

THE TURBULENT FORTUNES OF NARRATIVITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY HISTORIOGRAPHY

by Charles K. Telfer

1. Introduction

THE SHEER BREADTH of issues involved in twentieth-century discussions over narrativity and its relationship to historiography is staggering. First of all, there is no single accepted definition for historical narrative. We might adopt the common sense definition “a representation of a sequence of non-randomly connected events.”¹ But peculiar emphases abound and the term “narrativity” itself is used in polyvalent fashion.² Additionally, as we enter into the question of narrativity and historiography we find ourselves facing a whole range of questions that involve not only the philosophy of history and historiography in general, but very much involve the disciplines of literary theory, linguistics, and semiotics as well as cultural anthropology and other social sciences.³

With so many topics and subtopics how shall we proceed? To proceed along the lines of intellectual history seems a relatively straightforward way to foray into this area of methodological contention. I think we can best understand

¹ A minimalist definition of narrative shared by “narratologists over the past twenty years,” says Rigney writing in 1987 is that of “a representation of a sequence of non-randomly connected events.” Ann Rigney, “Narrativity and Historical Representation,” *Poetics Today* 12, no. No. 3 (Autumn 1991): 591.

² “A survey of the historiographical literature shows the ‘narrativity’ of ‘narrative history’ being defined in a variety of ways corresponding to a particular system of differences produced by specifically historiographical concerns: 1) Narrative history is distinguished historically and generically from ‘annals’ and ‘chronicles.’ 2) Narrative history is distinguished from structural history on the grounds of its topic, i.e., its concern with short-or long-term diachronic processes or transformations. 3) Narrative (history) involves the figurative representation of unique actors and events and, as such, is distinguished from quantitative, statistical accounts of the world. 4) Narrative (history) is concerned with (the experiences of) individuals, rather than with groups or social trends. 5) Narrative (history) has a privileged relationship with a particular type of subject matter: i.e., it treats political matters rather than social and cultural ones. 6) Narrative (history) is distinguished from analytic discourse, its function being to tell how and not why things happened. 7) Narrative (history) involves a particular mode of cognition or type of explanation which is distinct from nomothetic explanation and which is proper to the historical sciences. 8) Narrative (history) is characterized by its rhetorical appeal and aesthetic qualities. 9) The ‘narrativity’ of narrative history, according to Kellner, is the promise of a meaningful pattern in history; the guarantee that what is represented will ‘contain’ meaning (this unfolding of meaning may or may not take the form of a story). 10) Closely related to Kellner’s use of ‘narrativity’ is Ankersmit’s use of the metatheoretical term ‘narrativism’ to refer to those historians who actually recognize the mediating role of language in producing historical meaning (as opposed to the ‘epistemologists,’ who do not).” Ann Rigney, “Narrativity,” 594–95.

³ Cf. Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge—With a New Epilogue by the Author* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 150.

the twentieth-century debates over narrow questions of historiographical methodology in the light of the broad intellectual shifts in thought taking place in our culture during the last century. I also think that this rather specialized study can provide an interesting portal for considering some major cultural trends that have brought us to where we are at today and set the context not only for professional historians but also for ministers and others seeking to address questions of history in the public arena.

The main sections of this paper will consist of: first a very brief sketch of the nineteenth-century consensus on the use of narrative in historiography. I will then examine the twentieth-century challenges brought to narrative historiography under two headings: first by those seeking to conform the writing of history to the model of the (particularly social) sciences, and second by those influenced by the “literary turn,” i.e. the postmodern critics. I spend the bulk of the paper here, exploring different thinkers characterized by three different emphases (and I identify each group with a particular philosopher—Wittgenstein, Nietzsche or Heidegger—who was particularly influential on these critics). I then outline certain contributions and critiques of postmodernism regarding narrative historiography. And I conclude with some brief reflections on what this survey may mean for us as Christians engaging in the writing of history ourselves.⁴

2. A Nineteenth-Century Consensus regarding Historical Narrative

As historiography became more and more professionalized throughout the nineteenth-century, historians, as would be expected in any field, developed various approaches to their task. Postitivists such as Comte sought scientific objectivity, idealists were particularly influenced both by Kant and Romanticism (such as Hegel who viewed history as advancing dialectically), and historicists underlined change through time. But they all agreed on the importance of narrative to historiography. Narrative was a hallmark of the discipline of the historian and gave a sense of realism to the subject being described.⁵

There was a broad consensus that the task of the historian was to get at the facts, and allow the general contour that arose when they were contemplated in connection with each other to guide the historian in presenting them.⁶ Narrative allowed the writer to present the facts in chronological and causal relationship to each other. Historians were all involved in the grand project of uncovering the details of what happened in the past, and, presenting them to public view in a grand narrative. The historiographic projects of von Ranke’s multi-volume *World History* project (begun in 1880) and the *Cambridge Modern History* series planned by Lord Acton were typical of this nineteenth-century consensus on narrative.⁷

⁴ This essay was originally submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a course in “Old Testament Historiography: Issues and Methods” taught at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the fall of 2009 by Dr. Lawson K. Younger Jr.

