facts’ in what they call an ‘artistic’ manner, they uniformly eschew the techniques of literary representation which Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen have contributed to modern culture . There have been no significant attempts at surrealistic , expressionistic, or existentialist historiography in this century (except by novelists and poets themselves) for all the vaunted ‘artistry’ of the historians of modern times.		

As the scissors cut through the paper, they will cut through certain words as well, such as ‘relate’ in the first line, and ‘uniformly’ in the second. So trim the ragged edges of the wounds, like a battlefield surgeon – a sort of literary *débridement*. The result is three separate columns of text – Text ABC.

Column A:	Column B:	Column C:
When historians try to ‘artistic’ manner, they Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen significant attempts at century (except by historians of modern times.	their ‘findings’ about the eschew the techniques of contributed to modern expressionistic, or and poets themselves) for all the vaunted ‘artistry’ of the	‘facts’ in what they call an literary representation which There have been no historiography in this

These three columns can be stitched or stapled together in several ways. For example, switch columns B and C to produce Text ACB: “When historians try ‘facts’ in what they call their ‘findings’ about the ‘artistic’ manner, their literary representation eschews the techniques of Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen. There have been no contributions to modern significant attempts at historiography in this expressionistic century (except by the vaunted ‘artistry’ of the poets themselves) for all historians of modern times.”

Or switch columns A and B to produce Text BAC: “ ‘Findings’ about when historians try ‘facts’ in what they call an eschewal of the techniques of an ‘artistic’ manner are literary representations which contributed to the modern Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen. There have been no expressionistic or significant attempts at historiography in this by poets themselves for all century (except by the vaunted ‘artistry’ of historians of modern times.)”

Or, if we want, we can read a column separately, instead of grafting it onto the remaining two. For example, transpose columns B and C, as above, but read column A separately, producing Text A + CB: “When historians try an ‘artistic’ manner, Joyce Yeats, and Ibsen are significant attempts at this century (except by historians of modern times). ‘Facts’ are what they call their ‘findings’ about the literary representations which eschew these techniques. There have been no contributions to modern historiography in this expressionistic, or the vaunted ‘artistry’ of the poets themselves for all.”

Or move column A to the right of C, then read column B separately, producing Text B + CA: “Their ‘findings’ about eschewing the techniques have contributed to the modern expressionistic, and poets themselves for all. When historians try ‘facts’ in what they call an ‘artistic’ manner, their literary representations have Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen. There have been no significant attempts at historiography in this century (except by the vaunted ‘artistry’ of the historians of modern times).”

To paraphrase Burroughs: cut the page, and you have a new Hayden White article – as many Hayden White articles as you like; for if these are not Hayden White’s words, then whose are they? Tristan Tzara said: “Poetry is for everyone.” I would say the same for critical theory.

An early version of this paper was presented at the 6th Annual New Frontiers in Graduate History Conference at York University in 2002. Thanks to Bonnie Sallans for suggesting that I read Hayden White’s “The Burden of History” four years ago, when we were both walking the picket line at McMaster University, during the Teaching Assistants’ strike. Thanks also to Stephen Heathorn for his helpful and encouraging comments on various drafts of this paper, and for suggesting that I submit my work to

Left History. Special thanks to Ian Hesketh for his very constructive criticism. And, as always, to the Green Guy.

Notes

¹ Hayden White, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5, 2 (1966), 127.

² *Ibid.*, 134.

³ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 132-33.

⁸ Keegan studies only the Somme's infamous opening day, 1 July 1916. Officially, the first thirteen days of the Somme campaign are known as the Battle of Albert, but this official name is little used, even by specialists.

⁹ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), 43-44.

¹⁰ As I was putting the finishing touches on this article, I discovered that Toronto's contemporary art gallery, the Power Plant, was planning to serve surrealist food at this year's fundraising ball, including "a green popsicle that tastes of tomatillo gazpacho instead of lime, and is dubbed, "Ceci n'est pas une popsicle." The name is a reference to the famous 1929 painting *La trahison des images* (The treachery of images), in which René Magritte subverted artistic realism by painting a realistic picture of a pipe, underlined by the words '*ceci n'est pas une pipe*' (this is not a pipe). According to the report in the *Globe and Mail*, "surrealism is the hottest fad to hit the food circuit since tall food." Tralee Pearce, "Dishing Like Dali," *Globe and Mail*, 29 May 2004.

¹¹ Joseph de Maistre, *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, trans. Jack Lively (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 258.

¹² Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1993), 222.

¹³ Lyn Macdonald, *1915: The Death of Innocence* (London: Headline, 1993), 506.

¹⁴ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, new edition (London: Cassell, 1957), 137.

¹⁵ Fraser Bell, "The Spirit of Our Time," *Queen's Quarterly* 111 (Spring 2004), 20.

¹⁶ André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26.

¹⁷ Breton, "Manifesto," 29-30.

