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THE ETHICS OF FINDING AND MAKING THE PAST

DISCOVERING THE PAST: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ETHICS OF SCIENTIFIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

Background: The Birth of Scientific Historiography

In the wake of the rise of nation-states and remarkable technological advances, scientific historiography was born—propelled by the view that “what really happened” is a viable object of investigation.¹ By freeing professional academic historians from the need to please autocrats and aligning their investigative practices with those techniques that had led to great progress in the natural sciences, hope that events in the real historical past could be truly known was fed. Such sanguinity was relatively unheard of until the nineteenth century, when the scientific study of the past took hold. While a few historians, like Jean Mabillon in France and David Hume somewhat later in England, developed standards for assessing the reliability and authenticity of sources, there was little consensus among scholars that knowledge of past events could be satisfactorily attained. Prior to the establishing of the first European chair in History and Morals at the College de France in 1769 (and long after this event as well), information concerning the past—as compared to what could be known of the natural world present at hand—was often considered not only difficult but impossible to come by. This view was articulated by the followers of Descartes and La Mothe le Vayer. According to these skeptics the reality of the past, the measure against which all claims to historical truth are supposedly advanced, lay irretrievably beyond the reach of the researcher. Such doubt, as is evident in the adoption of Cartesian ideas by Jesuits in France, was not incompatible with the common practice of deriving historical knowledge from purportedly faithful,

longstanding intra-traditional sources. As noted by George Huppert and Paul Veyne in their assessments of popular reaction to the early juridical-style use of footnotes as confirmation by Estienne Pasquier in the sixteenth century, most critics objected to this encumbering of the text because it attempted to secure legitimation and authorization to knowledge of the past that could only be bestowed by time itself. Historical truth, as Veyne wrote, at this time was still primarily the product of “tradition and vulgate.”²

Scientific historiography in nineteenth-century Europe takes two chief forms, one encountered in the work of early German historicists and the other in the work of French and British positivists. The latter held that human activity could be explained causally, like other phenomena in the natural world, in terms of generalizing laws. The former famously denied that this was possible, instead arguing that human actions could only be “understood” through altogether different means—that is, by attending to the specific historical and cultural circumstances which lend meaning to human sayings and doings. While there do exist important differences between the two schools and within them, there is much that is shared—including a generally undeveloped theory of meaning.³ This is important to note, as oftentimes the polemic between the advocates of these opposing camps has led commentators to emphasize incompatibilities between the members of these traditions. The practice of labeling one’s beliefs about the past “true” because they were based on evidence obtained through following rigorous methods which supposedly limited eisogetical contamination was widespread—adopted not only by positivist historians but many historicists as well!⁴ While positivist historians like Henry Thomas Buckle were clearly impressed and influenced by Auguste Comte’s attempt to discover scientific laws guiding the progress of history—in keeping with the recent arguments of Eckhardt Fuchs—they were no less inspired by the work of German scientific historiographers. Rather than viewing, for example, Buckle’s concern to establish a nomothetical model for historical research as a challenge to that of German historiographers—which is how Buckle’s detractors in Germany often characterized it—Fuchs shows that this nineteenth-century English historian understood his work to be a supplement.⁵ Comte, Buckle, and other positivist historians’ efforts to discover historical laws through inductive generalizations—which might aid in not only understanding events in the past but direct action in the present and future—depended upon the data produced by the work of other professional historians who deployed painstaking methods for objectively securing knowledge of what happened in the past. Beliefs about the past were true, for positivists and—as I will show in detail—some early German historicists like Leopold von Ranke only if they could be anchored by unassailable knowledge of what actually occurred.

Even though historians like Ranke have maintained a strict division between the discovery of evidence from which the past might be reconstructed (facts) and their “ethical” interpretation (values), devoting themselves exclusively to the former, they nonetheless produced what amounts to a professional ethics for practitioners of the science of history. In general, questions related to what should count as a reliable belief about the past have been allegedly resolved epistemologically—specifically, by linking propositions about what occurred, through the analysis of historical remains, with past states of affairs. Professional historians concur not only on reliable methods for investigating the past, but their assessments owe their uniformity to the fact that the past upon which they are patterned has already been determined independently of their researches. Each investigator, if he or she effectively combats bias and approaches the traces of the past in the present objectively, encounters the same preestablished past—even though historians and others might describe it in an indefinite number of ways. Specific strategies are carefully tailored to determine the best ways of coming to know and preserve the details of events which have already taken place. In both Germany and France, there was a proliferation of various introductions and guides to scientific methods which ought to be employed by historians.⁶ Commitment to common standards and agreed upon facts of the matter was to condition all investigation into what happened in the past.

