

# Against the Historical 'Middle Ground': A Reply to Michael Coleman

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This paper is a reply to Michael Coleman's recent article in *American Studies in Scandinavia* ('Response to a Postmodernist: Or, a Historian's Critique of Postmodernist Critiques of History')<sup>1</sup> which, because he's raising in it both *general* arguments against the (apparent) claims of postmodern historians as well as *specific* instances of where I personally seem to have got things hopelessly wrong, is in two parts. In the first I want to address just a few of the more typical arguments which keep appearing against postmodern historians and 'history theorists' which, at this point, ought to come to a halt; they just don't have any purchase any more (if they ever did!). This is not because the postmodernists targeted are no longer paying attention (though most have probably got better things to do than rebut generally ill-informed, swingeing critiques), nor is it because the exchanges which actually do take place have become repetitive, familiar and unproductive (though there may be an element of this as the two 'sides' are said to talk past each other), but because one 'side' of the debate – the postmodern – has won the day; is so convincing that the location and the terms of any remaining worthwhile discussion about the 'nature of history today' can only now take place *within* the framework(s) established by postmodernists and not *between* 'modernists and postmodernists'. If only empirically and epistemologically

1. Michael Coleman, "Response to a Postmodernist: or, A Historian's Critique of Postmodernist Critiques of History" in *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 34, 1, Spring 2002, pp. 47-64.

mindful historians, if only Coleman had noticed, they/he would have realised that the reason they may feel they're talking to themselves is because the 'debates' have moved on, leaving them behind. And in the second part of this paper, as already suggested, I want to deal directly with Coleman's specific complaints against me insofar as they are not effectively covered in the general response I will have made in the first.

## **PART ONE**

### **(1) On Generalities**

One of the many general complaints made by Colemanists (he is in many ways so typical of mainstream academic historians that the collective noun is not inappropriate) about the sometime engagement between modernist and postmodernist historians (or, as it is often pejoratively put by Colemanists, between historians *as such* and mere 'theorists'), is that the two sides take up such extreme and/or uncompromising positions that the resultant polarisation negates the possibility of dialogue: straw persons face straw persons. What would therefore be better (claim Colemanists) is that such unhelpful postures are dropped and, as 'rational' people, we find some common 'middle ground' where, in a mutually respectful and productive atmosphere, 'we' settle our differences and work together for what is surely our joint objective: to consider that constitutes the discourse of history nowadays in ways conducive to the establishment of verifiable historical knowledge so to help the continuation of those vibrant historians contemporary social formations so much need. And I want to say, against this, that such a middle ground no longer exists – and nor should it. And my reasons for saying this involve at least the following...

### **(2) Against the Middle Ground**

Because the past (all that has happened everywhere 'before now') and histories (synoptic accounts, interpretive syntheses, etc., which appear at

the level of the text) are of a categorically different kind, then to understand what histories most plausibly seem to be we have to necessarily place them under – and read them through – the idea(s) of representation and presentation. And, on the basis that the etymology of representation most plausibly suggests substitutionalism, then we might best understand historians representations/ presentations – histories – precisely as substitutes, as things which stand in for absent objects in a relationship which can only be *metaphorical*: this representation/painting of a vase of flowers *as if* it were a vase of flowers; this text *as if* it was the past or some aspect of the past. And this difference between the two objects so expressed is, again, the difference between two totally different phenomena, and so is a permanent and thus ontological one: there is no way that a historical representation/presentation of the past could ever be ‘the past’ otherwise it would not be a history; no way that a painting of a vase of flowers could ever be a vase of flowers otherwise it wouldn’t be a painting. The only way that the ‘before now’ can meaningfully enter – transformed- into our consciousness as history, then, is by way of a ‘textual’ substitution (irrespective of the technical medium) in the mode of metaphor.

Now, all this is pretty basic stuff and fairly well recognised. But the quite devastating logical conclusion of reading things this way is rarely drawn by Colemanists. Not surprisingly. For if it is then at the level of history – at the level of the text which is always more than the level of the statement, the annal, the chronicle – what is definitively ruled out is the possibility that history has ever been, or ever will be, an *epistemology*.

For within the problematic of epistemology, the form(s) and the content(s) which constitutes the possibility of epistemological claims (claims to an objectively verifiable knowledge beyond peradventure), that of correspondence and description, are *not* available at the level of the text, at the level of histories. This is because the text (as the embodiment of the figurative, the inescapably aesthetic) is *always* more than – and thus is irreducible to – correspondence and description: the historicised past is always that of the imagined figure.

