

The Metaphysics of Western Historiography

西方歷史學的形上學

Hayden White*

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* *Professor Emeritus, History of Consciousness, University of California, Santa Cruz; Consulting Professor of Comparative Literature, Stanford University.*

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Abstract

In the West, after the decline of religion and the destruction of metaphysics by the modern natural sciences, history has come—by default—to stand as the basis, the foundation, the arche of a specifically human mode of existence. It is a mistake, however, to think that history describes a linear, cyclical, or sinusoidal process of development. On the contrary, what is unique about the Western idea of history is the notion of rebirth, revival, or reformation, the idea that it is possible always to begin again. Whence the popularity of the notions of Renaissance, Reformation Revolution, Rebirth, and so on for characterizing historical processes in the West. These notions of revival and rebirth derive, it would seem, from the peculiarly Christian idea that meaningful temporality describes a process of expectation and fulfillment. This idea translates the Christian notion of conversion, which holds that a person can remain the same while undergoing, thanks to the power of grace, a catastrophic transformation in the depths of his/her soul.

摘要

在宗教衰微和現代自然科學摧毀了形上學之後的西方世界裡，失去競爭對手的歷史儼然成為人類特別的存在模式、基礎和根本。歷史不應被誤認為是在描述線性的、循環的或曲折的發展過程；因為，西方歷史理念的獨特之處在於復活、復甦或革新等見解，亦即一種永遠都可能從頭來過的想法。因此「復興」、「改革」、「革命」、「復活」之類的觀念在西方十分流行。復甦和復活的觀念似乎衍生自一個奇特的基督教理念，這個理念認為時間之所以具有意義，乃是因為它描繪了一個期望和實現的過程。此理念闡述了基督教的皈依歸正的觀念，認為藉由恩典的力量，一個人在經歷靈魂深處天翻地覆的變化之同時，也能維持自我不變。

“L’histoire, ce n’est donc pas une durée,
c’est une multiplicité de durées qui s’entrecroisent et
s’enveloppent les unes les autres. Il faut donc substituer
à la vieille notion de temps la notion de durée multiple.”

—Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, II, 279

“The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the
axis of selection into the axis of combination. Equivalence is pro-
moted to the constitutive device of the sequence.”

—Jakobson, “Closing Statement,” 358

Oti peplerotai ho kairos, kai eggiken he basileias tou theou.
 (“The time (*kairos*) is fulfilled (*peplerotai*) and the kingdom of
God draws near.”)

—Jesus, in the Gospel according to *Mark, I, 15*.

Historical discourse in the West is motivated by a desire to discover form in a past which, by the clutter of remains left to us, we know to have once existed but which now presents itself as ruins, fragments, and clutter. We want to know what these cluttered remains can tell us about a past form of life, but in order to elicit from them a comprehensible message, we must first impose some order on these remains, give them form, endow them with pattern, establish their coherence as indicators of parts of a whole now disintegrated. For form, pattern, and coherence are indicators of the presence of some kind of substance, within, behind, or beyond the appearance of clutter which the monumental/documentary record in its unprocessed condition presents to us at first sight.

In our present enterprise, we are concerned with the uses to which a specifically historiological (I use an English equivalent of Heidegger’s concept of historical thinking) knowledge can be put in our efforts to determine whether “progress” has been made in different departments of knowledge-production. And if so, how this progress progresses, how it stretches itself (*sich erstrecken*) along a given trajectory of development, how it perdures in transformation, and how it might actualize itself in a non-teleologically determined drama of recog-

nitition that is, at the same time, a self-recognition, an identification of what it became over the trajectory of its actualization from its beginning to its end. Beyond that, we want to know how “crisis” and “regression” function in the articulation of this trajectory, how conflicts internal to this process of articulation were resolved or failed of resolution, and at what costs to the “subject-in-progress” these resolutions were purchased. To be sure, as social scientists, we want a non-prejudicial criterion of evaluation, a criterion by which to assess variation or changes in terms of “gain” and “loss,” a criterion that will allow us to distinguish between positive and negative moments in the process as a whole. For progress can only be measured as movement towards an ideal condition, in this case, a condition of perfect knowledge of our objects of interest.