Leopold von Ranke and the Scientific Study of the Past

Ranke and the German school of “scientific history” which he founded during his long and extremely productive career (c.1795–1886) stand out against the backdrop of romantic and patriotic German historiography which precedes it. Ranke, like his immediate predecessors, rebelled against the writing of history in service of Church and kings, which is characteristic of much European historiography before the nineteenth century. He also found fault with historians who championed nationalist mythologies and naïve notions of human progress, the primary motivation of which was to bolster the emerging states of Europe. Ranke considered the unwarranted commendations offered by secular historians just as harmful to good historiography as the flattering accounts of the past that were offered to appease religious authorities. As he remarked near the end of his life: “I found by comparison that the truth was more interesting and beautiful than the romance. I turned away from it and resolved to avoid all invention and imagination in my works and to stick to facts.”⁷

Ranke did acknowledge key differences between the scientific method deployed by the historian and that used by scientists studying the natural world. He admitted that historical understanding was “not merely an extension of the subject, nor is it merely a borrowing from the object; it

is, rather, both simultaneously.”⁸ This is reflected in the Rankean goal of bringing together *Geschichte*, the professional academic German term for history derived from the verb *geschehen* (“to happen”), with *Historie* (“knowledge”).⁹ First and foremost for Ranke, the unprocessed data surviving from the past needed to be brought together and examined in the same manner that scientists supposedly worked. Ranke, as one of the original pioneers of textual criticism, provided historians with an influential model of just how this could be done.¹⁰ It was the function of such “lower criticism” to simply establish indisputable textual facts that no reader could deny—for example, they set out to determine whether a mark on a primary manuscript was a “P” or an “R.” This foundational practice, upon which all “higher” interpretive and valuational criticism necessarily depends, was keenly focused on getting the oftentimes overlooked basics—upon which historical interpretation was based—correct. Famously, Ranke was a great supporter of nineteenth-century efforts to compile a single, all-encompassing collection of textual sources, critically edited, on medieval German history (*Monumenta Germaniae Historica*). He trained several students for this specific task—such as Georg Waitz, who took over the mammoth project in 1875.

Second, in a move which separated historians from other scientists, Ranke maintained that human behavior couldn’t be explained causally in terms of general laws—contra positivists like Comte and Buckle—and needed to be “understood” (*verstehen*) by means altogether different than those adopted in the natural sciences. This was best accomplished by focusing on the specific meanings of narratives composed by authors who were identified through attending to the detailed historical and cultural contexts in which they were embedded. This strategy has been commonly labeled “historicism” (*Historismus*). History was always concerned, as opposed to philosophy, with attaining knowledge of the particular.¹¹ Universal history, such as advanced by Hegel, was dismissed by Ranke, who thought that the historian should almost exclusively involve herself with researching the individual and diverse influential ideas which give meaning to human activity in a particular context rather than focusing on a single all-consuming and self-generating *telos*. According to the Hegelian view, “only the idea would have an independent life, and all human beings would be mere shadows or phantoms inflated by this idea.”¹² This is not to say, however, that Ranke rejected the predominant idealist sentiment which held that human history was best understood as the working out of ideals in the real, the general in the particular—that is, in the lives of people and their institutions. Instead Ranke wrote at the end of his early 1821 lecture to the Prussian Academy of Sciences titled “Wilhelm von Humboldt: ‘On the Historian’s Task’”: “In its final, yet simplest solution the historian’s task is the presentation of the struggle of an idea to realize itself in actuality.”¹³

Ranke's notorious goal as a historian, outlined in the first line of the same lecture, was to record "what actually happened" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). While he acknowledged that some pasts could not be known, in general he never doubted the effectiveness of his overall scientific approach to finding the past. On account of this confidence, his work bears little resemblance at all to that of the young Friedrich Nietzsche's, another contemporary student of classical philology, who argued that historiography could never be a science.¹⁴ Ranke clearly thought that what happened in the past, including the ideas which motivated individuals and inspired human events, could be known with seemingly transparent surety. He attended exclusively to epistemological issues, focusing not on the "if" question—that is, whether the details of what occurred in the past could be known—but instead on how this was possible.