⁵ *Ibid.* 600.

⁶ “In past times it was assumed that the shape of the narrative, though not of course its stylistic quality, was predetermined by the nature of the evidence.” Willie Thompson, *Postmodernism and History* (Theory and History; Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 58.

⁷ The Cambridge series first appeared in 1912. I am using traditional, “long nineteenth-century” dates of course.

This is not to say that narrative was the only style of historiography. Alexis de Tocqueville's work on Democracy in America is a famous piece filled with analysis. But narrative was the historian's mainstay.

The understanding of history that emerged in the eighteenth century and became dominant in the nineteenth century rested on several assumptions. One was the notion that there was only one history, *die Geschichte*, that permitted a continuous narrative of historical development. Ranke in 1824 had still entitled his first work *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Peoples*, although he in fact pursued one grand narrative, the emergence of the modern state system at the turn of the sixteenth century. Another idea was that there existed certain key institutions, primarily the state, that occupied the central role in the narrative.⁸

This nineteenth-century consensus in favor of narrative historiography was to undergo sharp critique from at least two main directions in the course of the twentieth-century. These constitute our next two sections.

3. Twentieth-Century Social Scientific Approaches to Historical Narrative

The twentieth-century saw major challenges to the earlier consensus for narrative historiography. One of the impulses in a new direction came from those seeking to make historical studies more like the social sciences.

The preference for a narrative, preeminently political, history centered on events and great personalities was challenged, and the demand was made that history be linked more closely to the empirical social sciences. At no point, however, did this critical reaction to history as it was researched and taught at universities throughout the world question two basic assumptions of the older historiography, namely (1) that history should be a professional discipline, and (2) that history must conceive of itself as a science. On the contrary, there was pressure to make the pursuit of history even more professional and more scientific.⁹

In Germany Max Weber pushed for a greater social science emphasis in historiography. And in France history had to justify itself against the attacks of Emile Durkheim who denied it the status of a science since it dealt with particulars and did not "aim at general statements capable of empirical validation, which constituted the core of scientific procedure and thought."¹⁰ Francois Simian made a place for economic history as a science since it worked with quantities and models. "The conventional forms of narrative history" did not so qualify, however.¹¹

As Darwin, Freud and especially Marx became dominant intellectual influences in the twentieth-century, new views of the human person, of society, and of the processes of social change swept over the Western intellectual landscape. Approaches that can broadly be called "social-deterministic" became increasingly dominant. Such views of history viewed change not so

⁸ Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, 142.

⁹ Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

much as the wake caused by great individuals, but as the workings of deeper forces which manifested themselves in social and political changes.

The “scientific” approach of Karl Marx had an enormous and abiding impact on the study and writing of history in the twentieth-century.¹² In short, he emphasized the economic as the engine of history. His historiography of course became official dogma in all those societies which adopted communistic governments in the twentieth-century. But far beyond classes on “dialectical materialism” taught in Eastern-block classrooms, Marx represents just one voice among many calling for a closer examination of the non-individual-driven forces that shape the course of human history.

More and more twentieth-century historians adopted, “the belief that material conditions such as changes in the relationship between population and food supply, changes in the means of production and class conflict, were the driving forces in history. Many, but not all, regarded intellectual, cultural, religious, psychological, legal, even political, developments as mere epiphenomena.”¹³

This twentieth-century emphasis on a search for the quantifiable was a serious blow to the use of narrativity in historiography. As the impulse was “we must be more scientific” in our historical research, narrative historiography became suspicious for at least two reasons.

First, because narrative involves literary artistry, as anyone familiar with Thucydides, Herodotus or Livy knows by experience. For the history-as-science movement, the ability to write a polished and persuasive story was something for the humanities not the sciences to study. “Just the facts, please,” was more the attitude.

There was a second reason for the reaction against narrative historiography. And we might consider it another anti-humanistic impulse. And this was the insistence on nomothetic rather than idiographic explanations for historical change. If historiography is a science, it must be able to lay down general rules for why historical change takes place. This left little room for a focus on the individual, the particular or the story.

