

Introduction: What is history?

History, the articulated past – all kinds, even our personal histories – is forever being rethought, refelt, rewritten, not merely as rigor or luck turns up new facts but as new patterns emerge, as new understandings develop, and as we experience new needs and new questions.

Robert Penn Warren, “The Use of the Past”

I have no original answer to the question posed by my subtitle. But I would like to explore some of the issues in the voluminous debate about the status of history and historiography so that we can better understand Joyce’s own implicit but rich contribution to that debate.

History comes to us most often in the form of a narrative, a story. Unlike fictional narratives, historical ones are supposed to be true: “The one describes the thing that has been,” as Aristotle wrote, “and the other a kind of thing that might be.”¹ The historian deals with truth, facts, a past reality; the poet or fiction writer makes something up. Yet the English word “history” did not always register this dividing line, as we see in the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s first definition: “A relation of incidents (in early use, either true or imaginary; later only of those professedly true).” During the Renaissance, the writing of history was viewed not as a scientific inquiry but as an exercise in the art of rhetoric.² As late as 1828 Macaulay could write: “History, at least in its state of ideal perfection, is a compound of poetry and philosophy.”³ Only in the nineteenth century did historiography take on the status of a social science and sharply differentiate itself from story-telling.

But what is this science of history? The *OED* defines it as “That branch of knowledge which deals with past events, as recorded in writings or otherwise ascertained.” Past events, however, can no longer be experienced – a fact which opens historical knowledge to

the charge that it is a construction as much of imagination as of thought, and that its authority is no greater than the power of the historian to persuade his readers that his account is true. This places historical discourse on the same level as any rhetorical performance; it becomes a textualization no more authoritative than literary discourse.⁴ Yet history (past events) “is *not* a text, not a narrative,”⁵ as Jameson takes pains to point out. And history (an account of past events) has a referent that is not merely imagined but real. Aristotle’s distinction, then, holds. The problem for the historian, which Aristotle does not address, is an epistemological one that can be condensed into a few questions. First, how do we gain knowledge of past events when we can no longer experience them? Second, how do we gain knowledge of aspects of the past which have shaped our lives without our awareness and which make themselves felt to us as givens, as Necessity? Third, how does the discourse of history mold those events which it attempts to represent?

Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), the pioneer of “scientific” history, might have been puzzled by these questions. His goal was simple: not to judge or evaluate the past, but to tell “only what actually happened” (“wie es eigentlich gewesen”). He had tried, he said, “to extinguish my own self . . . to let the things speak and the mighty forces appear which have arisen in the course of the centuries.”⁶ Ranke’s co-founder of early nineteenth-century German historicism, Wilhelm von Humboldt, saw the historian’s task in a similar light: it is “to present what actually happened.” He added a twist, though, pointing out that an event

is only partially visible in the world of the senses; the rest has to be added by intuition, inference, and guesswork . . . The truth of any event is predicated on the addition . . . of that invisible part of every fact, and it is that part . . . which the historian has to add . . . Differently from the poet, but in a way similar to him, he must work the collected fragments into a whole.⁷

J. G. Droysen, too, recognized the historian’s role in bringing out the undersurface of historical facts. Historians, he declared, “must know what they wish to seek; only then will they find something. One must question things (*Dinge*) correctly, then they give an answer.”⁸ Writing in the early twentieth century, Eduard Meyer, a historian of the Romantic idealistic school whose ideas were adumbrated by Humboldt, turned Ranke’s concept of scientific objectivity on its head. He denied that historiography is a systematic discipline, claiming: “The historian’s subjective judgment [is] deci-

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sive. The historian has the right to demand that in this respect he is not judged differently from the artist.”⁹ Meyer’s credo brings us back to Aristotle and the question of how the historian differs, or does not differ, from the poet.

During the first half of the twentieth century the English philosopher-historian Robin Collingwood also grappled with this question. He observed that the historical imagination cannot operate as freely as the poet’s or fiction-writer’s because it must work from “evidence.” This evidence does not have to consist in written records alone; it can be derived from archeology, paleography, philology, numismatics, and so on. In the case of textual evidence, “history finds its proper method when the historian puts his authorities in the witness-box, and by cross-questioning extorts from them information which in their original statements they have withheld.”¹⁰ He acknowledged, though, that evidence cannot be easily separated from the argument or interpretation built upon it: we recognize evidence as such only when (as Droysen implied) we’re already working from a system or hypothesis which invests it with significance. The historian’s imaginative and creative faculties, therefore, are involved in the very foundations of his work.¹¹ For this reason Collingwood found history (accounts of past events) to be the record of human thought. But history (the past events themselves) is also an expression of thought. The human agents of historical events acted as they did because of their conscious or unconscious ideas and beliefs. Thus “wrong ways of thinking are just as much historical facts as right ones,”¹² at least insofar as they gave rise to actions, events, regimes, and ways of life.