Again, it is easy to see why this is the case, but a reiteration of some basic points may dispel any remaining doubts. Thus, to get into this *via* a discussion of singular statements and complete(d) texts, we might say that once the world (and worlds past) has been ‘put under a description’

(a scheme) then, relative to that description it is possible (by virtue of coherence, consistency and thus correspondence between phenomenal actuality and language which gives us, once language has constituted the actuality of a phenomena as a linguistic 'reality', that problematic of world and relationships we 'know' as 'our' world) ... it is possible to make 'true' statements about such a self-referencing reality. Of course. But what holds for statements (albeit perilously on many occasions) *never* holds for texts which, in their ineradicable figural aestheticism, are not objects that can be proven or falsified, made true or false, before the tribunal of knowledge, of epistemology.

The Dutch philosopher of history Frank Ankersmit has explained all this, and its consequences, better than most.<sup>2</sup> For Ankersmit, historian's texts (and by extension texts *qua* texts) consist of many individual statements most of which give an accurate *description* of some state(s) of affairs which took place 'before now'. These 'evidential statements' are extracted from the archive and have about them, when corroborated (on ultimately arbitrary criteria operating by courtesy of a sometime consensus at the 'research phase' of the historian's work) the aura of facticity, a facticity which comes to the surface as *one* element of the text replete with 'current' notions of scholarly apparatus but in ways which suggest that what is being presented here not just in these statements but in the whole text is the past – or some aspect of the past – *as such*. And here Ankersmit makes a first qualification. For obviously nobody literally accesses the past *as such*, and nobody nowadays seriously takes the view that history as a discourse is committed to the re-recovery of the past in some sort of pre-discursive state. The historicised past is clearly 'always already' textual, such that all that there has ever been and ever can be at issue is what can be drawn intertextually from the generic archive, it being these traces which function as the historians ultimate referent for statements but not, crucially, for texts. Moreover, with the possible exception of areas of the 'before now' with an almost non-existent archival record, the evidential traces and thus the evidential 'true' statements available allows historians to write many more such state-

2. F. R. Ankersmit discusses most of the issues considered in this reply in his many publications, but never better than in his most recent book, *Historical Representation* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001).

ments than are ever included in their texts. It is sometimes argued that postmodernists deny that there are any such things as 'facts' and this is accurate in the sense that such 'facts' have to be given that status by much investigation, designation, interpretation, and so on. But that work done, it is not then a matter of there being no facts but that there are millions of them. Consequently, it is this situation which makes the anti-postmodern stance of such representative Colemanists as Christopher Norris appear absurd. Thus Norris rehearses a near-universal complaint when he writes that there is,

a certain postmodernist way of thinking about history which goes roughly as follows. History is a fictive construct, a selective, partial, ideologically inflected view of the past. There is no historical truth...but always a variety of different, competing and strictly incommensurable claims about every significant historical event. Of those aspects of postmodernism I would want to resist, this is the one that most urgently needs resisting for the obvious reason that it opens the way for all manner of 'revisionist' distortions or suppressions of historical fact. The worst example, of course, is the revisionist approach that seeks to play down or to relativise what happened in Nazi Germany and elsewhere during the years of the Holocaust... [Here] getting things right in the face of competing ideological or politically motivated claims – is a matter of the utmost importance.<sup>3</sup>

Now, this really is a gift. For it would be interesting if Norris (*et al*) could actually *demonstrate* how any historian writing at the level of the text was not doing something *fictive* (not 'fictional' – a slippage between fictive and fictional appearing regularly in anti-postmodern writing) but *fictive*, in the sense that to create an account of the 'before now' in say, a narrative form when the phenomenon under investigation did not have a narrative form, is precisely what is meant here by fictive; namely, something made up, fabricated, fashioned, shaped, figured, fabular: *fictio*. It would also be interesting if Norris could suggest – given that no account can ever be either logically or contingently exhaustive – an 'account' that is not necessarily a selection. And it would be interesting indeed to know if what is being presented *via* selective procedures that are not expressible as a universal or algorithmic method (for history knows of no definitive methodology) could escape from being partial and, in the end given

3. Christopher Norris. "Defending Derrida" in *The Philosophers' Magazine*, Autumn, 2002, pp. 41-43. This short 'defense' was part of a series of talks on postmodernism held in London in 2002. Norris has written extensively, and repetitively, on the dangers of postmodernism.