Without doubt, much of Ranke's work, as Georg Iggers has noted, reflected the German idealism and emergent historicism of his time. Like most who set for themselves the goals of finding and representing what has occurred in the past, when pressed Ranke admitted what actually turns out to be a most common view—adopted tellingly by some of Ranke's methodological opponents as well¹⁵—that the past was inaccessible in a way that objects available to observation in the present are not. For example, in his 1821 lecture cited earlier—in spite of Ranke's usual practice of cautioning historians not to "add" anything in their descriptions of historical evidence—he stated that events in the past were "only partially visible in the world of the senses" and that much needed to be contributed by "intuition, inference, and guesswork."¹⁶ Ranke, however, in addition to maintaining that the primary objects of historical investigation are artifacts which have survived into the present and that these must be first approached scientifically, thought that there existed determinate states of affairs in the past—similar to Platonic ideals which lie behind what can be viewed in the present—on which the truth of his historical statements ultimately rested. In this way, a relation between subjects and objects derived from the presumed structure of sensory observation in the present was retained in Ranke's historical work. Beliefs about the past were considered true if they could be linked up to bygone invisible realities which exert a causal force on how they are subsequently represented. In this way, for Ranke, the objects discovered by historians resemble the "real" mathematical ideal forms ascertained by Plato and Gottlob Frege.¹⁷

While Ranke definitely thought that there was an imaginative, poetic side to the historian's work, clear adherence to a correspondence theory of truth underlies his idealism. Like many others, Ranke maintained that scientific investigation itself was a combination of making and finding the past. Both subjective and objective factors influencing historical judgment needed

to be taken into account. Ranke's claim, in spite of his radical rhetoric which often outpaced his most thought-out positions, was not that historians could appeal to evidence as to what occurred in the past established independently of linguistic descriptions constituted in distinct social contexts. Instead, he simply maintained that the interpretation or valuation of such historical facts should not be a part of the active research program of the historian. This is why Ranke emphasized the need to control the isogetical contributions brought by historians to their projects and hence privileged the "object" of historical investigation. "What actually happened"—not just actions and events but also thoughts—should guide historical research. Ranke characterized the creative aspect of the historian's work as consisting in her ability to detect the general shape and progress of historical events, even as an artist grasps "the truth of form." In the 1821 lecture, he wisely noted that specific knowledge of the past "always presupposes a knowledge of the general under which it is comprehended. It is in this sense that the understanding of events must be guided by ideas."¹⁸ Ranke, however, went on to write:

It is, of course, self-evident that these ideas emerge from the mass of events themselves, or, to be more precise, originate in the mind through contemplation of these events undertaken in a truly historical spirit: the ideas are not borrowed by history like an alien addition, a mistake so easily made by so-called philosophical history. Historical truth is, generally speaking, much more threatened by philosophical than by artistic handling, since the latter is at least accustomed to granting freedom to its subject matter. . . . It is to the active and productive forces, therefore, that the historian must turn. Here he stays with his proper domain. What the historian can do in order to *bring*, engraved on his soul, that form to the observation of the labyrinthine events of world history through which alone true connections will emerge, is to *abstract* that form from the events themselves.¹⁹

It was the goal of the historian to produce an exact mirror image or map of "what actually happened in the past." The historian's representation of historical events should be derived "from the events themselves."

A Professional Ethics for Historians

In another of his earliest works, specifically in the appendix of his first 1824 publication *Zur kritik neuerer geschichtschreiber*, Ranke laid out standards for the use of historical textual sources.²⁰ Historians must agree that the nearest witness to an event, both in time and place, is generally the best. Likewise,

the correspondence of actors closest to the scene Ranke deemed more reliable than stories told by distant chroniclers. On account of this, much of his historical writing was centered on political drama and the writings of famous personalities. Later, Ranke will spell out more consistently the need to attend to the historical stages upon which these individuals' lives are played out. Unfortunately, Ranke gives only minimal consideration to underlying social and economic conditions. Ranke, as summarized by Georg Iggers, "had little understanding for the political conflicts and the clashes of interests which take place in the state."²¹ Although he has frowned upon others for having romanticized the past, I think he can be legitimately criticized for having done the same in his reconstructions which are largely dedicated to the lives of prominent persons.

