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Ann Rigney

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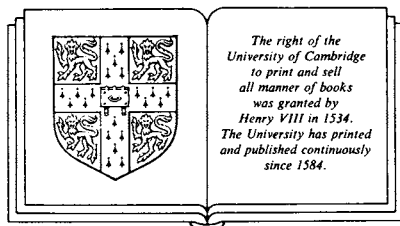
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THE RHETORIC OF HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION

Three narrative histories of the French
Revolution

ANN RIGNEY

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1 Historical representation and discursive context	19
Historical representation in context	19
The intertextual context	28
Intertextual antagonism	47
Conclusion	62
2 The narrative configuration of historical events	63
Narrative representation: 'Le 10 août'	63
Events in their narrative context	65
Representation <i>en creux</i>	90
Conclusion	100
3 The configuration of actors I	103
The representation of collective actors	103
The constitution of groups	106
Associations and dissociations	119
Conclusion	135
4 The configuration of actors II	137
Proper names and their symbolic function	137
Personal records: Danton and Robespierre	139
Personal effects	150
Epilogue: Robespierre before the public (8 June 1794)	164
Conclusion	171
<i>References</i>	177
<i>Index</i>	185

Cambridge University Press

0521530687 - The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution

Ann Rigney

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

This is a literary study of historical writing. A few preliminary remarks on the relation between history-writing and ‘literature’ may therefore be in order. ‘For a long time’, as Lionel Gossman writes of pre-1800 discursive practice, ‘the relation of history to literature was not notably problematic. History was a branch of literature’ (1978:3). We might add that, for the best part of the last 150 years, the relationship between the writing of history and the writing of literature has been equally unproblematic – but for quite the opposite reason: history and literature being apparently of such separate orders, there was no common ground between them worth making an issue of. As a result, the literary or discursive dimension of history-writing has for long been ignored: on the one hand, by literary scholars, whose concern has been almost exclusively with the traditional ‘literary’ genres of prose fiction, drama, poetry; on the other hand, by historians, for whom the role of discourse in the constitution of historical knowledge has not been of particular theoretical importance.

The appearance of an essay such as Gossman’s – pregnantly entitled ‘History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification?’ – indicates that the relationship between ‘history’ and ‘literature’ has become an issue again. The question raised in his title reflects recent developments in the concept and study of discourse (its extension beyond the confines of ‘literary’ works) and the growing interest, on the part of literary theorists as well as historians, in the role which discourse plays in historiographical practice.¹

That the frontier between discourse and history is now open again is illustrated by the growing attention which historians are paying to the role of texts in their object of study and to their own role as interpreters of texts

¹ For a general survey of these diverse theoretical developments and the relations between them, see Struever 1985.

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0521530687 - The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution

Ann Rigney

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Preface

and decoders of signs. (Witness, for instance, Dominick LaCapra's insistence that intellectual historians should move away from a naively 'documentary' to a textual approach to their material; witness Carlo Ginzburg's self-consciousness in attempting to 'read' the semi-literate mind of a sixteenth-century miller in his *Il formaggio e i vermi*, 1976.²) Not only have historians been profiting from developments in semiotics and textual analysis to renew their own practices, but there has also been increasing interest in the role of the historian himself as a writer and producer of texts. What is or what should be – the difference is not always clearly drawn – the role of discourse and the role of narrative form in the constitution and communication of historical knowledge? In very different ways, works like Paul Veyne's *Comment on écrit l'histoire*, 1971/1978, Michel de Certeau's *L'Écriture de l'histoire*, 1975, and the collection edited by Jürgen Kocka and Thomas Nipperdey, *Theorie und Erzählung in der Geschichte*, 1979, have attempted to address these theoretical questions with a view to historiographical practice. Among those who have approached similar questions from a literary perspective, that is, with a view to a greater understanding of symbolic productions, we find above all the name of Roland Barthes and of Hayden White, whose 1973 *Metahistory* has played a key role in waking the sleeping dog (or sleeping beauty) of historical discourse after a century of positivist neglect.