no definitive historical method, arbitrary. And it would be amazing if Norris knows anyone who writes histories – including himself – outside of the ethical/moral/ideological/political set of assumptions and desires that give them and him their own distinctive positions; their personal signatures. And it would be not only amazing but absolutely original if Norris could show *exactly* how, at the level of meanings, of interpretive significances which are incommensurable – as in the case of different tropings and emplotments of, to use Norris' own example, the Holocaust – that such incommensurable positions could be resolved by reference to the facts as if value was logically entailed from them; as if it were ever possible to logically transit uni-equivocally from historical syntax to semantics. For the point about revisionism in general is that whilst there could conceivably be agreement about all the facts of the matter there can be no entailed agreement about what they might signify. Consequently, until Norris (*et al*) can show both in terms of a specific instance and general applicability how you derive values from facts, then no matter how much he bemoans the distinction it won't go away. Of course nobody is denying, least of all Ankersmit or me, that it is possible to get at the level of the statement/descriptive phrase regimes, 'facts', and nobody is denying that such evidential phenomena can *constrain* the range of descriptive possibilities such that, for example, the denial of the Holocaust in the light of the weight of corroborated traces is absurd. Moreover – and somewhat in passing – I know of no single postmodernist who is a Holocaust denier – and I doubt if Norris or anyone else does! But what *cannot* follow from all this is that we definitively know what the Holocaust *means*. And it is this 'fact' that gives weight to Ankersmit's point that since the past *per se* has no *intrinsic* meaning of its own in it, then no correspondence between the past and the meanings we ascribe to it are available. Which is also why he thinks that 'representations' are better to be thought of as 'presentations'; as proposals for ways of thinking about and thus imagining the shape of things past in the present. For we can now immediately see the problem of trying to verify as objective or true any such proposal given that the past itself does not have in it proposals of its own for any proposal to be checked against. Ankersmit thus concludes his analysis in ways easily rebutting Norris's position: saying 'true' things at the level of the statement is relatively easy – anybody can do that – but saying 'true' things at the level of the meaning-full text is

impossible – nobody can do that. And this is why his slogan – the statement is modernist, the text is postmodernist – is so apt. For given that history – to be a history (rather than a list, a chronicle, etc.) is always in excess of the sum of its parts – any historian (Coleman, Norris ...) who remains anti-textural, and therefore anti-postmodern, is just plain passé.

It is for these sorts of reasons that I think Hayden White and Jacques Derrida ought not to be castigated by Colemanists – as they typically are – but rather that their theories about historical representations/presentations be embraced as ‘the only game in town’. After the above comments on Ankersmit there is perhaps little need to yet again rehearse White’s position on the inextinguishable relativism of all historical readings. But within the literature on White – and I mention this because of Norris’ ‘oh-so-typical’ use of the Holocaust as the ‘test case’ against postmodern relativism – I want to insist, again in passing, that White has *never* revised his relativist position despite near unanimous claims that he has done so, an accusation which suggests that, in his ‘revisionism’, he has ‘cut the heart out of his philosophy’. And this is important to discuss, I think, because it helps underline the ‘relativistic’ points I am trying to make so that if Coleman(ists) wish to try and rebut them they know precisely the ‘proposal’ they have to engage with.

Thus, in his ‘Historical Emplotment and the Problem Truth in Historical Representation’<sup>4</sup>, White questions whether, with respect to historical emplotments, there are any limits to the type that might properly be used or if ‘anything goes’. And his answer is that ultimately ‘anything goes’. For we could only presume that ‘the facts of the matter’ set limits to the sorts of stories/narratives we can tell if we believe that the events themselves have in them a latent story form and a definitive, knowable plot structure. In which case – *if they did* – then we could indeed dismiss, say, a comic or pastoral story ‘from the ranks of competing narratives as manifestly false to the facts – or at least to the facts that matter – of the Nazi era’.<sup>5</sup> But of course they don’t. For as White says elsewhere ‘one must

4. Hayden White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation” *Figural Realism* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) pp. 27-42. White’s essay has appeared in many places, most ‘usefully’, perhaps, for this discussion, in Saul Freidlander’s *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992).

5. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

face the fact that when it comes to apprehending the historical record, there are no grounds to be found in the historical record itself for preferring one way of construing meanings over another'.<sup>6</sup>

Thus why the confusion; White's position seems clear enough? Why is it that historians like Saul Freidlander, Martin Jay and umpteen others, have insisted that White qualifies/subverts his relativism here? And the reason seems to be that White suggests that we might indeed be justified in *appealing* to 'the facts' in order to dismiss competing narratives of the Third Reich if they were to be emplotted in a comic or pastoral mode. But – and this is the big but – this attempted 'appeal' could only be an *attempt*; it could never succeed because of the fact-value dichotomy. And, in fact, White has himself recently refuted those who have read this attempt as the undercutting of his own long-term relativism. Thus, in his recent article, 'An Old Question Raised Again', he refers to his earlier article to say the following:

Here I considered the question of whether one could endow the events of the Holocaust with *all* the meaning that the various modes of emplotment known to Western practices of narrativisation provide. And I made two remarks. One had to do with the relation between facts and meanings. I said that when it comes to imputing *meaning* to a given set of historical events the facts *cannot* be appealed to in the same manner they can be appealed to in order to determine the truth-value of specific statements made about specific events. I referred to *meaning*, not *truth*. The second remark had to do with the question of whether the Holocaust could be freely emplotted ... including those [emplotments] of comedy and farce. I did not say that *the facts* precluded the emplotment of the Holocaust as a farce; I said [only] that it would be tasteless and offensive to most audiences to so emplot it. I invoked moral and aesthetic criteria, not facts, as determinative of the choice of the plot structure to be used in the narrativisation of the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup>

For White, then, it remains our moral/aesthetic *choice* to invest the facts with whatever meaning we wish. To be sure, certain investments may be (and indeed are) offensive, but the point remains that offence is not enough to undermine the fact-value dichotomy – and thus inexpungeable moral relativism for ever. And so to Norris and fellow Colemanists I

6. The Politics of Historical Interpretation, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) p. 75.

7. Hayden White, "An Old Question Raised Again: Is Historiography Art or Science? (Response to Iggers)" *Rethinking History*, 4, 3, 2000, pp. 391-406, p. 402.



repeat that what they have to do is not to keep on saying that it is ethically/morally repugnant to be able to *logically* emplot the Holocaust 'anyway you like', but to show how they can actually *logically* expunge such 'inexpungeable relativism' at the level of textual meaning.

And here I move from White to Derrida. For while as a citizen and a man of the left (and of course as a Jew), Derrida can and does reject Nazism/neo-Nazism/anti-Semitism, etc., in terms of the logic of deconstruction not only are we always able to decide how to make anything ultimately mean whatever we want it to mean but that, on the whole, this is considered to be a good thing. And this is because for Derrida *all* ethical/moral/political decisions have to go through the *aporia* of the decision; of 'the undecidability of the decision'.

For for Derrida, for a decision to actually be a decision, it must be more than the application of a previous rule or command or legal code. For if I am to do justice to any judgement I might make about an event which comes to me – as events always do – in ways which have never quite occurred before (be they ever so familiar) then this new event *must*, in all its singularity, be judged in ways that are precisely not the re-application of any previous decision. Because if I were to apply again a decision derived from a previously worked out formula (or from 'the lessons of history' construed as some form of necessity) then I would merely be carrying out an administrative act and thus no decision will have been made. A decision worthy of its name, then, occurs in a situation of radical undecidability, at a moment temporarily outside of all ethics, all morality, and so necessarily involves an element of *invention*. Of course, I can never actually make – nor has anyone ever made – a pure, new decision like that; all decisions have their newness contaminated by one's previous decision-making experience no matter how much one tries to forget it. Moreover, there is a sense in which, when making a decision, I always have to remember at least something for, as Derrida points out, the decision must 'deliver itself over to the impossible decision while taking account of rules and laws' – otherwise it would be so radically 'other' as to be incomprehensible. Yet, nevertheless, it must still be a decision beyond 'all certainty or all alleged criteriology':

Undecidable – this is the experience of that which, though foreign and heterogeneous to the order of the calculable and the rule, must nonetheless ... deliver itself over to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules. A decision that would not go

through the test and ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision; it would only be the programmable application or the continuous unfolding of a calculable process. It might perhaps be legal; it would not be just.<sup>8</sup>

From which summary one can conclude that that which has to be avoided at all costs is some sort of evaluative closure. Accordingly, it seems eminently sensible to 'conclude' that it really is excellent news that ethical/moral decision are always unfixed, always non-totalisable. It is a good thing that there is an unbridgeable gulf between fact and value; that the 'opening' to an ethical/moral decision is always a 'non-ethical opening to ethics', for in these ways the future of 'future decisions' is always open. Accordingly, this way of looking at things allows us to draw together the decisional aestheticism of Ankersmit, the relativism of White and the radical undecidability of Derrida in ways which undercuts foundational, meaning-full 'knowledge', and which opens up a space which, as Geoffrey Bennington puts it, 'might reasonably be called political insofar as it makes judgements necessary whilst disallowing any full cognitive grasp or possible programming of that judgement'.