The most famous example of this is Fernand Braudel’s *The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. This father of the French *Annales* school distinguished historical changes according to distinct timelines which he distinguished into three levels. History changes almost imperceptibly in *la longue durée*, which is focused on geographical and climatological factors. Social, legal and economic *conjunctures* develop at a slow pace. While political events develop rapidly but are considered merely *événements*.¹⁴

I consider Braudel typical of the twentieth-century scientific impulse in historiography. Though even he cannot utterly avoid narrative in his three-volume work, his insistence on empirical data alone leads Hans Barstad to call him an “anti event-oriented and anti-narrative analytical scientist.”¹⁵

¹² *Ibid.*, 78–9.

¹³ L. Stone, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on an New Old History,” *Past and Present* 85 (1979) 5 as quoted in Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 77.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57. What most of us have read as the meat and potatoes of histories is for Braudel mere “goings-on.”

¹⁵ H. M. Barstad, “History and the Hebrew Bible,” in L. L. Grabbe (ed.), *Can a ‘History of Israel’ be Written?* JSOTS 245/ESHM 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1977) quoted in Provan, Long,

Called by some the “third of the major schools of historical interpretation in the twentieth century” (after Marxism and the *Annales* school) American modernization theory is similarly nomothetic.¹⁶ “There is a single process of modernization which operates in all developing societies—regardless of their color, creed, or climate and regardless of their history, geography, or culture. This is the process of economic development, and ... development cannot be sustained without modernization.”¹⁷ Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s cliometric study of American slavery with its “immense qualitative apparatus” is an excellent example of this particular approach.¹⁸

The scientific emphasis in historiography led to a widespread distrust of narrative in the historiography of the second half of the twentieth-century. Richard Evans, writing in 1999, notes, “Probably the majority of histories other than introductory textbooks have in the last three or four decades done their best to avoid having their structure shaped by the passage of time, and this is even more the case with articles and theses than it is with monographs.” He also notes, “The first injunction history tutors in universities give to their students is ‘avoid narrative’; only thematic analysis gets the top grade, a judgment which also reflects wider attitudes in the twentieth-century historical profession to the presentation and communication of historical research and scholarship at every level.”¹⁹ Such impulses led to what Provan, Long and Longman call the “near death ... of narrative history.”²⁰

4. Twentieth-Century Postmodern Approaches to Historical Narrative

Ann Rigney writing in 1987 remarked, “In the last thirty years or so, under the critical influence of the *Annales* school and structuralist historiography, the nature of narrative and its function within historiography have been the subjects of particularly intense historiographical debate.”²¹

I now want to sketch the outlines of what she calls “structuralist historiography” the second major challenge to the traditional practice of narrative historiography.

This topic of “structuralist/post-structuralist,” or for our purposes more broadly put “postmodernist” theories and their application to the writing of history is an immense one. At the risk of oversimplifying, to gain some perspective I would like to identify three impulses amidst twentieth-century theorists. I will identify each with a particular philosopher to whom, it seems to me, the impulse owes a special debt.

and Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*. 85. “*Annales* historians increasingly want to be scientists. They often call their institutes ‘laboratories’ and speak of history as a science, a social science to be sure, but nevertheless one that, as they repeat, must work quantitatively if it is to be scientific.” Iggers, 59–60.

¹⁶ Joyce Appleby, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1995), 84.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, 122. In some ways, the very term “cliometric” summarizes what I call the scientific challenge to narrative historiography, since it tries to “measure,” hence the reference to “Clio,” the muse of history.

¹⁹ Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 130.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 593.

4.1. Children of Wittgenstein

One broad school participating in discussions of narrative in historical theory are “certain Anglo-American analytical philosophers (Walsh, Gardiner, Dray, Gallie, Morton White, Danto, Mink).”²² Analytical philosophy, with its intense concern for the logical analysis of language along the lines of the natural sciences, owes a special debt to Wittgenstein and his attempt to scientificize language. But it is just on this point where they fail to grasp the multileveled nature of what an historical narrative conveys. Though they accepted the idea that truth could be conveyed through historical narratives, they “assumed that their truth value resided either in the literal statements of fact contained within them or in a combination of these and a literalist paraphrase of statements made in figurative language.”²³ But this is a “scientific prejudice in favor of literalism,” and “what gets left out is precisely those elements of figuration—tropes and figures of thought, as the rhetoricians call them, without which the narrativization of real events, the transformation of a chronicle into a story, could never be effected.”²⁴ These analytical thinkers, in groping for scientific certainty, confused a narrative account with a literal account, free of any figuration. And they have thus ignored the literary aspects of historical narrative and whatever facets of reality they may convey in non-literal terms.²⁵