A further correlate of Ranke's belief that the past imposes itself on the professional researcher is his insistence that historians approach historical evidence displaying practiced "impartiality" (*Unparteilichkeit*). As he writes in "On the Character of Historical Science":

It is not opinions which we examine. We are dealing with existence which has often the most decisive influence in political and religious disputes. Here we rise to contemplate the essential character of the opposing, conflicting elements, and see how complex and entangled they are. It is not up to us to judge about error and truth as such. We merely observe one figure arising side by side with another figure; life, side by side with life; effect, side by side with countereffect. Our task is to penetrate them to the bottom of their existence and to portray them with complete objectivity.²²

While Ranke admitted that it was very difficult to stand back and "describe" what occurred in the past as a passive onlooker, avoiding bias and the tendency to judge the actions of personalities examined, nevertheless he considered such a detached and disinterested approach possible. Committed first and foremost to what has actually occurred, the historian's duty was to keep personal values from influencing an investigation. The historian should leave it to others to decide whether a historical event was good or bad, positive or negative. Contrary to those who maintained that the historian's own values cannot be effectively curtailed from influencing analysis and that "selfishness and lust for power are the mainsprings of all affairs," Ranke encouraged historians to be confident that such difficulties could be overcome.²³ He goes on to write that these reservations did not "restrict freedom of observation; no, the more documentary, the more exact, and the more fruitful the research is, the more freely can our art unfold, which only flourishes in the element of immediate, undeniable truth!"

Neither Ranke nor many of his students questioned the possible political consequences of enshrining their so-called certain views about the past. The highest ethical value that Rankean historians could cultivate was to disregard the political and religious ramifications of their work. For example, when dealing with highly charged disputes between religious parties regarding what occurred in the past, Ranke argued that it was not the job of historians to judge which parties were right or wrong. This is his point when he writes: "We merely observe one figure arising side by side with another figure; life, side by side with life; effect, side by side with countereffect. Our task is to penetrate them to the bottom of their existence and to portray them with complete objectivity."²⁴ Ranke, regrettably seems to have been entirely unaware of the uses to which "an objective point of view" and declarations of indifference might be put by those producers of historical knowledge consciously and unconsciously advancing their own personal interests, as well as those of clients, political parties, and professional associations.

Recently, Aviezer Tucker has drawn attention to what is perhaps Ranke's most important contribution to modern historiography. Following primarily the example of Barthold Niebuhr and F. A. Wolf, whose work had a great influence on Ranke, the collective pursuit of knowledge concerning the past was accentuated.²⁵ Acknowledging not only the contribution of the general context or whole to the understanding of the specific, Ranke began his 1821 lecture by stating that "the facts of history are in their several connecting circumstances little more than the results of tradition and scholarship which one has agreed to accept as true."²⁶ Once again, however, this claim—which sounds very close to one made by Richard Rorty, who argued that truth is what our colleagues let us get away with—needs to be reviewed carefully. Ranke's emphasis on the role of consensus among historians, in the determining of the real past, should not be taken to mean that he held historical truth to be nothing more than what was agreed upon by authorized experts. Professional historians concur not only on methods for investigating the past, but their assessments owe their uniformity to the fact that the departed reality of the past upon which they are patterned has already been determined independently of their researches. This constitutes what Tucker, a contemporary writer on the philosophy of historiography who shares Ranke's insistence upon the need to keep the discovery of historical facts separate from their interpretation, labels "an identical core of scientific historiography" which is susceptible to interpretation in a variety of different ways.²⁷ Each investigator, if she effectively combats bias and approaches the objects of historical investigation objectively, encounters upon examination of the available historical evidence the same past.