So the challenge to Coleman(ists) is, once again, that they stop wringing their hands over ethical and moral relativism and to show, if they cannot go along with the generous open logic of Derrida *et al*, both where Derrida *et al* have got it wrong and, *vis a vis* their own anti-foundationalism, demonstrate how *exactly* foundations can be established and worked. The challenge to Coleman(ists) is that he/they engage directly with the above sort of arguments and rebut them point by point (not by slurs, pejorative slights, *ad hominem* dismissals ...) but philosophically; theoretically. This is an open invitation for Coleman *et al* to try.

To bring this first part to a tentative conclusion, let me now sum up, in four short paragraphs, the upshot of the preceding discussion before turning to engage with some of Coleman's specific charges against me.

8. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundations of Authority'" in *Acts of Religion* (London, Routledge, 2002) pp. 228-298, p. 252.

### (3) Four Conclusions

It can now be seen that critics of postmodern histories *generally* pose to its proposers the kind of questions which are now utterly redundant. Those are questions which, no matter how put, all boil down to concerns about objectivity, disinterest, truth and relativism which, further boiled down, effectively take the following familiar form: if histories are aesthetic, figurative discourses without foundations, then what happens to the pursuit of truth at the end of enquiry? My answer is to say that if the notion of the aesthetic is understood then nobody could possibly ask this epistemological question any longer. There is no point. And this is for the inescapable reason that it is no good expecting an aesthetic mode to answer an epistemological question. For the difference between these two categories is an ontological one; epistemologies and aestheticisations are different not in degree but in kind. And this explains why the break between modernist and postmodernist histories (the first wanting – but not achieving epistemological status – the latter not bothering) is *not*, as things stand, an epistemological break (which seems to allow for the possibility that one day they might be unified and the break ‘healed over’), but a permanent because incommensurable difference.

Second, it therefore follows that it’s really no good thinking that post-modern insights – into language, representation, narratology, etc. – can be somehow grafted on to modernist histories which might thus allow them to overcome ‘postist’ critiques and so survive not only intact but strengthened. For this is not possible; the break between modernity and postmodernity is as epochal, and as fundamental, I propose, as that between the medieval and the modern, and it is as inconceivable to think that modernists will be able to long survive in postmodernity (with their vocabularies, lexicons, axioms, etc.) any more than ‘the medieval’ might survive as if unaffected in modernity: these are differently constituted ‘worlds’. It is also, I think, a mistake for academic historians to think that postmodernists want their kind of pseudo-epistemological histories – their epistemological fallacies – to continue, and that they might even want to help them do so. It is understandable that academic historians, mistaking their own time-space bound *genre* for ‘the real thing’, can see no alternative to their current practices, but postmodernists can and do and such inventive sightings signal the end of one type of history and the

beginning – perhaps – of others, as yet embryonic. Postmodernity offers new births.

Third, from a postmodern perspective, this unavoidable break is a break which, though understandable ‘historically’ is, *logically*, a break that should never have been made. For if postmodern claims *vis a vis* what is arguably the best way of characterising histories – as aesthetic, figurative discourses – are correct, then it is not that postmodern histories alone are examples of an aestheticisation of the past which then stand over against modernist ones which just happen not to be aestheticisations. *For if history as such is an aesthetic*, then it always has been and always will be; there cannot be histories *qua* histories of any other type. All histories – past, present, future – are thus of the aesthetic type postmodernists raise to the level of consciousness. Which is another way of saying that postmodernist histories are and always have been ‘the only game in town’. So that in coming to the *end* of epistemological *attempts* to historicise the past we have, as it were, come home to ourselves. And so let us accept this homecoming, this happiest of thoughts which at this point can be thrown into the wake: *epistemological claiming histories just ought never to have existed; histories just ought never to have been modern.*

Finally, we can surely now see why we are witnessing the disappearance of ‘the middle ground’. For if, as I said at the beginning, one pole of the polar difference between modernist and postmodernist histories collapses such that we are now all postmodern aestheticisers, then there is no middle ground left to occupy. So that to those who still think that history is or could be an epistemology rather than a reflexive, aesthetic, figural, refractive, discursive experiment without foundations – and that to it postmodernism makes no difference – all I can say, finally, is ‘think about it’. And then relax; and then go with it. I mean why not...you have nothing to lose but your pasts.