4.2. Children of Nietzsche

The “linguistic turn” refers to “the priority given to language and discourse in any form of cultural study or investigation.” It is sometimes used as an alternative designation for postmodernism, and it is the more radical of these “children of Nietzsche” that people often identify as postmodernism.²⁶ The “linguistic turn” in historiographic discussions owes its immediate inspiration to developments in linguistic and literary theory in the French-speaking world.²⁷ Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) underlined not simply how we shape language but how language shapes us. We are shaped by linguistic structures. This subjection of human beings to the framework of structures (in this case, linguistic ones) is foundational to the structuralist conception of society and history.²⁸ A thorough study of the influence of structuralism (and its closely related stepchild post-structuralism) on historiography would be a monograph in its own right. Needless to say, anthropological concepts from Claude Lévi-Strauss, literary critical theories of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida as well as the philosophical firebrands of Michel Foucault have had a profound impact on the questions being asked of narrative historiography (as traditionally practiced). I am calling this part of our discussion “children of Nietzsche” since the German critic (and nihilist) had such a deep impact on these last three important thinkers.²⁹

²² Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 31.

²³ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Thompson, *Postmodernism and history*, 131.

²⁷ Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, 135.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁹ White, *The Content of the Form*, 37.

Barthes seems to be the father of the structuralist/post-structuralist attack on traditional narrative historiography. In Barthes' 1967 essay, "The Discourse of History," he "attacke[d] the vaunted objectivity of traditional historiography ... by exposing the ideological function of the narrative mode of representation with which it had been associated."³⁰ Barthes critiqued history for a pretended status of scientificity and because it was a victim of what he called the "fallacy of referentiality."³¹ There is something surreptitious in the narrative form. It presents the illusion of an ordered view of the world, and of cogently representing its processes and structure to itself in a meaningful way. But meaning is always constituted rather than simply found. Barthes writes in his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,"

Claims concerning the "realism" of narrative are therefore to be discounted.... The function of a 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.³²

When we consider how profoundly different the epistemology is behind such statements, especially in contrast to the confidence in the accessibility of objective facts held by most nineteenth-century historians, we would do well to suspect influences such as Nietzsche.³³ There has been a shift from a common-sense epistemology that history has an objective reality to be discovered toward a new view in which language constructs reality.³⁴

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

³² *Ibid.*, 37. White comments, "Much could be said about this conception of narrative and its supposed ideological function, not least about the psychology on which it is based and the ontology that it presupposes. It is, obviously, reminiscent of Nietzsche's thought about language, literature, and historiography, and insofar as it bears upon the problem of historical consciousness, it does not say much that goes beyond 'the Uses and Abuses of History for Life' and the *Genealogy of Morals*. This Nietzschean affiliation is openly admitted by such Post-Structuralists as Derrida, Kristeva, and Foucault, and it is this Nietzschean turn in French thought over the last twenty years or so that serves to distinguish the Post-Structuralists from their more 'scientific' Structuralist predecessors, as represented by Lévi-Strauss, Roman Jakobson, and the early Barthes." *Ibid.*

³³ "Taking Nietzsche as their inspiration, Foucault and Derrida made Western Man into a modern-day Gulliver, tied down with ideological ropes and incapable of transcendence because he can never get beyond the veil of language to the reality 'out there.' The Nietzschean vision, conveyed through irony and satire, permits varying interpretations, and postmodernists offer a multiplicity of responses to his iconoclastic writings. Foucault described reading Nietzsche as a 'philosophical shock' and a 'revelation,' but that hardly distinguishes him from most American undergraduates. Thus the Nietzschean influence could be partly stylistic and literary, partly philosophical. Foucault and Derrida often tried to emulate aspects of Nietzsche's difficult, aphoristic, and allusive writing style because they saw it as consonant with his central intellectual argument that all concepts are in the end illusory creatures of the moment. Knowledge, Nietzsche taught, is an invention that masks a will to power." Joyce Appleby, *Telling the Truth about History*, 208.

³⁴ David Gunn and Danna Fewell typify the shift in these terms, "In short, we find ourselves participants in a major epistemological shift which is, in the larger picture, but a phase in a long-standing Western debate, stretching back to Aristotle and beyond. Stanley Fish has a particularly helpful and accessible discussion of the issues, which he casts in terms of the 'serious' and the 'rhetorical' human. At issue are fundamental views of truth and human nature. The 'serious' human views self and society as objective realities in a world of ostensible, essential truths and values—the 'common-sense' view. Truth is an eternal object which needs to be discovered. Reason and science, re-emphasized by the Enlightenment, are the prescribed tools for revelation. The 'rhetorical' human fashions the world through language, manipulating reality rather than discovering it, since reality

Postmodern thinkers in line with Barthes tend to see historiography as a social construct, inevitably subjective, ideological and ultimately “existing on a continuum with notions such as ‘myth’ and ‘fiction.’”³⁵ I will explore the relativistic and ultimately nihilistic implications of such views below.