In the first instance, those theorists approaching historical writing from a literary perspective concentrated on the referential function of historical discourse in an attempt to overcome what they perceived to be a general resistance on the part of historians to the very notion that historical writing involves 'signification' rather than 'reproduction'. Thus Barthes' seminal 'Le Discours de l'histoire' (1967) was implicitly based on a particular view of 'the historian' as someone who blithely ignores the discursive basis of his own representations, someone who naively (and erroneously) believes in his own power or the power of language to copy the past 'as it really was'.³ In a similar way, the main thrust of Hayden White's early work was pitted against the 'reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are – verbal fictions' (1978:42).

² See also Schmid 1986 and its programme for an explicitly semiological *Geschichtswissenschaft*.

³ Both in his 'Le Discours de l'histoire' (1982:20n; originally published 1967) and in his classic 'L'Effet de réel' (1968:88), Barthes exemplifies the 'naivety' of historians with a quote from Thiers: 'Etre simplement vrai, être ce que sont les choses elles-mêmes...' ('To be simply true, to be what things themselves are...'). See Bann (1984:8f) for a critical exploration of the mythical status of Ranke's infamous 'wie es eigentlich gewesen'.

Cambridge University Press

0521530687 - The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution

Ann Rigney

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xi

Thanks in no small part to the critical endeavours of Barthes and White, it has now been generally recognised that historical works are not only documentary sources of information about the past, but also ‘verbal artifacts’ which may be legitimately studied as such. We can safely assume that the question ‘reproduction or signification?’ no longer needs to be asked.

But, having granted the theoretical point that there can be no discursive representation without signification, it seems time to go further in examining what sort of ‘signification’ it is that historians produce and how they actually go about producing it through the medium of discourse. Above all, it seems necessary to consider the discursive dimension of the historian’s work more closely in the light of its specifically historiographical function, that is to say, its function in representing and explaining real events of collective significance. If we grant that all historical texts are signifying constructs, do we have no other option but to follow Hayden White in concluding that they are also ‘verbal fictions’? These are the issues which concern me here.

Rather than address these questions in a purely theoretical manner, however, I shall proceed by way of the analysis of particular historiographical practices, using the insights of contemporary semiotics and narrative analysis – a body of critical discourse which, with the exception of Barthes’ brief essay, has rarely been brought to bear on historical works. Through the close, sustained analysis of particular texts from the nineteenth century, I hope to be able to broaden the range of theoretical questions which might be asked of other historical discourses and to bring more clearly into focus the particular constraints involved in historical, as distinct from fictional, narration.

This interest in the relationship between discursive form and historiographical function prompted me to focus my analysis on three, roughly coeval narrative histories dealing with a common topic: namely, Lamartine’s *Histoire des Girondins* (1847), Michelet’s *Histoire de la Révolution française* (1847–53), and Blanc’s *Histoire de la Révolution française* (1847–62). Three histories, written in a similar socio-cultural context, some 60 years after the Revolution to which they commonly refer.

The same concern with ‘historiographical function’ also dictated my way of proceeding with these works: rather than give primacy to the individual texts (by devoting one chapter to each work, for example), I have allowed the events to take centre field. More precisely, I have opted to organise my analyses around the different representations of certain core episodes or key figures in the Revolution – notably, the ‘Journées

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0521530687 - The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution

Ann Rigney

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

d'octobre' (1789), the 'Massacre du Champ de Mars' (July 1791), 'Le 10 août' (1792), the judgement of Louis XVI (January 1793), the conflict between Danton and Robespierre. In adopting this comparative, event-based method, I aimed to bring into relief, against the background of a common event or a common figure, the discursive and narrative strategies actually deployed by the different writers in representing and giving meaning to events. While this event-based approach has enabled me to foreground the literary activity of the different historian-narrators, it has been equally important in helping to show up the constraints imposed on them by the nature of their historiographical role and the nature of the raw material with which they are dealing; the fact that they are not free to produce whatever meaning they choose; the fact that, unlike fiction-writers, they are not free to invent.

Some of the differences between the three writers in their view of the Revolution, and in their ideological presuppositions, do emerge in the course of my analysis; they are not, however, the immediate subject of the analysis itself. For my primary concern here is not to describe in detail the three interpretations of the Revolution and the ideologies which inform them, but to investigate the literary means through which those interpretations are established in the first place; the literary, and specifically narrative, means through which real events in the past can be symbolically reconstituted and invested with a particular significance for a latter-day public.

All quotations from foreign languages are given in translation and, except where otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. In certain cases, where the precise wording of the original seemed important, I have included both original and translation.

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Ann Rigney

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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