## PART TWO

This is not the first time that Coleman has ‘replied’ to a postmodern historian/theorist. In 1998, in the pages of *American Quarterly*, he attacked Robert Berkhofer’s *Beyond The Great Story* (‘Gut Reactions of a Histo-

rian to a Missionary Tract').<sup>9</sup> And it is interesting to note that not only have Coleman's arguments not developed over the last four years but that his characterisation of himself as the plain, simple, straight-talking 'real' historian and Berkhofer as some zealous (and thus irrational, confused and fundamentalist) 'missionary', is repeated in his 'historians' critique of my own deluded, postmodern position: once again the 'real thing' attacks the fake, the quasi-historian, the stupid 'theorist'.

But in fact the 'real thing' is in poor shape, as is its defense, Coleman's arguments – if such they are – being a mix of unsustainable assertions and confusions stirred with *ad hominem* slights and the plaintive cries of an allegedly much-misunderstood, wounded animal. The only real difference between Coleman's two polemical pieces is that in Berkhofer's case he has conveniently tabulated his arguments whereas, in mine, things are just jumbled up. And so, taking a leaf out of his own book, I want to myself tabulate Coleman's points so that I can deal with them one by one: there are six of them.

### (1) Objective Histories

Whilst Coleman admits that an objectively true history is impossible (p. 50), nevertheless, he argues that historians must retain the claim that they can provide 'varying degrees of credibility' in constructing the historical past. Unfortunately, it is not very clear what Coleman means by 'credibility', but if what he has in mind is the production of historical facts of the level of the statement as if 'history' was reducible to that, then all the arguments from Ankersmit apply. And, incredible though it may seem, it looks as if this actually is what Coleman means. For could any scholar, he says, claim that the following two stories are equally credible: '(1) From the late fifteenth century Europeans began to colonize the Americas. (2) From the late fifteenth century, Aztecs and other peoples of the Americas began to colonize Europe'.<sup>10</sup> From which example Coleman argues that

9. Michael Coleman, "Gut Reactions of a Historian to a Missionary Tract" *American Quarterly*, 50, 2, June 1998, pp. 340-348.

10. Michael Coleman, "Response to a Postmodernist ..." *op cit*, p. 50.

whilst it is one thing to reach *one* objectively true reconstruction of the past, this example shows that the (postmodern) claim that 'all stories are equally credible or incredible' (p. 50) is quite another.

There are several points here. First – and very briefly given what has been said already – it beggars belief that Coleman doesn't recognise – or if he does then *act* on the recognition – that a history is more than the sum of its factive/cognitive elements, and that, therefore, the 'credibility' of cognitive elements does not equate to the credibility of narrative orderings which may include them but which are irreducible to them. But I have to conclude that Coleman doesn't recognise this – otherwise how could he have given the example he has?

But if Coleman's argument won't work – and it obviously won't – then it would seem that postmodernists are right to claim that all narratives are equally credible or incredible and that, therefore, anything goes. And logically this does seem to follow; as we have seen in our discussion of White and Norris, fact and value, syntax and semantics do indeed float free of each other, only contingently (and pragmatically) being 'connected' but never entailed. Nevertheless, in the above discussion of White and Norris – and indeed Ankersmit – the attention I have given to the 'true' statement (and which I always give) *should* have cautioned Coleman from rushing to the 'anything goes' *logical* conclusion as if there was nothing to take the attitude of 'anything goes' *about*. This 'qualification' of a kind – and it is for many postmodernists 'of a kind' – thus needs to be considered so that the un-nuanced 'version' of Coleman can be corrected.

No postmodernist I know of, then, thinks that a *text* – and by extension the historicised past as *text* – can in the actuality of its existence be *about* absolutely anything, or can be read in complete disregard of 'the words on the page' (or the 'historical syntax'). Rather, postmodernists argue (in the manner of Derrida) that whilst no 'reading' of a *text* can make itself absolutely necessary (hence the logic of 'anything goes'), in fact no existing text can in practice open itself up to just any reading – otherwise the reading wouldn't be about *that* text. No, what texts do is to *appeal* for a *reading*; what the historical past as a text does is to call out for an appropriative gaze, otherwise there wouldn't be a reading but only a passive decipherment – which is very precisely not what a reading is. As Geoffrey Bennington puts it:

Any reading, however respectful of the text being read...takes place in this [interpretive] opening, and this is why texts are not messages and why the classical conception of communication [Coleman's paradigm of clear, no nonsense prose] is unhelpful discussing them...A text is a text only as at least minimally readable in this sense, and that means it can always be read differently with respect to the way it would (be wished) to be read. An absolutely respectful relation to a text would forbid one from even touching it. The ethics of reading would, then, consist in the negotiation of the margin opened by readability.<sup>11</sup>

