

Fictional Plots and Historical Explanation: A Response to David Leeson's "Cutting Through History"

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By choosing the technique of the cut-up (as Leeson notes, the cut-up was already a surrealist exercise long before William Burroughs introduced it to the mainstream American avant-garde) to explore the possibilities of using non-traditional narrative procedures for a historical account, David Leeson provides his readers with a fine confirmation of perhaps the single most important argument of Hayden White's work, namely that the fundamental mode of historiographical explanation consists in the historian's construction of a plot. Since the cut-up is a surrealistic technique precisely intended to defeat meaning and to free the resulting narrative from the author's own interpretative control, Leeson's essay functions as a rather elegant *reductio ad absurdum* that demonstrates the absolute identity of meaning and plot structure in history.

As Paul Veyne has convincingly argued, historical explanation is not at all analogous to classical scientific theory, for historical inquiry has nothing to do with the search for the articulation of a general law (along the lines of "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction" or $c^2=a^2+b^2$) that would subsume a group of superficially unrelated individual phenomena such that each individual phenomenon could be construed as an illustration of the law. Rather, historical explanation aims to understand a singularity – not all battles but the attack by the fourth Guards Brigade on the afternoon of 18 May, for example, or the Battle of Festubert, or even World War I. Each are singularities; each is capable of being taken as a whole object of historical knowledge. And to do this, a historian offers a narrative account, one that proceeds as thickly as the evidence will allow, to show the interplay of chance, deliberation, material conditions and their intended and unintended consequences. The historian, that is, creates within a given medium – typically prose – a narrative representation of some segment of the past, and what we call the meaning is the result of very deliberate intellectual activity addressed to each of the key terms in the preceding clause. How to deal with the constraints of the medium, the decisions about where and how to segment time, the sort of questions that the historian addresses to the documentation, indeed what the historian takes to be adequate documentation in the first place, all play a role in determining the properties of the representation that the historian creates.

In "The Burden of History," Hayden White observed that in offering such narrative accounts, historians have overwhelmingly relied on the protocols of nineteenth-century realistic fiction even as writers of fiction in the twentieth

century were submitting these very protocols to intense challenges. The point is that plots and the protocols of representation that produce them are neither cognitively indifferent nor value neutral. The fragmentation, discontinuity, and complex temporality that characterize the “avant-garde” techniques of representation of a Woolf or a Joyce or a Musil were not merely the products of artistic experimentation for its own sake. They were challenges to the ideological presuppositions and unacknowledged assumptions that underlay the conventional sense of reality as such, and they were meant to question those presuppositions and force those assumptions to be consciously addressed. When historians continue to use the protocols of nineteenth-century fiction as if they went without saying, 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.

In brief, if White’s essay can be read as a call for the historian to consider new kinds of narrative procedures it is only insofar as it is primarily a call for the historian to reconsider the unconscious and unexamined assumptions about the nature of human action in time that come with conventional procedures of historical explanation. It is no accident, in this light, that since 1966, the year of the first appearance of “The Burden of History,” much of the most significant work in women’s history, in anthropologically based work in medieval and early modern religious history, as well as in theoretically sophisticated work in postcolonial history has, in fact, not only stimulated far-reaching discussion about the nature of historical documentation, but has also raised some of the same questions, from the side of practice, about historical narrative – including most significantly questions of change over time, of social discontinuity, and not least questions of small and large scale periodization – that White’s essay raised theoretically.

When we turn to what Leeson disarmingly calls “history’s tobacco industry,” military history, “the war and society school” is not the best example to consider, for even though Keegan’s Weberian typology in *The Face of Battle* is obviously intellectually far more compelling than the old-fashioned genre painting narratives that Keegan criticized, it is still wedded not only to the representational techniques of nineteenth-century realism but more significantly to the sense of the battle field, seen from the perspective of military command, as the place of significant historical action. More to the point, as illustrations of the dependence of protocols of narrative representation on assumptions about historical agency, it seems to me, are those ground-breaking narratives, whether reportage or quasi-fictional, that emerged from the Vietnam war. I am thinking of Michael Herr’s *Despatches* and the astonishing North Vietnamese autobiographical novel *The Sorrows of War* by Bao Ninh. And Stendhal, of course, had already in the nineteenth century brilliantly depicted the Battle of

Waterloo from the point of view of a marginal soldier who did not quite know where he was or what he was doing, and in the process Stendhal rather completely overturned the conventions of novelistic representation. It is not by trying out cut-ups or surrealistic exercises but rather by developing a radical and critical sense of historical action and its relation to violence, by reformulating the temporal and spatial delimitations of "battle," and by developing a truly dialectical exploration of the multiform relations of war and society that the historian will be thrust willy-nilly into the narrative possibilities of the twenty-first century.