¹⁸ Surrealism also helped inspire 'cyberpunk' science fiction, especially the 'transrealist' works of Rudy Rucker. In William Gibson's classic novel *Neuromancer* (1984), a character encounters Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* on a space station, while Rucker's latest novel *Spaceland* (2002) begins on 31 December 1999, and includes the following dream of Y2K:

I have this mental image of the Earth as being like one of those chocolate oranges, pre-cut into time-zone-sized segments. And when the Millennium hits, the segment with Tonga works its way free and tumbles off alone into black space, the sun glinting on the curved sector of its rind, with Tonga's part of the South Pacific all sloshing off the segments' edges. It's probably already happened, dude, but they're covering it up. And presumably the rest of the South Pacific is pouring down into the huge, wedge-shaped gap that Tonga's segment left, it's a thousands-of-mile-high waterfall that vaporizes into steam or even into plasma when it hits the molten nickel of the earth's exposed core. It's gonna drain the Pacific dry. And more and more of the segments are falling out needless to say. I wonder how soon the drop in the water level will be noticeable in San Francisco Bay (Rudy Rucker, *Spaceland* [New York: Tom Doherty, 2002], 15).

¹⁹ Brion Gysin, "Cut-ups self-explained," in William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (London: John Calder, 1979), 34.

²⁰ William S. Burroughs, "The cut-up method of Brion Gysin," in *The Third Mind*, 29-31.

²¹ Quoted in Sarane Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art*, trans. Gordon Clough (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 65.

²² Burroughs, "The cut-up method," 31.

²³ Actually, the terrain of French Flanders was unsuitable for trenches: here, as elsewhere, the defenders were piling up walls of sandbags, known as 'breastworks'; but out of consideration for the reader I have used the familiar, non-technical term 'trenches' instead.

²⁴ As I argued in my thesis, historians have wrongly neglected the Battle of Festubert, perhaps because it was fought by the small forces of the Regular Army, before the arrival of Kitchener's New Armies in the autumn. Festubert was essentially a miniature version of the Battle of Loos (autumn 1915), the Battle of the Somme (summer-autumn 1916), and the Third Battle of Ypres (summer-autumn 1917). Anyone who wants to understand the nature of the British Army's trench battles on the Western Front would do well to start with Festubert.

²⁵ At the time of writing, a 'cutup machine' could be found online at http://web.ukonline.co.uk/gary.leeming/burroughs/cutup_machine.htm.

²⁶ I should mention that I've experimented with 'fold-ins' as well. "A page of text – my own or someone else's – is folded down the middle and placed on another page – The composite text is then read across half one text and half another – The fold-in method extends to writing the flashback used in films, enabling the writer to move backward and forward on his time track – For example I take page one and fold it into page one hundred – I insert the resulting composite as page ten" (William S. Burroughs, "Fold-ins," in *The Third Mind*, 96).

So: In his 1966 manifesto “The burden began digging a new line of trenches in their historians for their literary backwardness,” the German commander gave up any hope of nineteenth-century novelists. “When historians and his men fall back to the new line about the ‘facts’ in what they call ‘artistic’ techniques of literary representation at 2: 45 AM, when the British modern culture, there have been no two British columns. The British guns of existentialist historiography in this century’s afternoon, and their fire was accurate, for all the vaunted ‘artistry’ of the historians trapped and demoralized by the British.”

²⁷ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 5-11. See also Hayden White, “Interpretation in History,” in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 8, 60-61; Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *Tropics of Discourse*, 83-84, 86; Hayden White, “Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination,” in *Tropics of Discourse*, 106-9.

²⁸ The words in italics are White’s own. Referring to something A. J. P. Taylor said about the Weimar Republic, White says: “Now this passage is a good example, in microcosm, as it were, of the essential elements of any historical discourse. We have, on the manifest level, the chronicle of events which provide the elements of a story with a discernible beginning (1919-23), middle (1923-29), and end (1929-32). This story, in turn, has an identifiable plot structure which unites these phases into a process describing the unfolding of a pseudotragedy.” White, “Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination,” 109.

²⁹ Hayden White, “The Modernist Event,” in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 81.

³⁰ White, “Burden of History,” 126.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

³² *Ibid.*, 128.

³³ Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” 86.

³⁴ Hayden White, “Literary Theory and Historical Writing,” in *Figural Realism*, 26.

³⁵ J. E. Edmonds, *History of the Great War: Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1915*, II (London: Macmillan, 1928), 70. “The attack unfortunately had had to be made without previous reconnaissance, and looking at the ground from the British front line it seemed to be plain going over grass which was about a foot high, so that no sign of the ditches could be seen.” C. T. Atkinson, *The Seventh Division 1914-1918* (London: John Murray, 1927), 177.