4.3. Children of Heidegger

Ricoeur, Gadamer and Hayden White are three other (broadly postmodern) thinkers who have profoundly contributed to the twentieth-century debate over narrativity and history. I call them “children of Heidegger,” not because they were unaware or uninfluenced by Wittgenstein or Nietzsche, but because of the intense sensitivity to *the question of time* that typified Heidegger’s work and theirs also.

In his magnum opus, *Being and Time*, Heidegger explores the situatedness of all being in time.³⁶ Pushing the frontiers of Heidegger’s philosophy in new directions, Paul Ricoeur explores similar issues in his three-volume *Time and Narrative* (and in the shorter *Life in Quest of Narrative*). Living itself is an act of experiencing time, and it is incomprehensible outside of a narrative framework. Narrative is “an act of emplotment, that is to say, an act of configurational synthesis, or ordering of heterogeneous human actions and multiple events within a frame of time.”³⁷ Without narrative our lives are unintelligible. Narrative

is that which is constructed as reality rather than some objective essence. On this view ‘the givens of any field of activity—including the facts it commands, the procedures it trusts in, and the values it expresses and extends—are socially and politically constructed, are fashioned by [humankind] rather than delivered by God or Nature (again quoting Fish)’. This world is a carnivalesque one of exuberance and possibility, of enthusiasm and metaphor, of religion, magic, and verbal incantation, where truth is ‘an artifact whose fundamental design we often have to alter’ (quoting Richard Rorty).” David M Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10. This comment comes in the context of describing the shift from historical criticism (with its “breathtaking” arrogance”) to literary criticism in biblical studies. Gunn and Fewell enthusiastically embrace the postmodern, “carnavalesque” approach. I will make suggestions toward an evangelical third option below.

³⁵ Ibid., 11. Iggers, though ultimately critical of post-modernist relativism, summarizes, “Linguistic theory, as it has been developed in French literary theory from Barthes to Derrida and Lyotard, contains an element that in my opinion must be taken very seriously and that has applications to historical thought and writing. The participants in this discussion have rightly raised the point that history taken as a whole contains no immanent unity or coherence, that every conception of history is a construct constituted through language, that human beings as subjects have no integrated personality free of contradictions and ambivalences, and that every text can be read and interpreted in different ways because it expresses no unambiguous intentions. Foucault and Derrida have with good justification pointed out the political implications of language and the hierarchical relations of power inherent in it. These contradictions which permeate all of human life, force the observer to ‘deconstruct’ every text, in order to lay bare its ideological elements. Every reality is not only communicated through speech and discourse but in a very fundamental way is also constituted by them. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, 132.

³⁶ “The main aim of Heidegger’s work, *Being and Time*, is the re-awakening of the question: what is meant by ‘Being?’ Heidegger’s starting-point is not the perceptible things, but what he terms: human *Dasein*, i.e., being in time. Two ontological distinctions are characteristic of *Dasein*: (1) *Dasein* is essentially always my own, i.e., it cannot be ontologically grasped as the case or the example of a genus of natural beings; and (2) the characteristics of *Dasein* are not ‘qualities’, but possible ways of Being, Being there, in time.” Han Young Lee, *From History to Narrative Hermeneutics* (vol. 64; Studies in Biblical Literature 64; New York/Berlin: Peter Lang, 2004), 159.

I mention him because he is so well-known, but for reasons of space I will not be exploring the hermeneutical philosophy of Heidegger’s student, Hans-Georg Gadamer in this paper.

³⁷ Ibid., 167. “Apart from history, the concept of temporal experience (*Dasein*) is an *aporia*, i.e., not

is the “manifestation in discourse of a specific kind of time-consciousness or structure of time.”³⁸

Hayden White appreciates and seems to appropriate most of Ricoeur’s approach.³⁹ Having been so audacious as to take a stab at Ricoeur in just over a paragraph, it may be equally foolhardy of me to comment on Hayden White’s contribution to the discussions of narrativity and historiography since he has published so widely on the topic.⁴⁰ His 1976 *Metahistory* was a mile-marker for the discussion of narrativity along postmodern lines.⁴¹ For both thinkers narrative is a means of symbolizing events “without which their historicity cannot be indicated.”⁴² Life itself has an unavoidably narrative sense to it, and cannot be understood otherwise.