The innovative nature of such a communal approach to the study of the past in the nineteenth century should not be lost on the contem-

porary reader. Just because collaboration in historical studies might be the rule today, for the most part this was not the case until the resources of states were finally channeled in support of great ventures to accumulate, examine, and order documents and artifacts related to their preferred pasts. The problem with this methodology is the same as that which was noted at the end of the last paragraph vis-à-vis the individual historian. Can the consensus of expert scientists or historians, who agree upon a collective body of historical facts surviving into the present and conduct their investigations following the same methods, ever be described as unbiased or “impartial”? Is their certainty regarding the details of the past—all the more potent as it is shared—defensible to outsiders who do not share the same values? The skeptic might argue that Rankean historians unreflectively participate in a charade, one that in spite of their claims to the contrary is often self-serving. Working together in accordance to common values and standards, Rankeans have undoubtedly made it their professional duty to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate historiography as well as to determine what counts for historical facts in conformity to which their narratives about the past are constructed. The critic, however, will argue that agreed upon historical facts are themselves interpretations of what actually happened in the past and, in the most extreme cases, simply fictions.

CREATING THE PAST: THE ETHICS OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE PAST

Background: Challenging Ranke

In recent years, the scientific historiography of Ranke and others who have shared his commitment to discovering the past has been challenged repeatedly. In the United States, historians like Charles Beard and Carl Becker—labeled relativists by many²⁸—questioned whether historians could ever be impartial observers. Instead, they charged in opposition to the Rankean scientific historiography promoted by Langlois and Seignobos, among others, that every historical inquiry was conditioned by the prejudices and points of view of historians themselves. In Europe, twentieth-century hermeneutical approaches championed by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, among others, denied that bias could ever be eliminated from historical studies. The circle of interpretation, which dictates that every interpretation is already based upon an interpretation, was inescapable. Others argued, more radically, that it was increasingly futile if not impossible to overcome epistemological difficulties associated with the acquisition of knowledge of the past. This is particularly evident in the recent work of postmodern and postcolonial theorists like F. R. Ankersmit, Tony Bennett, and most famously Hayden

White, who have described what happened in the past as totally inaccessible and charged that so-called proper historical method is itself the product of narrativizing and ideological interests on the part of the historian.

In the next section, I will review Hayden White's influential critique of scientific historiography. White, in contrast to Ranke who emphasized the need for the impartial discovery and compilation of historical facts, insists that all historical work is imbued with values—essentially, a matter of interpretation.²⁹ White, especially in his earliest published works—for example, the essays “The Burden of History,” “Interpretation in History,” and the landmark 1973 book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth Century*³⁰—argued quite provocatively that historical narrative is in no substantive way different from fictional narrative. “History” is better understood to be the product of the historian's imagination—as much invented as found.³¹ I will attempt to discern precisely what he means by this. As a response to arguments similar to those presented by White, the confidence of consumers of the past and even some historians in the West has waned.³² In spite of White's occasional denial that he is a radical skeptic or pessimist when it comes to acquiring knowledge of the past,³³ I will argue that White's work provides an excellent case study of a historian who both denies that the past can be known as an object of inquiry with certainty and constructs an ethical approach to historical interpretation based upon this premise. In the next chapter, I will present an alternative story. Deweyans might admit to not being certain. This, however, does not mean that they are thorough-going skeptics—left adrift “on a sea of doubt.” I direct much criticism in this monograph against those who promote such misunderstandings of Dewey's thought.

Hayden White: History as Narrative Fiction

Hayden White, in addition to reviving something of the skepticism toward the investigation of the past that was present prior to the advent of the “scientific” study of history, also transformed the way that historians have traditionally viewed the study of narrative—namely, as an instrument in appreciating and even explaining events in the past. Typically, European scholars like Ranke, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, R. G. Collingwood, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur stressed that human behavior is best accounted for through understanding the conceptual and symbolic meanings that agents directly relate to their activity. Such understanding—often associated with the *verstehen* and hermeneutical traditions—is captured through attending to narrative, which opens up an invaluable window to the past. American philosophers of history like Arthur Danto, William Dray, and Louis Mink have also attempted

to show how the study of narrative form allows for a non-nomological type of explanation—as opposed to the “covering law” explanation in the work of the twentieth-century positivist Carl Hempel³⁴—that is particularly useful to historians studying past human behavior. Narratives, according to these authors, possess features which enable them to communicate the import of sequences of consecutive events to which they “correspond”—something that scientific explanations more assiduously construed do not allow.