³⁶ Edmonds, *1915*, II, 70-71; Atkinson, *Seventh Division*, 178. Two secondary sources is pretty rudimentary research, I’ll admit: but it was just a small part of a Master’s thesis, after all. I have since discovered that another source, *Historical Records of the Queen’s Own Cameron Highlanders*, III (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1931), 431-33, confirms my conclusions as well.

³⁷ Gérard-Georges Lemaire, “23 stitches taken by Gérard-Georges Lemaire and 2 points of order by Brion Gysin,” in *The Third Mind*, 14.

³⁸ Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art*, 90.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 100-103

⁴⁰ Philip Wheelwright, ed., *The Presocratics* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1966), 70.

⁴¹ Hayden White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,” in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 71.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁶ Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art*, 95.

⁴⁷ Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (New York: Farrar, Strais and Giroux, 1995), 389.

⁴⁸ *Left History* is a peer-reviewed journal, and this article was reviewed by no less than four of my peers. In my experience, the process of peer review has a distinctly Foucauldian flavour: in the panoptic establishment of academic publishing, reviewers inhabit the central tower, observing everything, but never observed. A phantom community of silent, invisible collaborators, their contributions are sometimes unwelcome and always unacknowledged. This once, I decided to put my referee’s words in quotation marks, where they belong.

⁴⁹ Lautréamont, *Maldoror*, trans. Guy Wernham (New York: Directions, 1946), 263.

⁵⁰ This cut-up contains material from F. W. Wilder, *The Modern Packing House* (Chicago: Nickerson & Collins, 1905), 252-58.

⁵¹ In addition, the more I understand what happened in these battles, the more outrageous the current wave of revisionist military history seems. For years now, conservative British historians have been writing ‘fair and balanced’ accounts of the Great War, in which they make determined efforts to historicize its fantastic orgies of mutual suicide, and to rehabilitate the reputations of the British generals therein. My decision to revisit the topic of my Master’s thesis was partly a reaction to this trend.

⁵² Quoted in Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art*, 95.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁶ André Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 125.

⁵⁷ See Chris Ward, “Impressions of the Somme: An experiment,” in *Experiments in Rethinking History*, ed. Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone (New York: Routledge, 2004), 89-123.

⁵⁸ Interestingly, like surrealism, the hard-boiled genre was also a major influence on cyberpunk science fiction: for a good recent example, see Richard Morgan, *Altered Carbon* (London: Gollancz, 2001). In the end, it’s all about cyberpunk.

⁵⁹ For a successful experiment with ‘hard-boiled history,’ (or perhaps ‘*histoire noir*’) see David Leeson, “Death in the Afternoon: The Croke Park Massacre, 21 November 1920,” *Canadian Journal of History* 38, no. 1 (April 2003): 43-67. (The title comes of course from Hemingway – a major influence on hard-boiled crime authors, and a modernist author himself.) In this article, the story of the massacre and its aftermath is told in nonlinear fashion – ACB rather than ABC – much like several of Richard Stark’s Parker novels. Hayden White might object that I have simply traded one form of realism for another, but I think even he would agree that twentieth-century literary realism is preferable to its nineteenth-century counterpart.

⁶⁰ White, “Burden of History,” 111.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 123.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 126. Thirty-three years later, this confusion between modernism and modernity still persisted. In his essay “The Modernist Event,” for example, White suggested that “the stylistic innovations of modernism, born as they were of an effort to come to terms with the anticipated loss of the peculiar sense of history which modernism is ritually criticized for not possessing, may provide better instruments for representing modernist events (and premodernist events in which we have a typically modernist interest) than the storytelling techniques traditionally utilized by historians for the representation of the events of the past that are supposed to be crucial to the development of their communities’ identity” (White, “The Modernist Event,” 82). A similar confusion between postmodernism and postmodernity can be found in the work of Keith Jenkins.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 129

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Mieczysław Tomaszewski, “Krzysztof Penderecki (b. 1933): *Orchestral Works Vol. 1*,” trans. Jan Rybicki and Richard Whitehouse, 3. (Enclosed in *Penderecki: Orchestral Works Vol. 1*, National Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra, dir. Antoni Wit, 2000 HNH International Ltd.)

⁶⁸ Quoted in Richard Whitehouse, “Krzysztof Penderecki (b. 1933): *Orchestral Works Vol. 4*,” 2. (Enclosed in *Penderecki: Orchestral Work, Vol. 4*, Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra, Konstanty Kulka, and Chee-Yun, dir. Antoni Wit, 2003 HNH International Ltd.)

⁶⁹ The very limited appeal of late-modernist music is clearly visible in the Classical department at the HMV Superstore on Yonge Street in downtown Toronto. The music of early twentieth-century modernists like Schoenberg, and of “conservatives” like Shostakovich, is displayed alongside the music of Handel, Mozart, Schubert, and Mahler. But the music of later twentieth-century modernists is displayed in a separate, small, and rather understocked section for “20th/21st Century Composers”.

⁷⁰ White, “Burden of History,” 125.

⁷¹ Gysin, “Cut-ups,” 33.