Collingwood not only considered history to be thought, but felt that “all historical thought is the historical interpretation of the present.”¹³ Because evidence changes with the nature of our questions, and the questions change as time brings about new historical perspectives, “every new generation must rewrite history in its own way.”¹⁴ This is not an argument for relativism, but rather a recognition that the value of reconstructing the past depends on what we do with it in the present.¹⁵ Thus, while Collingwood does not advocate a particular social program, he does tie the writing of history to its effects on present-day thought, both in itself and as translated into action.

To revert to the first of my questions posed above – how do we gain knowledge of the past when we can no longer experience it? –

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Collingwood felt that we cannot fully know past events. He never questioned their reality, yet avoided falling into what Barthes saw as scientific history's error of taking the signified for the real.¹⁶ Acknowledging that an account of past events does not equate with the events themselves, he stressed the imaginative and time-bound aspects of such an account. The knowledge we gain of the past is partial not only because evidence may contain gaps or be doubtful, but because our point of view conditions it. Collingwood posited a kind of historical parallax, according to which the position of the observer in a given culture plays a key part in forming her view of a past culture. The questions we ask about the past are determined by our own particular present, and the resulting answers – while never yielding full, absolute knowledge – can illuminate the past in terms of the present and vice versa. Emphasis falls on illuminating the present, which is why Collingwood has been called “the philosopher of history as a strategy for asking questions about ourselves.”¹⁷

Yet how do we know what to ask about ourselves? Collingwood might well have agreed with the premise of my second question – that the past has helped form our present lives in ways unknown to us which manifest themselves as Necessity – but he didn't raise this question. He recognized that past writers of history unconsciously withheld certain information which historians today must extort from them “by cross-questioning.” As to what we withhold from ourselves, though, he remained largely silent. Apparently he assumed that this blank space in our self-knowledge is small enough so as not always to prevent us from directing our inquiries about ourselves and history in the right direction.

A crucial concept absent from Collingwood's thought, which relates to that gap in our historical self-awareness, is ideology. Both in general and Marxian usage, “ideology” has three primary meanings:

- (i) a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group;
 - (ii) a system of illusory beliefs – false ideas or false consciousness – which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge;
 - (iii) the general process of the production of meanings and ideas.¹⁸
- Collingwood clearly had (ii) in mind in writing of “wrong ways of thinking.” He also used the first sense in suggesting that each generation has its own perspective, its own way of thinking. And he recognized that (iii) takes place in a specific cultural and temporal context, with the resulting limitation that meanings and ideas never

contain full, absolute truth. Yet his failure to grapple head-on with the concept of ideology barred him from systematically exploring the problem of how historians, caught in their own historical moment, can avoid wrong ways of thinking and unconscious omissions such as they detect in their predecessors' work.

A later historian, M. I. Finley, embraces the missing word which ties together so much of Collingwood's thought. Citing a definition of "ideology" from the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* that roughly matches (i) above, he states: "The study and writing of history . . . is a form of ideology." He dismisses the possibility of objectivity, such as that which Ranke professed, and observes that the selection and arrangement of events in any historical narrative implies a value judgment. It is the historian who "must ask the right questions [of historical evidence] and provide the right conceptual context." Further, we must begin by asking of any written evidence, "why was it written? why was it 'published'?" This is paramount because "what any given society asks or fails to ask, records or fails to record, by itself offers an important clue to the nature of that society."¹⁹

Finley goes beyond Collingwood, at least insofar as he names and conceptualizes the beast – ideology – that lurks in the margins of Collingwood's texts. Yet both he and Collingwood fail to explore sufficiently the implications for people who write about history (be they novelists or historians) of the limits and relativity inherent in ideology in all its senses. To say that each generation must find its own historical truth, or that the historian must consciously articulate his "conceptual context," provides little in the way of theory or a program for action.

Fredric Jameson, an American cultural critic, offers both the theory and the program. Though a Marxist, he implicitly rejects the claim that Marxism furnishes a scientific means of attaining the truth about the past – that it explodes the "false consciousness" of earlier ideologies (ii), yet remains immune itself to the conditioning effects of making its observations at a certain point in history. Rather, he finds that Marxism can transcend other ideologies precisely because it takes history (that is, ideology enacted) as its object of study. All ideologies (i) contain elements of truth and, indeed, resemble Marxism in that they express at bottom a salvational or Utopian impulse. But they are "strategies of containment,"²⁰ not because they limit salvation or citizenship in Utopia to the chosen, but because they keep certain matters from consciousness. This

unconscious material, as it affects behavior, assumes the guise of Necessity. It seems, in spite of its historical origins, to be given – simply “the way things are.” Society, through ideology, works hard to maintain this illusion; for when repressed material breaks through, instability or chaos can result.