A scientifically responsible historiological account of progress or regress in a given field of human activity, in this case, science, art, or thought, presupposes objectivity or at least value-neutrality *vis à vis* the object of study. And when it is a matter of deriving such an account from a historiological study of the phenomenon in question, objectivity or neutrality presupposes a certain “distance” from the phenomenon and the assumption of a certain “perspective” from which the phenomenon is to be grasped as a possible object-of-study. But if “history” is considered as a condition of human existence that is one, whole, and developing, both distance and perspective require belief in the relation of present to past as disjunction rather than conjunction, difference rather than similarity, contiguity rather than continuity. A historiological account of the past, considered as a segment of a process that is virtually finished, “over and done with,” dead and regenerated, consists of a demonstration or a representation of this past as if it were only virtually finished, not actually over and done with, but still alive in some sense, alive in the present as an after-effect, a presence which produces effects by virtue of its absence, or virtual absence, an absence which presents itself to the present as distanced, withdrawn, still degenerating rather than totally obliterated.

This is why the “recent past”—the near or proximate past, that aspect of the present which is still in process of passing into the past, that which is not yet past—is a special problem for historiological treatment. We cannot distance ourselves from the recent past in a properly historiological manner. We cannot gain or assume a specifically historiological perspective on it, because, although it is becoming past, that is to say, is receding from any *Jetztzeit* (we might say that it

is “decoming”), it is still present to hand as a part of our present, but it is also becoming something that will have been.

The recent past is always receding into a distance, but it has not yet distanced itself sufficiently to allow us to obtain a “historical perspective” on it. (It is like The Third Reich for many Germans, Vichy for many French, the Shoah for Jews, Communism for Russians, Slavery for Americans, or the “unnameable” twentieth century for all of us). It is the so-called “past that won’t go away,” a past which while “going away,” receding into a distance, still will not “go away completely” and thus become a possible object for a properly historiological treatment.

Since the pathos of historical distance is organized in the mode of a temporal relation, the recent or near or immediate or proximate past cannot be represented in the kind of discourse that historians have traditionally employed to describe meaningful historical processes: the closed or consummated narrative. Since our interest is in determining whether the current canonical dispensation in a given field of social or cultural practice is progressive or regressive—whether it represents progress or regress or some combination of the two—a historiological judgement, of the kind that would allow us to see it as an end (a consummation, a fulfillment, an *Erfüllung*) of a process of development and therefore as a progression, is rendered impossible. The present state of things from within which we launch our effort to determine what progress might consist of and how we might determine its presence in a given field of scientific inquiry offers itself as threatened by descent into a condition of “anomalous chaos” (*eines regellosen Chaos*). It has been suggested that this condition has been caused by the seeming contradictoriness and incommensurability of traditional models for describing the vicissitudes of historical development: linear, cyclical, dualistic, and fractal. (Agamben, Ricoeur, Laplanche)

These models of the possible trajectories of history are set over against two other possible models—called the Chaos (Big Bang?) and the Constancy (Steady State?) models, drawn presumably from current theory in the fields of high energy physics, genetics, astrophysics and cosmogony and extended as possible historical destinies in the absence of any way of choosing among, combining, or distributing the four previously defined models across historical processes at different levels of integration of the factual record.

For my part, I think that neither the Chaos nor the Constancy model is viable for the characterization of historical processes, because the very concept of

history presupposes that the processes to be studied are Cosmological rather than Chaotical in nature and, beyond that, that Constancy in history can only be construed as continuity-in-change or change-in-continuity. Historiology presumes that history has a substantive meaning, whether this "substance" in question be construed as God, humanity, civilization, or society. The linear, cyclical, dualistic, and fractal models describe different kinds of order (cosmos) discernible in systems presumed to be Cosmological rather than Chaotical in nature and processes presumed to be functions of different kinds of continuity in change and change in continuity. Thus, the linear, cyclical, dualistic, and fractal models must be seen as constructions by human consciousness desirous of finding order in chaos in the mode of "consideration" and seeking to view change as a mode of relationship in complex systems whose form of existence is changing while its substance remains the same. Chaos and constancy are problems for a historiography that cannot abide the thought of either.