It is the success of narrative in revealing the meaning, coherence, or significance of events that attests to the legitimacy of its practice in historiography. And it is the success of historiography in narrativizing sets of historical events that attests to the ‘realism’ of narrative itself. In the kind of symbolization embodied in the historical narrative, human beings have a discursive instrument by which to assert (meaningfully) that the world of human actions is both real and mysterious, that is mysteriously real ... that what cannot be explained is in principle capable of being understood; and that, finally, this understanding is nothing other than its representation in the form of a narrative.... There is, then, a certain necessity in the relationship between the narrative, conceived as a symbolic or symbolizing discursive structure, and the representation of specifically historical events.⁴³

White has been lambasted for an “extreme constructionist view of narrative in historical writing.”⁴⁴ We will examine this critique of postmodernist theorists in more detail in the next section, but it seems to fall wide of the mark. Yes, White in his earlier days emphasized that narrativization utilizes plot structures that come down to a limited selection of specific story types (epic, romance, tragedy, comedy or farce).⁴⁵ Yes, White is acutely aware of how linguistic and literary structures constrain the historian. Yes, White distinguishes sharply between

intelligible in the absence of a narrative construct.” *Ibid.*, 168.

³⁸ White, *The Content of the Form*, 31.

³⁹ “White sees Ricoeur’s contribution to the theory of historiography as an attempt to contrive a ‘metaphysics of narrativity.’ “The historical narrative must, by virtue of its narrativity, have as its ‘ultimate referent’ nothing other than ‘temporality’ itself. Placed within the wider context of Ricoeur’s *oeuvre*, what this means is that he has assigned historical narrative to the category of symbolic discourse, which is to say, a discourse whose principal force derives neither from its informational content nor from its rhetorical effect but rather from its imagistic function. A narrative, for him, is neither an icon of the events of which it speaks, an explanation of those events, nor a rhetorical refashioning of ‘facts’ for a specifically persuasive effect. It is a symbol mediating between different universes of meaning by ‘configuring’ the dialectic of their relationship in an image. This image is nothing other than the narrative itself, that ‘configuration’ of events reported in the chronicle by the revelation of their ‘plot-like’ nature.” *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁰ Rigney, “Narrativity and Historical Representation,” 594–95.

⁴¹ Hayden White “has been absorbed into the postmodernist pantheon as far as history is concerned.” Willie Thompson, *Postmodernism and history* (Theory and History; Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁴ William Dray as quoted in, Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 82.

⁴⁵ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 43.

the events of history and their representation in historiography (narratives cannot be *simulacra* in the philosophical sense). Yes, White (as all postmodern theorists) highlights the similarity in form between narrative historiography and historical fiction. But White is *not* saying that “historians can emplot the past pretty much as they like,” as Dray for one argues.⁴⁶ White admits that “It may not be possible to emplot a given series of events in just any way at all.”⁴⁷ But he is attempting to underline in a strong way the artistic element in writing narrative history—a discussion that goes back at least to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Quite contrary to those who would see historiography along the lines of objective natural sciences, historiography is not simply a “vehicle for the transmission of information about an extrinsic referent.” But it uses literary artistry drawn “from the performative domain of poesis.”⁴⁸ There is merit in this understanding, as we will now consider by way of evaluation.

5. Contributions of Postmodernism regarding Narrative Historiography

I think that postmodernist theorists should be credited with at least two major contributions in the twentieth-century discussion regarding narrative historiography. First, for stimulating a re-appreciation for the literary nature of narrative historiography and secondly for the critique of the illusion of scientific objectivity.

5.1. Re-appreciation of the Literary Nature of Narrative Historiography

From the point of view of the history of ideas, Hayden White is surely correct in connecting historiography with poetics. Along the same lines, Adele Berlin has Aristotle in mind when she notes, “The study of narrative, or narratology, is a subdivision of poetics.”⁴⁹ Postmodernism has done us the favor of underlining the literary nature of historiography that was nearly lost for a time. Most outstanding historians, such as Gibbon, Macaulay, and von Ranke have appreciated the literary aspect of writing history. And White is correct that, “History as a discipline is in bad shape today because it has lost sight of its origins in the literary imagination.”⁵⁰ We can agree with White that narrative constructions have a semiotic function, that they use “modes of emplotment” which “in representing chronologically related events, gave them the aspect of stories with beginnings, middles, and ends.”⁵¹ The story-structure of narratives and the fact that they are generally written with the intention to persuade are rhetorical matters that have been discussed across the ages.