Just like Ranke, White conceded from his earliest writings onward that the historian’s task has two parts. In *Metahistory*, he writes: “As an investigator, the historian is engaged in science; as narrator, in art.”³⁵ But whereas Ranke privileged the contribution of impartially discerned historical evidence which serve to ground knowledge of real pasts, White famously insisted that the facts from which “what actually happened” can be discerned always depend upon their narrative expression. History, he writes in this early text, is not to be understood as equivalent to “the past.” Rather, what counts as history is better labeled “metahistory,” which is always the product of narrative prose discourse of which there are four possible types or emplotments: romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire. These match up with four different modes of explanation and ideological implication, each of which is identified ultimately with four tropes derived from classical rhetoric—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony.³⁶ Central to White’s approach is his belief that every historical narrative is first and foremost a “text,” and that these texts are never exceptional with respect to their meaning or truth. Like Roland Barthes in “The Discourse on History,” White refuses to admit that the work of historians is fundamentally different from that of writers of fiction.³⁷ Both historical and fictional narrative—usually considered to be diametrically opposed to each other—bring form and coherence, poetic rather than scientific in nature, to past events which lack these qualities for us on account of the storyteller’s inability to effect their recovery.

White has favorably quoted from Barthes’ “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” as well:

Claims concerning the “realism” of narrative are therefore to be discounted. . . . The function of narrative is not to “represent,” it is to constitute a spectacle. . . . Narrative does not show, does not imitate. . . . “What takes place” in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally *nothing*; “what happens” is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming.³⁸

The problem with traditional nineteenth-century historiography, White argued persuasively, is that the majority of historians persist in understanding

the facts of historical research to be predetermined—waiting to be discovered. Instead, White thinks that historians impose on the remnants of past occurrences an order or “closure”—ever proceeding from beginning to end—which even collectively these events do not possess. This is the mistake made, for example, by Collingwood, whom White has accused of failing to understand that “no given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story; the most it might offer to the historian are story *elements*.”³⁹ In other words, we only inherit fragments divorced from their original coherence and thereupon create new stories about them. The only facts about the past available to or capable of being discovered by the historian—what White when addressing texts that have survived into the present associates with both individual “statements” and the collections of these arranged sequentially known as “chronicles”—are always inappropriately though necessarily supplied with invented, foreign meanings in the stories told about them. Such data, however, which serves as the primary starting place of all historical speculation, is “open-ended” having no obvious relation to origins or conclusions.⁴⁰

Contrary to the European and American scholars cited in the opening paragraph of this section who have emphasized the positive role that the study of narrative can play in the representation of the past, White argued that the supposed narratives to which historians’ efforts at understanding and explanation correspond never existed. Instead, the historian as described by White has no access to events in the past. The problem with traditional historiography, according to White, is that the accounts of the past that it offers are never purely descriptive and are incapable of amounting to something more than the equivalent of fiction. Historians have basically made the mistake of thinking that the predominant narrative form in which they represent the past is itself the object of their so-called investigations! White, however, has insisted—for example, as summarized in the preface to *The Content of the Form*—that neither individual persons nor groups in the past have lived the meaningful stories told about them since the time of Herodotus.⁴¹ No historical narrative is ever able to simulate the conditions of actual lives lived in the past.

In his earliest published essay, “The Burden of History,” White’s doubts extend even deeper. Adopting a view of the past as “sublime” or only aesthetically significant in the tradition of Arthur Schopenhauer, the early writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jacob Burckhardt—the latter, a dissident student of Ranke, who had decided that there was no “inherent meaning or significance” in the past—White attempts to free himself from the “limitations of the ‘storytelling’ technique.”⁴² The study of history should never be a “refuge” for “all of those ‘sane’ men who excel at finding the simple in the complex and the familiar in the strange.”⁴³ The past is

fundamentally unknowable, ever separated from the historian who in vain attempts to become well acquainted with it.