Psychologically, we might characterize any solution to the problem of relating Chaos to Constancy in the description of a given "subject of history," as a wish-fulfillment fantasy, product of a desire for coherency in response to anxieties generated by the apprehension of the past as "blooming, buzzing confusion" (clutter) and the relation of past to present as a discontinuity. The idea that a given course of historical events might describe a pattern representable in the form of a line, circle, oscillation in place, or fractum is an absurdity—product of overreduction when only one of these models is used and of confusion when more than one is employed. Any historian working according to the rules of his game (historiology) knows that these models of cosmological processes in history are hopelessly inadequate to the description, let alone the explication of a historical process.

Why?

In the first place, they are abstractions from geometrical systems and can hardly be used to describe real processes in "nature" much less in "history." Secondly, as applied to either nature or history these models are much too commonsensical and vague to permit confident use of them as either explicative or explanatory devices. And third, they are much too mechanistic to be used for describing processes more organic in nature or if not more organic, more socio-psychical than merely corporeal in kind. The ideology of inevitable progress that is supposed to have dominated thought about history in the nineteenth century and to have lately been abandoned as a myth in which no one any longer

can believe—in spite of the so-called victory of capitalism over communism—went down with all of the so-called grand narratives (Lyotard’s “grands récits”) whose simple-mindedness was manifested in their use of precisely these models of the line, circle, oscillation in place, and fractum as their manifest forms of representation. And this end of the grand narratives or myths of history is what is supposed to have justified the belief that “history” itself had ended and was being replaced by a new kind of time-and-space consciousness, global and non-ideological in nature, that was “post-histoire” in its essence, which meant, no longer interested in temporality, focused on space and the relation between global and local places organized as markets and real estate, not developing because all of the space had been “colonized” and presenting a spectacle of “flows and intensities” rather than the kinds of “changes and continuities” featured in Aristotle’s cosmology.

But the relation between the era of the grand narratives of history and that which unfolds within with presumption of their demise is still comprehended as a historical relationship: a change within a continuity that is substantively “historical” in nature, historical and therefore narratable, which is to say, adequately representable in the form of a story. But this means describable historiologically only in a mode or combination of modes of narrativization, for which the line, circle, oscillation, and fractum must appear as conceptual reductions of modes of relationship describable only in figures or figurations, that is to say, images or *Bildnisse*—the function of which is precisely to capture modes of human existence peculiar to human being under the conditions of sociality or living with others as members of real or imagined communities in which individuality is constantly being threatened by absorption to the group and subjectivity experienced as objectification in the eyes of the legal system which imposes order on the group and subjects the subject to the rule of symbolic objectification.

The problem of the relation between narrative or story meaning and historical significance is a specific case of the more general problem of the relation between figural or imaginal representations of reality and organization of such representations according to the categories of conceptual thought. A figure or image of any aspect of reality is supposed to derive its status as a meaningful and true representation of reality from the coherency of the conceptual contents implicitly present in the figures or images representing the reality to which they refer or mime or otherwise indicate. But a narrative representation of reality can always be shown to be inconsistent or incoherent at the level of the concepts

supposedly figured forth in its imaginal forms. And this is the principal reason that efforts to transform historical inquiry into a science typically features an attack on narrative representation as the instrument if not the cause of the very ideological distortions of the historical record characteristic of the “grands récits”—myths of history, such as those of “progress” or “decadence”—inherited from the past. But efforts to dissociate historical consciousness and narrativity—by constructing non-narrative modes of representation of historical processes, as in the *Annales*’ “longue durée” or statistical series, or seeking to discover a logic or grammar of narrative, as in Genette, Greimas, Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, etc.—have failed. It appears that at the conceptual level, narratively organized discourse is illogical or alogical or only paralogical in nature, yet at the same time is ineliminable from any representation of reality as history. At the present moment, it appears to be the case that either we must accept that any representation of reality advanced *sub specie historiae* must utilize the form of the narrative to qualify as a historical representation and will therefore be necessarily only paralogical in aspect, or redefine historical reality as being itself narrativistically organized in order to account for the adequacy of the narrative mode of discourse to the truthful representation of its historical referent. The latter project has been most fruitfully attempted by Paul Ricoeur in *Temps et récit*. (3 vols.)