Here it is appropriate for us to note by way of appreciation the new literary criticism in biblical studies. In the last third of the twentieth century there has

⁴⁶ Provan, Long, and Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 82.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 42. We will see below, despite first-blush appearances, that there is nothing objectionable with this assertion. “Some biblical scholars and even historians appear to miss the distinction between fictionality in the sense of artistry, or craft, and fiction in the sense of genre. The former is about *how* a representation is achieved, the latter is about *what* is represented.” Long 86

⁴⁹ Rigney, “Narrativity and Historical Representation,” 596.

⁵⁰ Provan, Long, and Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 81.

⁵¹ Rigney, “Narrativity and Historical Representation,” 596.

been an increased appreciation for the literary nature of the Bible, including the historical narratives which, obviously, make up so much of the Old Testament. Berlin, Alter, Sternberg, Bar-Ephrat, just to mention a few of the Jewish contributors among many scholars, are sharpening our sensitivity to the careful literary crafting involved in the historical narratives of Scripture.⁵² Careful study of biblical narratives as literature is the essential first step before any further historical analysis can take place.⁵³

5.2. Critique of the Illusion of Scientific Objectivity

Another very significant contribution of postmodernist thinkers has been to debunk the illusion of an utterly detached and scientific objectivity in the writing of history. With its deep sensitivity to the situatedness of all human knowledge, postmodernism has rather thoroughly undermined the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century myth that historiography was the neutral quest for facts that could be scientifically formed into part of a universally-agreed upon master-history. Lyotard seems to have been the first to speak of a “metanarrative” or “grand narrative.”⁵⁴ It is against metanarratives of all stripes that postmodernism broadly speaking has taken aim. As Christians we can rejoice that the once all-but-universally-dominant, secularized, modernist view of history (and of biblical narratives in particular) has been reduced to one (rather parochial) view among many “master narratives.” We can appreciate that the myth of progress (a secular substitution for the Christian view of providence) has been exposed as false.⁵⁵ We can appreciate that the occidentalism implicit in many historical narratives has been exposed. Certain furiously critical thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault have taken aim at the entire Enlightenment project itself, how successfully remains to be seen. And we can applaud however much this dragon of unbelief under the guise of “objective science” may be wounded. But we will see that these children of Nietzsche have followed in his nihilism as well—which brings us to our next section.

6. Critiques of Postmodernism regarding Narrative Historiography

One does not have to be a Christian believer to fear where the relativism of certain post-modern thinkers might take the whole project of history writing. The German historian Iggers, the English historian Thompson and

⁵² Alter notes, “In all biblical narrative and in a good deal of biblical poetry as well, the domain in which literary invention and religious imagination are joined is history, for all these narratives... purport to be true accounts of things that have occurred in historical time.” As quoted in Provan, Long, and Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 81.

⁵³ “Literary analysis must come first, for unless we have a sound understanding off what the text is doing and saying, it will not be of much value in other respects.” Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, “General Introduction,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Robert Alter and Frank Kermode eds.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 2. A careful analysis of the text as narrative literature is in no ways contrary to a careful historical study, but instead is an essential foundation for that study.

⁵⁴ Thompson, *Postmodernism and History*, 3.

⁵⁵ Cf. Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, 147.

American historians Appleby, Hunt and Jacob are all deeply concerned that postmodernism could lead to the death of history.⁵⁶ Appleby notes, “The nature of historical truth, objectivity, and the narrative form of history have all been targeted by postmodernists,” and “postmodernism throws into question the modern narrative form, proving once again that the philosophy of history does matter.”⁵⁷

The “linguistic turn” does well to expose the bias and subjectivity present to one extent or another in every piece of historiography. But its basic assumption that language not only reflects but actually creates reality abrogates the borderline between history and fiction.⁵⁸ By emphasizing that “human beings do not achieve a separation from the objects they study; they simply invest them with their own values,” postmodernists have collapsed the distinction between subject and object of knowledge. There remains no way then to distinguish between invention and reality, between history and myth.⁵⁹

In the light of the turbulence and grave disappointments of the twentieth century, one can sympathize with the fury of negation implicit in the postmodernists’ position on history. But is ultimately nihilistic.⁶⁰ And such convictions carried out would indeed spell the death of historiography.

7. Concluding Reflections

It comes as no surprise that most practicing historians have rejected radical postmodernism, and that radical postmoderns have not by and large been notable for producing historiography. We should not be surprised that narrative historiography never went fully out of style.⁶¹ How could that be? Life itself has a narrative quality to it. Memory itself takes the form of a story with beginnings, middles and ends. As human beings we will always continue to tell stories about the past. Our lives are meaningless without them.⁶² And as Christian historians we have a duty to the people of God to provide them with meaningful historical narratives.⁶³

⁵⁶ Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*; Thompson, *Postmodernism and history*; Appleby, *Telling the Truth about History*.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 205 and 230–31.