In the essay “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,”⁴⁴ White spelled out carefully not only the politics of emergent scientific historiographies in the nineteenth century but also a utopian alternative.⁴⁵ The desire to represent past events and reach beyond the basic “confusion” of the historical record—either through nomological scientific explanation or empathic narrative understanding—invariably reflects, in White’s view, moralizing interests.⁴⁶ These attempts were most importantly associated with the “consolidation of the (bourgeois) nation state.”⁴⁷ In an age when conflict raged between diverse political forces, some more well established than others but each relying upon distinct readings of the past to support their claims to power, White wrote that “it made good sense” especially for new states to found a supposedly independent historical discipline. “Objective” determination of the past sanctioned new social and political orders.

According to White, historians beginning with Ranke—who I think White has correctly characterized as focused upon finding historical facts established independently of the historian’s evaluative interpretation of them in spite of his idealism⁴⁸—have not been as impartial as they have made themselves out to be. While they have eschewed becoming entangled in the political, their claims to be disinterested inquirers constitute in themselves appeals to authority.⁴⁹ At the end of “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,” White makes the same point as at the beginning. He maintained that the study of the past “is never innocent, ideologically or otherwise, whether launched from the political perspective of the Left, the Right, or the Center.”⁵⁰ Both bourgeois and Marxist historians have expunged from the past its sublime character—that is, as awe-inspiring and bewildering spectacle—by treating it as both a real and comprehensible object of investigation. In so doing, historical thinking has been “domesticated.”⁵¹ The “suppression” of the radical otherness of the sublime in history supplies not only the rationale for secular and democratic visions of socially responsible behavior but for fascist ideologies as well. By illegitimately casting the past as an intelligible object of investigation, historians have committed a grave error with dire consequences. They have tamed what White’s hero, the German poet Schiller, has referred to as the “confusion,” “uncertainty,” and “moral anarchy” of the past: its essential strangeness.⁵² The “disciplining” of the past—that is, the imposing of illusory order and narrative meaning upon that which has none with the aim of buttressing political agendas on the left and right—needs to be scaled back and eliminated.

In many ways, White’s claim that the narratives of historians never adequately correspond to what actually happened in the past strikes a chord

similar to that found in the work of Ferdinand Braudel and the *Annales* historians of twentieth-century France. These scholars argued that narrative was an inadequate vehicle for the accurate representation of the past, since it was too readily usurped by factional and individual interests. Instead, they devoted themselves exclusively to the apolitical compilation of the raw data of history—non-narrativized facts surviving into the present such as is provided by annals and even chronicles.⁵³ The *Annalistes* likewise notoriously chose, contra the practice of Ranke, not to focus on the dramatic lives of specific persons but rather only on impersonal details such as geographical, economic, and demographical factors influencing human activity. White's assessment of the *Annales* project, especially in the "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," makes his own position more clear. While it is generally impossible to avoid narrativizing, White suggests that by "representing the moral under the aspect of the aesthetic"—the goal of his own project—the perils associated with value-laden storytelling might be avoided.⁵⁴

White acknowledged that the *Annalistes'* description of archival material is attractive. Even if historians were somehow capable of ethically distancing themselves from the content of their investigations, the *Annalistes*—similarly to White—argued that "there are no grounds to be found in the historical record itself for preferring one way of construing its meaning over another."⁵⁵ Likewise, the *Annalistes'* attempt not to force statements and chronicles into conformity with coherent stories, instead presenting them without beginnings or ends, deserves praise. In "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," White wrote:

It seems eminently rational and, on the face of it, rather prudent. . . . to record only those events about which there could be little doubt as to their occurrence and. . . . to resolve not to interpellate facts on speculative grounds or to advance arguments about how the events are really connected to one another.⁵⁶

On the other hand, the *Annalistes*—like Ranke before—were plainly elaborating on the idea that there exists a core of historical facts or evidence available to the sophisticated, impartial researcher of the past. This was, however, something that White with mixed success attempted to resist.