Ricoeur defines narrative as the form of discourse in which the human experience of temporality achieves expression in language. The experience of temporality, he argues, takes three forms: the experience of within-time-ness (the passage of time as measured by clocks, and the rhythms of diurnal and seasonal process, ageing of the body, etc.); the experience of “primordial temporality,” of entropy, death and disintegration; and the experience of “historicality” which is nothing other than the experience by the individual of a relationship to a group which has preceded it in the time that was and will outlive it in the time to come.

The experience of historicality, Ricoeur asserts, is an experience of narratively organized temporality, the organization of time as “configured” in such a way as to reveal a figural relationship between (the three “extases” or “epochés” of temporality) present, past, and future.

Historicality is graspable only as a figuration because any attempt to imagine it, to represent it conceptually. To integrate it according to a logic of identity and non-contradiction can result only in anomaly. This is what is wrong with the use of the concepts of line, circle, gyre, and fractum to describe specifically his-

torical relationships and processes. The use of any one of these models or any combination of them to describe a historical entity can at best transform it into a representation of the experience of “within-time-ness”: as annals, chronicle, or at best an encyclopedia and at worst a list of mere occurrences, never a representation of the modes of being in the world of the subject of history, which is the human subject as an agent who makes events happen rather than merely suffering their effects upon him. Narrative alone can capture the complex interplay of existential choice, engagement, aspiration and frustration, exaltation and defeat, intentionality and effectivity that the human subject of history lives rather than merely suffers. And it is for this reason that narrativity is alone suitable for the representation of historical processes capable of capturing for consciousness that effort to endow human life with meaning that might be characterized as either progressive, regressive, or both, in a discourse that is literally truthful in its parts even if only figuratively truthful in its totality. This amounts to a redemption of a certain kind of figurality as an instrument adequate to the representation of the kinds of relationship between past, present, and future that we must recognize as historical-natural, rather than either historical or natural, in kind.

Now, I think that this is a plausible way of speaking about the adequacy of a narrative mode of representation to the historical reality about which it speaks. Ricoeur argues for the necessary relationship between a properly historical representation and specifically historical phenomena. A narrative mode of representation is adequate because the actions of human subjects are narratively structured. Every intentional act presumes a “prefiguration” of the world in which it is to be enacted. The outcome of the action confirms the adequacy or inadequacy of the pre-figuration to the world captured in an image insofar as it permits a retrospective configuration of the intention and its effects after the action has run its course. A configuration is a new figuration of a sequence of actions and outcomes of actions which reveals meaning in the form of a story whose outcome illuminates inaugural and intermediary phases of a sequence by retrospectively “grasping them together” as a realization of a purpose in the world pre-figured as the ground from which to launch the action. Thus, the subject of history produces its own history by its actions.

And the historicity of these actions can be grasped by the historian long after their actualizations insofar as he or she is capable of re-configuring the relation between the agent, the act, and its outcome in the form of a story that “makes sense.”

But “making sense” has to be understood as “mettre en intrigue” or providing the plot-type that allows what might appear as only a series of events to be grasped as a complex interplay of sequentiation and equivaluation. The “plot” that can be seen retrospectively to have been unfolding over the course of an agent’s activity from its inaugural to its end phase permits the grasping together of a given concatenation of events as an instance of purposive activity in the kind of figure-fulfillment structure that is the substance of every plottype. Thus, emplotment (*mise en intrigue*) of a set of events transforms them from seeming to be manifestations of the experience of within-time-ness into appearing to be an experience of historicity. And the activity of emplotting events provides a specifically historical meaning to sets of events by representing them as doubly-referential, by showing how they are at once appearing and disappearing “within-time” and manifesting the non-structurality, the mystery and paradoxes of the human experience of “deep temporality” (*Zeitlichkeit*, Being towards Death, apprehension of eternity, desire for immortality, etc.).

The narrative is thus a way of mediating between the experience of existence in time and the paradoxes of temporality set out by St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, on the one hand, and the treatment of these paradoxes as the very condition of Dasein’s historicity in *Being and Time* by Heidegger, on the other.