In that sense, Bennington's Derrida likens this necessary reading to an *inheritance*. For though inheritances exist (just as a text, just as the historicised past, exists for us...we by no means come from nowhere), and must thus be taken into account, an inheritance just wouldn't be an inheritance (nor a text a text nor the historicised past the historicised past) *if* we didn't *necessarily* pick and choose from it, a picking and choosing which, because one is never sure if the inheritance is complete to pick and choose from, is always itself incomplete: *no picking and choosing, no reading, no interpretation, no appropriation, is ever quite right*. And this is excellent, because it leaves, for example, historical reading as an endless task always before us, thus ruling out any total/totalising/totalitarian closure: the openness of all readings to future re-readings means that this open future guarantees an open past; the past cannot ever be fully settled because the future cannot be fully closed down. As Derrida puts this:

An inheritance is never fully gathered; it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can only consist in the injunction to *reaffirm by choosing*. You must [il faut] means you must filter, select, criticise; you must sort out among several of the possibilities which inhabit the same injunction. And inherit it in a contradictory fashion around a secret. If the legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal; if it did not simultaneously call for and defy interpretation, one would never inherit from it. One would be affected by it as a cause – natural or genetic. One always inherits a secret which says 'Read me, will you ever be up to it?'<sup>12</sup>

Will we ever be up to it? Will we ever achieve full presence; ever get total knowledge/ understanding? Of course not. But the point Derrida is making is that the absence of a 'single unity of meaning' (the objective truth ... etc.) does not commit either him or anyone else to a recommen-

11. Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London, Routledge, 2000) p. 36.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

dation of meaninglessness, nor does it mean the equivalence of the value of all readings – but rather, as Bennington argues, ‘the singularity of each’ and the recognition that no one reading will ever be able to claim to have exhausted the textual resources of any text – including the historical past as text – being ‘read’.

## **(2) Jenkins is not an Academic Historian and Therefore ...**

This charge is an old chestnut which, in effect, amounts to saying that since philosophers and theorists of history in general – and myself in particular – are invariably not empirical historians of an academic type, then we have no right, given our lack of practical experience, to criticise the methodological and craft practices of the professional historians who have. Against which at least two replies can be made.

First, it is by no means the case that philosophers/theorists of history have no practical experience of doing history – unless one rules out as history the history of ideas, the history of mentalities and intellectual history more generally. But my second and main point against Coleman – one expressed many years ago by R. F. Atkinson when responding to a similar charge against philosophers by Geoffrey Elton – is simply that it is *totally* beside the point if philosophers of history are ‘practicing historians’ or not. For philosophies of history – like philosophies of science or aesthetics or law – are discursive practices in their own right and do not derive their *raison d’être* from serving another discourse. Consequently, Atkinson correctly argues that philosophers of history are not trying to be historians and that it is therefore ‘of no necessary concern to them that their activities help, hinder or otherwise bear upon the practice’. Philosophers interest themselves in history, he adds, ‘for their own purposes: the instrumental value, or disvalue, of their investigations to history is wholly accidental’.<sup>13</sup> Atkinson is to the point. If history as a discourse – as a piece of writing – is made up of metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, methodological, ethical and narratological aestheticisations,

13. R.F. Atkinson, *Knowledge and Explanation in History* (London, Macmillan, 1978) pp. 7-8.



and if historians make claims to knowledge, then they cannot escape philosophical critiques of each of these constituent elements of their discourse nor the resultant status of their discourse as such. Which means, given that such critiques are leveled against historians 'practices', that one cannot refute them merely by redescribing the very practice being held to account: a philosophical critique demands a philosophical defence: can Coleman give it?

### (3) On Metanarratives

For Coleman, postmodernists stupidly contradict themselves when, in 'their crusade [sic] to invalidate modernist history' they themselves not only situate modernity 'historically' but often – and in my case all the time apparently – express such contextualisation by a classic use of the very metanarratives they revile: 'a vast metanarrative', writes Coleman, '*is central to their own triumphalist view of postmodernism*'. Not for the first time, he adds, have I 'pointed to such gross inconsistency by evangelists [sic] of the new postmodernist/anti-history order'; indeed, 'the very term "postmodern" is inherently *historical*'. Accordingly, he concludes, 'the unreflexive use by Jenkins, Berkhofer, Ermarth, and others of such historical "knowledge" suggests an insoluble problem in the post-modern crusade [sic] against metanarrative. To even accuse modernist history of establishing metanarratives (which it obviously does...) *is in itself to establish yet new metanarratives*'.<sup>14</sup>