Jameson’s adaptation, in *The Political Unconscious*, of Freudian psychoanalytic theory to a cultural context is restricted to method. For Jameson, Freudianism is not a body of timeless truths; rather, its continuing value lies in Freud’s insights into the mechanism of repression, and in his development of an interpretive system to ferret out and bring to light what has been repressed or denied. The Freudian analyst, far from accepting at face value the patient’s statements about himself, looks for latent meanings in them. Such meanings spring up when a repressed set of drives or energies (the unconscious) exists in a troubled, antagonistic relation to an overt structure (consciousness) that has the task of keeping the repressed invisible and masking or containing its eruptions. We never see the unconscious directly, but instead infer it from what can be seen and analyzed. By coming to an awareness of previously unknown influences on our behavior – in other words, by discovering the causes of Necessity and thereby unmasking it as such – we gain the possibility of freedom from such internal determinants. They may still affect but no longer need determine our actions. We can choose.

The person who wins such potential liberation through psychoanalysis exists not just as an individual, though, but as a member of society, and so remains subject to social (as well as natural) Necessity. Jameson posits a collective unconscious – we might call it a cultural or ideological as well as a political unconscious – which accounts for the given and seemingly necessary on the social level. It consists in repressed energies derived from historical contradictions which are unacknowledged or denied in a society’s conscious existence. Again, we cannot look at this unconscious directly as an object of study, yet we can infer its nature from the inevitable signs and symptoms of repression. Jameson derives this kind of “symptomatic analysis” not only from Freud but from Marx – whose genius, according to Engels, lay in treating as questions what everyone else took to be solutions – and ultimately from Hegel, whose dialectic of thesis and antithesis presumes that any solution or resolution must always be incomplete. As with Freudian psychoanalysis, though, the goal is to reveal the roots of outwardly causeless imperatives and to

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enable us to make choices not even seen as existing before. Thus Jameson offers an answer to the question, scarcely addressed by historians because scarcely perceived, of how we gain knowledge of the past when it has shaped our present in ways unknown to us which we experience as Necessity.

Jameson assigns narrative a key part in his analytic procedure. History (past events) comes to us through the medium of history (accounts of past events). Even unwritten historical evidence, for Jameson, has an implicit narrative structure. If we perceive the world in the shape of stories, then there arises the issue of interpretation. We cannot read narratives without interpreting them, and interpretation cannot occur without a framework provided by ideology. As remarked by Droysen, Collingwood, and Finley, we cannot recognize evidence as such without a pre-existing conceptual system that invests it with significance. Hence the problem of getting around or going beyond the system. Sensing this problem, Collingwood advocated cross-examining one's authorities to "extort" from them information they did not originally intend to yield, and Finley prescribed stepping "behind the text" to ask questions that the text itself fails to pose. In a much broader context, dealing with reality in general as well as history books, Jameson outlines a technique for doing this. We unmask the givens and uncover the hidden assumptions of any ideology (history being, for both Collingwood and Jameson, human thought or ideology [i] enacted) by interpreting or reinterpreting its narratives in terms of their latent rather than overt meanings. This results, to be sure, in another narrative. But to make such a narrative involves a re-emplotting and hence a transforming of the past, with significant consequences for both present and future. Although we never quite attain absolute historical truth – history, ultimately, is for Jameson a transcendent category which no narrative can comprehend²¹ – we can to some extent free ourselves of the chains of our past.

Concerning the implications of Jameson's thinking on narrative, Hayden White comments:

Human beings can will backward as well as forward in time; willing backward occurs when we rearrange accounts of events in the past that have been emplotted in a given way, in order to endow them with a different meaning or to draw from the new emplotment reasons for acting differently in the future from the way we have become accustomed to acting in our present.²²

To put it in psychoanalytic terms, the patient, having brought to light and understood some of the unconscious causes of his actions, re-emplots his life history so as to change the meaning not only of those actions but of the entire context in which they occurred.²³ Thus he becomes able to avoid neurotically repeating the past, and can live a truly new plot in the present, devoting to it that formidable flow of energy formerly channeled into repressing an awareness of threatening conflicts or contradictions in his thoughts and behavior. Jameson sets as a goal a similar process on the communal level. We cannot touch, look at, or directly engage the unconscious and absent causes of a society's history, but we can infer them by analyzing the succession of narratives they have generated, including overarching master narratives. The resulting new narrative does not free us of the past or causality in any absolute sense. It does, though, represent a past we have chosen, rather than one determined for us by unknown causes, and it makes possible a different, far more consciously created future.