I have argued elsewhere that what Ricoeur has done is to redeem allegory as the mode of representation underlying and informing any narrative representation of reality, whether the reality in question is conceived as factual or fictional. For him, what is being allegorized, however, is “historicity” itself. A historical narrative is an allegorization of the experience of “within-time-ness” considered as an experience of “deep temporality,” just like any novel which takes time as its subject-matter as well as its organizing principle—*Mrs. Dalloway*, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, *Die Zauberberg*, *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*, etc., etc. The activity of emplotment is what characterizes both, whether the world of events experienced as “historicity” is the primary referent of the story or not. This is why I called Ricoeur’s *Temps et récit* “a metaphysics of narrativity.” Historical events are given an ontological ground by the invocation of the ontological category of “deep temporality.” Thus, history is endowed with structure, the structure of surface and depth, change and continuity, chaos and cosmos, but distributed across levels of temporal integration, from the dispersed form of the chronicle to the configured form of the narrative to the unfigurable

form of eternity. Since the nature of one of the levels—deep temporality—can never be expressed, the two terms of the allegorical relationship are asymmetrical: one is apprehended as fact (within-time-ness) but the other can be grasped only symbolically (because it is what will be left over when time comes to an end).

Thus, like Hegel, Ricoeur gives us a theology of history with God left out, which is what might be meant by any metaphysics. Add the Christian God to paganism, Augustine to Aristotle, narrative to mimesis and you get Heidegger-Ricoeur.

What I am ready to accept in Ricoeur is his effort to link history and fiction as kinds of narrative that produce meaning by allegorizing events as manifestations of the paradoxes of life lived in consciousness of time. What I want to stress, however, is that what any narrative representation of historical reality allegorizes is the very plottypes that are used within the Western literary tradition to endow temporal processes with different kinds of meaning. A narrative representation of historical processes, then, is an allegorization of those structures of meaning found in myth, fiction, and literature.

Note that I suggest differences among mythical, fictional, and literary allegorization—for I regard these as different kinds of writing practices, overlapping and interpenetrating one another—as distinguishable by their subject-matter. All three use plottypes to endow temporal processes with meaning. But as kinds of writing, they are distinguishable by the degree to which they take writing itself as both a subject of the discourse and as an instrument for the enunciation thereof.

The “literary” discourse takes its own writing procedures as a subject of the enunciated as well as an instrument for producing the enunciation. If we accept this characterization of the kinds of narrative discourse, we can see how a given representation of historical reality might be viewed as mythical, fictional, or literary as the case might be. It is a matter of seeing a relation between what is said in the discourse and how what is being said is viewed as a subject of representation. Taking this tack, we would have no difficulty distinguishing between a narrative and a structuralist representation of historical reality or between different kinds of combinations of the two strategies. It would be a matter of determining whether the discursive procedures being used to represent a field of historical occurrences were being featured as a content or subject of the discourse along with its referents, or whether these procedures were treated as given, as preceding the articulation of the discourse itself, and were simply being used to represent phenomena (real or imaginary) without any awareness of

represent phenomena (real or imaginary) without any awareness of the difficulty of grasping experience by, with, and from discourse.

The presumed particularity, transiency, and pastness of the historical event or process means that, unlike a natural structure or relationship, it can only be grasped in a figure or image, and never conceptualized without depriving it of its individuality. To rerepresent a series of historical events as a process linear, cyclical, oscillatory, or fractal in kind is to enfigure them also, but to enfigure them as concepts or types and deprive them thereby of their "historicity." But to represent historical agents, events, and processes as elements of a narrative is to remember them by restoring their formal coherency and their formal relationship to the worlds they inhabited.

Of course, there are different kinds of narratives and different kinds of figuration. The narrative techniques of classical pagan culture differ radically from those of Western Christian culture and those of Christian culture from those of their post-Christian, humanistic and post-humanistic counterparts. There is a history of narrative yet to be written that features these differences as much as any continuities that might seem to exist on the basis of a structural analysis of narrative. (Barthes, Propp, Lotman, etc.) For narrative form can possess a variety of conceptual contents, just as figural form can do. By this I mean that narrative must be viewed as a mode of discourse which, while being capable of being laden or charged with a wide variety of contents or referents (real and imaginary, factual and fictional, perceivable or conceivable, and so on), must be considered to possess its own modal "substance."