⁵⁸ Han Young Lee, *From History to Narrative Hermeneutics*, 149.

⁵⁹ Appleby, *Telling the Truth about History*, 211, 234. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, 145.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 205–06.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁶² White is correct that narratives are a way to help people have a meaningful relationship to their social realities. But this does not mean they are simply means of social control or delusional. As Christians we believe that our very lives depend on—every word that comes from the mouth of God—a (divine) narrative. Cf. Rigney, “Narrativity and Historical Representation,” 597.

⁶³ Ferdinand Deist felt this when he said, “What is wrong in biblical research, is this: the more we research the history of Israel, early Christianity and the Bible, the less we seem to be able to contribute to the context in which we live, that is, to theology as a discipline and to common people’s understanding of themselves, their world and their faith, and the more the Bible becomes a dead book of the distant past.” “All acts of understanding have to do with finding (i.e. assigning) meaning. One of the major reasons for historical research lies exactly in our desire to assign meaning to our existence. This is achieved, firstly, by history’s assisting us to understand who we are and where we came from, and secondly by enabling us to venture informed guesses about possible future developments in our history. To put it differently, history assists us in obtaining hindsight, insight and foresight.” Ferdinand Deist, “Contingency, Continuity and Integrity in Historical Understanding: An Old Testa-

Does this mean we ignore the postmodernist challenge to objectivity? Not at all. We humbly admit that though history is one, historiographies will (and always should) be many. We are willing to admit our particular presuppositions and worldview commitments as Christian thinkers. We make a renewed commitment not only to a literarily-sensitive use of our sources, but also to the pursuit of objectivity as a goal not fully obtainable in this life. Because of the dominance of Kantian epistemology, we who claim knowledge of a transcendent God and his supernatural deeds recorded in Scripture were never really admitted to the table of academia. Perhaps that will begin to change. Secularists who embrace Enlightenment presuppositions are concerned that this foundational world view is at stake.⁶⁴ Perhaps it is. Will such scholars embrace a new transparency about their own presuppositions and worldview commitments? This remains to be seen. Perhaps, as we are honest about our presuppositions and faithful in our callings as historians, we may find opportunities to discuss and defend our own distinctly Christian metanarrative as people discover that metanarratives are ultimately impossible to live without.

In this paper we have sought to understand the turbulent fortunes of narrativity in twentieth-century historiography. These are most easily understood in the context of the broader cultural and intellectual shifts that took place: first towards a more rigorous attempt to make historiography a science, and then in a linguistic turn toward postmodernism. But from my point of view at least, the greater transformation in intellectual history was not between scientificists and postmodernists, but between pre-Enlightenment critical thought and post-Enlightenment critical thought. At issue between pre-Enlightenment thinkers⁶⁵ and post-Enlightenment thinkers (even such early figures as Spinoza or Reimarus) was the foundational dispute over whether human reason is a sufficient guide in all human inquiry. In the light of the revolutionary sea change that took place before and after the *Aufklärung*, changes among nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians (from the positivism of Comte to the absolute relativism of Keith Jenkins) are secondary-level paradigm shifts among thinkers all committed to the autonomy of secularized human thought.⁶⁶

ment Perspective,” *Scriptura: Journal of Bible and Theology in Southern Africa*, no. 11 (1993): 99, 108.

⁶⁴ “Postmodernist thought has made a substantial contribution to the contemporary historical discussions by its warnings against utopianism and conceptions of progress. This should lead us, however, not to abandonment and repudiation of the Enlightenment heritage but instead to a critical reexamination of it. This too has been the intent of a good deal of the new social and cultural history examined in this book. The alternative to an albeit chastened Enlightenment is barbarism.” Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, 155.

⁶⁵ Such as the unbelievably erudite OT scholar Campegius Vitranga, the subject of my dissertation, DV.

⁶⁶ Lee notes that the linguistic turn is a referential crisis. “In the beginning of the nineteenth century man sought in *reason* the autonomy of a *non-religious reference* only to be disillusioned later by the engagement of an elusive *structure* as the twentieth century’s point of reference. What one thus encounters after this long journey may be nothing but a fragmentary world of interpretation, emanating from a contiguous *referential crisis* with very few signs of nearing a resolution. [his emphasis]” Lee, *From History to Narrative Hermeneutics*, 146.