Jameson's thinking invests with great, almost unbearable importance the role of the historian or literary critic or any analyst of the narrativized past. Such an analyst is, potentially, a liberator – a participant in what Jameson's master narrative depicts as “the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity.”²⁴ But, as critics of Jameson have pointed out, there are problems with his totalizing vision of Marxism as the science of history. This vision (like that conceptual framework which Droysen, Collingwood, and Finley cite as a prerequisite for historical thought) is a priori; it requires belief before it can be used to analyze and subsume competing ideologies. Without such a belief, we can applaud Jameson's injunction “Always historicize!”²⁵ yet must recognize the potential limitations of the historicizer, who arguably cannot see (or see clearly) everything within the horizon of history because of the shadow cast by her position within her own historical moment.

Another problem with Jameson's theory has to do with language. Even though he describes his predominant practice, interpretation, as “an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code,” he nonetheless relies on the potential of words to represent reality accurately or adequately. The “problem of representation, and most particularly of the representation of History ... is essentially a narrative

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James Fairhall

Excerpt

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problem, a question of the adequacy of any storytelling framework in which History might be represented.”²⁶ That is, we can properly represent historical events and characters by locating them within the right master narrative. Yet historical narrative, though its referent (the past) can be seen as existing or having existed beyond the realm of words, is itself contained within language. This fact raises, as White points out, the issue of the rhetoricity of history. Moreover, history (accounts of the past) can even be said to originate in language. And language, as demonstrated by Jacques Derrida, is a far more slippery thing than the rhetoricians ever dreamed: no word or series of words has a single, unitary, absolute meaning, but rather is defined in relation to other words in an endless sequence of differing meanings (*différance*)²⁷ which cannot be made to stand alone through reference to a reality outside language. For a deconstructionist no storytelling framework, such as Jameson’s Marxian master narrative, can solve the problem of representing history, since all stories and histories remain trapped within the airless closure of language. History, from this point of view, is not a transcendent category; and historical discourse, regardless of the investigative methods behind it, is caught forever in a cloud of linguistic uncertainty, unable to break free into the sunshine of clear fixed truth.

One could, however, turn on its head this view of the post-structuralist prisonhouse of language. Instead of closure, we might see an infinite semiotic openness; instead of entrapment, we might see freedom – at least a freedom from absolutist concepts and ideologies. It is this idea of freedom or liberation which links Joyce’s attitudes toward history and language, and provides a common ground for both Jamesonian and Derridean perspectives on his work. Joyce struggled throughout his adult life to wrest a realm of freedom from history; though this was above all a struggle to save himself, we do find, in his fiction from *Dubliners* to *Finnegans Wake*, a liberating impulse directed toward the consciousness of his readers. Jameson’s theories provide a tool for investigating the successes and failures of this monumental war of liberation. At the same time, however, Joyce’s works increasingly localize (and universalize) the conflict within language. From the “Sirens” episode of *Ulysses* on, the word tends to become the world, and referentiality becomes ever more problematic. Stephen’s desire in *A Portrait* to escape the nets of family, country, and religion, whose effects on his growing mind are precisely delineated, is replaced in the second half of *Ulysses* and in

the *Wake* by a generalized desire to escape the authority of the word and the imprisonment of narrative. Here Joyce's project contradicts Jameson's, since the latter implies that, without narrative, the possibility of freedom (through reconstructing the past) would not exist.

We have arrived at an impasse, then, which is still being argued passionately today in a debate that Joyce's art prefigures. I myself lean toward a program of ideological activism, based in part on Jameson's theories, that aims to change our lives (and our descendants' lives) by changing the way we think about history. Like many other readers, I feel reluctant to accept the all-encompassing horizon of his Marxian master narrative; yet his major theme – the struggle to achieve freedom – seems to me as irresistible as the human need for a narrativized system of beliefs. We cannot, in contrast, speak of the master narrative of deconstruction, which is a method of interrogating idealist philosophical ideas and practices; nor can we speak of its program of action. Because of its focus on language, it has been charged with a denial of history; and because of its refusal to take a position of its own or do anything but subvert other positions, including those which oppose the established order, it has been charged with a tendency to foster political paralysis. But deconstruction has other political implications that potentially lend it to left-wing activism. It emphasizes

plurality over authoritarian unity, a disposition to criticize rather than to obey, a rejection of the logic of power and domination in all their forms, an advocacy of difference against identity, and a questioning of state universalism. It ... argues for the flawed and structurally incomplete, if not contradictory, nature of all attempts at absolute or total philosophic systems.²⁸

Thus no discourse can be accorded ontological privilege. Any position – that of Marxism or Catholicism or any other – is self-divided, and its claims to authority are self-contradictory.

How to reconcile these seemingly contrary implications of deconstruction – and of Joyce's art – is beyond the scope of my book. So, too, is the question of how to frame a discourse, deprived not only of any “transcendental guarantees”²⁹ but of a clear relation to history, which nonetheless can powerfully, self-confidently intervene in history.³⁰ I will, however, attempt to trace the evolution of Joyce's own narrative interventions in history, which began with the word's attempt to change the world and ended with the collapsing of the world into the word.