This substance is the substance of modality itself. So that, by its form alone, we might say, narrative insists modality and modal transformation on its manifest content or referent. This is what makes of it an ideal instrument for the representation of change-in-continuity over time. If you regard narrative as a genre rather than a mode, you must conclude that narrative has as its substance gender itself, typification, speciation, and the like.

But the difference between narrative as mode and narrative as genre provides a way of distinguishing between Classical and Christian conceptions of narrativity. Whereas the former genericizes mode, the latter modalizes gender. (Compare substantialist Christology to metamorphic Deism.) Whereas the Classical idea of narrativity moves from the perception of change to an identification of what is constant, continuous and typical in change, the latter moves from a perception of constancy and continuity to an identification of the effects and sig-

nificance of radical changes and transformations in an historical existent. And this is because Christianity (in its Pauline formulation) posits a catastrophic interruption of the historical process in the Incarnation as the cause of a qualitative change in the nature (the substance) of historical events thereafter. In attempting to imagine this change and to conceptualize it as a model for representing relationships between earlier (or past) events and later (present or future) events, Christian theologians worked out a notion of retroactive causation by which an event was to be historicized (distanced, placed in perspective, and assigned a positive or negative value) in the extent to which it could be interpreted primarily as an anticipation (a figure) of a later event or a fulfillment (*eine Erfüllung*) of an earlier event.

The figure-fulfillment model (which is not linear, not cyclical, not dualistic, nor fractal—none of the above) is a way of construing historical processes as a development in which an entity coming later in the order of time simultaneously exalts an entity preceding it as its own precursor and derogates it as an imperfect or partial or incomplete protomorph of the later and more fully actualized type to which both, though differentially, belong. The two entities—earlier and later—do not have to be construed as genetically related, in the manner of an ancestor and descendant. Indeed, it is the recognition by the later entity of the earlier entity as a virtual precursor of itself that bestows genealogical meaning on the relationship presumed to exist between them. The true identification of the earlier entity, an identification of which it could not have been aware, is bestowed retroactively—on the authority of a knowledge specifically historical in kind, a knowledge of “what has happened” in the past that separates the earlier entity from the later one, a knowledge based on historical distance and historical perspective and on the certitude of one’s own identity as a subject who is an actualization of what had previously been only a virtual rather than a fully-realized subject. It is on the basis of this recognition that the relation of continuity and change that unites and separates them can be established.

The paradigm of this model of historicity, as retrospective endowment of some element of the past with a meaning that is specifically “historical” in nature, is provided by St. Paul in his *First Epistle to the Romans*, in which he simultaneously exalts Judaism as a precursor of Christianity, as an imperfect, incomplete, or partial anticipation of the relationship to the one God that is “fulfilled” in the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ. Thus were the Jews to be at once distinguished from and elevated over the pagans by the rela-

tive superiority of their knowledge of God and derogated as having a knowledge thereof imperfect in the extent to which they did not recognize Jesus as the messiah whom they had been awaiting prior His advent. Paul is quite explicit about the qualitative difference between a life-to-be-lived under the qualitatively new conditions (the *modernitas*, as St. Augustine will call it) of inaugurated by the Incarnation and everything that has “come before.”

The important point to be made in our own discussion is the difference that this model of figure and fulfillment makes for the way that Christian culture will construe thereafter the relation between past and present, the kind of knowledge that we can have of this relationship, and the mode of representing its articulation in any given time. For historical knowledge in the West will develop on the basis of the presumed advantage that any later period enjoys in virtue of its capacity—as a function of posteriority alone—to comprehend anything earlier as being either an anticipation of itself (and qualifying thereby for inclusion in its genealogy and for a specifically “historical” understanding) or as not being in this line of descent and therefore being subject to an understanding more “anthropological” than historical in kind.