The main problem with the *Annalistes'* method, according to White, is that they have underestimated—once again to quote Barthes—the "international, transhistorical, transcultural" impulse to narrate.⁵⁷ Just because they have been able to steer clear of dramatizing the lives of the rich and famous, does not mean that they have escaped from narrativizing. Even the blandest of impersonal statistics and non-narrativized factoids tell a story. Furthermore, historians cannot avoid subject matter that is political,

nor should they try to do so. The *Annalistes'* belief that attending to the political is irreconcilable with true scientific study is too similar to the Rankean prejudice that a "science of politics" was desirable and possible to achieve.⁵⁸ One can infer from White's common criticisms that Ranke's quest for impartiality finds its equivalent in the disinterestedness feigned by the *Annalistes*.⁵⁹

The Heterological Ethics of Historical Interpretation

The cure for the desire to represent or narrate historical events "impartially" or "scientifically" has for White always simply been to proceed "aesthetically or morally rather than epistemologically."⁶⁰ What is required, as White declares in the conclusion of "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation," is a new "conception of the historical record as being not a window through which the past 'as it really was' can be apprehended but rather a wall that must be broken through if the 'terror of history' is to be directly confronted and the fear it induces dispelled."⁶¹ Even the sum total of all non-narrativized facts which have survived into the present cannot deliver up the sublime past. Historians must, above all else, recognize the fictitious character of their reconstructions of the past. Impartial, scientific access to historical facts is impossible.

The "terror" that White faces down is not anarchism, nihilism, or any lack of moral direction. He battles, rather, the "'objectivity,' 'modesty,' 'realism,' and 'social responsibility' that has characterized historical studies since their establishment as a professional discipline."⁶² Any scientific historiography which promises practitioners the ability to rise above the political dangerously inhibits self-examination and opens the door to tyrannical abuses. Every new historical narrative should be prefaced by the admission that the past is fundamentally Other, always different from what even the most careful and meticulous researcher imagines it to be. For White, as well as other "heterological historians" like Michel de Certeau and Edith Wyschogrod, the alterity of the past must be ever preserved.⁶³ Historians speak for unknowable others. Optimally, the historian will admit what cannot be known—which is incredibly great—and attempt to make explicit her own interpretive biases. By making the past more familiar, the historian does it a disservice, watering down the sublimity and "Otherness" of the past.

SUMMARY: RANKE AND WHITE

Ranke and White have unmistakably championed very different approaches to the study of the past. Whereas Ranke privileged the discovery of the

past, White emphasized that “what actually happened” is ultimately never anything more than a fiction. While each at times paid lip service to the dual character of historical writing, claiming that it is equal to the sum of both finding and making, their respective projects focused on the opposing sides of this often stated though rarely explained equation. The ethical prescriptions or action guides that they recommended for use by historians have been concerned exclusively with only one or the other of these aspects. Ranke proposed a program which, if followed, supposedly secured the impartiality of the historian and allowed access to uninterpreted evidence of the past. The interpretation of what was discovered, described, and compiled by historians was an almost unrelated concern—one which might, if not put into check by the historian, lead to misapprehension and error. At best, the various interpretations of the facts would be anchored in uninterpreted basic facts. White, alternatively, reserved the largest part of his efforts for making explicit the ways in which what counts for “the past” is constructed and constituted by its different narrators. No historical method can provide researchers with objective evidence from which to reconstruct the past. Every discovery and description was first and foremost a valuation, colored by the story-telling of the investigator. White offers no epistemologically sophisticated strategies or techniques for establishing historical knowledge. Instead, he argues that all knowledge about the past is a matter of interpretation or valuation and can never be impartially posited with any certainty.

There are also several similarities between the work of Ranke and White which should not be overlooked. Firstly, as noted earlier, each has admitted from time to time that the historian’s task includes both finding and making. Ranke, as noted previously, admitted both that the historian exercises some creativity in her representation of the past and that scholarly consensus plays a role in historical investigation. Ranke certainly did not think that the past was “real” after the same manner as the present, a commonplace view which White following in his footsteps and those of the *Annalists* share.⁶⁴ It is partly for this reason that White, who has no problems with scientific investigations of facts as long as they are conducted on objects present to hand, contends that some knowledge of the past is possible through the examination of surviving material culture—“just not scientific knowledge” where the past can be directly investigated.⁶⁵ White’s work owes more to Rankeans and positivists than he might be comfortable admitting. Edith Wyschogrod in *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and Nameless Others* makes a similar observation.⁶⁶ In fact, one of the most important points that I will try to make in this text is that a common logic underlies the arguments of those who claim—seemingly in opposition—that the past is something found or made.