And this is why one can presume to write an authoritative account of historical reality in the form of a narrative. The narrative is the discursive form in which the figure-fulfillment model for construing the relationship between any past and any putative present endows it with the value of sequence in equivalence and equivalence in sequence. The conception of historical inquiry as a search for “origins” is fair enough, as long as it is realized that the origin is always to be recognized as a precursor of something that comes later, and that it is the later which not only reveals the historical meaning of the earlier as precursor but also derogates the earlier as merely a precursor—a figure of what is to come and what is to be revealed as a fulfillment of what had only been imperfectly realized in the earlier. This is what is meant by attaining historical distance and perspective on “the past.”

Such too is the work of narrativity, the differential distribution of events across a timeline in which the meaning of beginnings can only be discerned from the vantage point of a putative ending. This meaning is always the meaning of an ending only partially, imperfectly, and incompletely realized in comparison with the fullness of being displayed in the ending. It is a conceit of narrativity that the characters in the story can never foresee the ending from the vantage point of

any position prior to its manifestation as ending, either as catastrophe or consummation and fulfillment.

Now, this thesis has certain implications for assessing the viability of our models for the representation of specifically historical processes, in which the presumption is that the events to be emplotted on the basis of one or more of the models are defined a priori as individual, unrepeatable, transient, no longer perceivable because past, and elements of a temporal process which is adequately describable in the form of a narrative. Obviously, a narrative understood as an enactment or performance of the figure-fulfillment model permits of the use of any or all of these models if the series of events being presented as a historical series is distributed across different levels of integration and different phases of dispersion. It is only the reduction of the narrated sequence to the simple lines, circles, gyres, and fracta of the models that would give offense to a properly historicized sensibility. Thus, we could imagine synthesizing the models by distinguishing the levels at which the historical subject achieves integration and the degrees of integration (understood here as self-identity) achieved in different phases of its evolution. Narrative has the advantage of featuring a kind of recursivity that permits of successive redescription of its putative referent by distinguishing among its phases of development on the way to completion of its process of self-identification. But the relationship among the different descriptions of the phenomenon at different stages of its development is not a logical relationship of entailment or implication. It is a tropic or, as it is called, tropological relationship, a relationship among figurations that is involved.

Thus, to discover contradictions between successive descriptions of an entity presumed to be undergoing changes of a specifically historical kind is otiose. For since their relationships are tropically rather than logically determined, i.e., determined by the narrator's need to show figural aptness rather than logical implication or entailment, which means emplotting the course of the subject's development according to structures of meaning of the kind found in myth and literature rather than in scientific or philosophical discourse, the turns in the narrative—the condensations and displacements identifiable at the level of Expression (as Form and Substance, or literal statement and figurative meaning of expression) in what is said about the referent of the discourse—are affected precisely by the strategies and tactics of poetic utterance itself: repetition, dissonance, assonance, paronomasia, periphrasis, ephemism, and so on.

Thus, the challenge confronting the critic or analysis of historical discourse cast in the form of a narrative is to resist the tendency to translate its figurative language into some version of literal(ist) speech or, what amounts to the same thing, read figures and images as if their real signification lay in the concepts that they simultaneously reveal and hide. We have to assume, it seems to me, that a historical narrative means what it says, but that what it says, it says in figurative speech, that, in a word, a historical narrative refers to real events in the world and makes assertions about them but can only do so through the use of figures of speech and figures of thought. To be sure, historical narrators often intend to speak literally and wish to be taken as speaking literally, but insofar as they are narrators and have chosen the narrative as the form most apt for the representation of the reality about which they speak, they cannot produce anything more than an annals or chronicle, never a history per se, without emplotting the events they wish to present as objects of historical interest and this means “enfiguring” them. This is why historical revisionism typically takes the form of a re-figuration of events already enfigured in some canonical form, rather than only or even primarily as an introduction of a new body of factual information about a given historical subject. For it is only as enfigured that historical reality can take on an aspect of a meaning at once revealed and concealed by the forms that events seem to display to perception as told or written about. The real issue in assessing a given emplotment of historical reality is the relative adequacy and ethical import of a representation of it as an instantiation of one or another or many plot-types: tragedy, romance, comedy, farce, epic, pastoral, etc.