It is incredible to think anyone – let alone Coleman – can be so grossly ignorant of what passes conventionally for a metanarrative and then, secure in such ignorance, accuse postmodernists of not knowing what they are doing. For whilst postmodernists do indeed construct *narratives* about phenomena, a narrative is not the same thing as a *metanarrative* – otherwise why two words? No, for a metanarrative to be a metanarrative it has to have an axiomatically held ground from which deductions are made yet which, being precisely *meta* (meta-physical), is beyond demon-

14. Michael Coleman, "Response to a Postmodernist ..." op cit, pp. 53-4.

strable proof outside of its own terms which remain unproblematised: I would hope I don't have to remind Coleman why Hegelian Marxisms, Nietzschean wills to power and Freudian oedipal 'mythologies' are metanarratives. And, of course, insofar as academic history sometimes makes similar claims on 'given' axiomatic foundations, then in these "non-refutable" instances, these too are metanarratives. But postmodern *narratives* are not of this type; they are, after Ankersmit, at best proposals about how things might be considered; they are, after Derrida (and I return to this in the last section) always interminably open and revisable, readable and re-readable. Nothing else is being claimed when postmodernists ask people to consider their histories as interesting proposals, and such proposals are not – I mean are they – metanarratives? As to the related question of why, if postmodernists *propose* that we consider that we have come to the 'end of history' 'we' still use historical examples to argue this; well, the reply here is that, just as philosophers *qua* philosophers talk, after Auschwitz (or Hegel) of 'the end of philosophy', and sociologists *qua* sociologists (such as Baumann) talk of 'the end of sociology' so, as a 'historian of ideas', I can, until the actualisation of the end of history in the specific way I talk about this 'end', use 'historical' and other discourses to try and explain this phenomenon. There is nothing paradoxical and certainly nothing contradictory here.

#### (4) Why do Postmodernists Hate Historians?

In his book, *Historical Representation*, Frank Ankersmit reflects on historians animosity towards theorists in general and postmodern ones in particular, and he offers the following explanatory 'proposal' for it. 'Deep in their hearts', he writes,

Historians feel more insecure about the scientific status of their discipline than the practitioners of any other field of scholarly research ... Deep in their hearts historians know that, in spite of all their emphasis on the duties of accurate investigation of sources and of prudent and responsible interpretation, history ranks lowest of all the disciplines that are taught at a university. Since one of the main effects of the historical theorists effort unfortunately is to confront the historian with these sad and disappointing facts ... it is only natural that the historian tends to project frustration about the uncertainties of the discipline onto the theorist. In short, the historical theorist is the

historian's obvious target for working off an all too understandable professional inferiority complex.<sup>15</sup>

And above all – and surely Coleman must recognise himself here – that resentment particularly raises itself to consciousness when philosophers of history make claims about the ontological and epistemological status of the historicised past, academic style, ‘on the basis of philosophised arguments only, without feeling challenged to find support for the ... assertions in hard historical fact’; thus reducing, with their theorising, ‘all the unwearying industry of the historian to mere irrelevant pedantry’ or, at least, as producing ‘material’ they can happily critique out of epistemological existence. No wonder postmodernists are the ones who are hated.

So, in aligning myself with Ankersmit's observations I would *reverse* the direction of the hatred Coleman discusses. ‘What’, he asks postmodernists, is it ‘about *you* that makes you so upset by *us*?’ We, he adds, are not attempting to banish postmodern histories in the way postmodernists are trying to end modernity's historicising experiment: ‘Turn self-criticism upon yourselves, as you preach [sic] at us to do’. Coleman's language here is desperate, an accusatory language that serves to save him admitting to himself the fact that postmodern theories have won the day and that he doesn't have the philosophical resources to refute them. Postmodernists, then, are not the ones who hate Coleman(ists), rather it is they who are disliked as they point out the shortcomings of ‘normal’ historical practices and move on to new pastures.

### **(5) But What About Using History For Emancipation?**

*Will forgetting history be more or less emancipatory for women, African Americans, and other such previously ‘invisible’ groups, whose present struggles are at least partly justified through constructed histories of oppression (generally justified constructions, I believe?) ... Through the systematic efforts of male and female, white*

15. F. R. Ankersmit, *op cit*, p. 250.

and non-white historians, the 'outs' at last have come into history – only to be threatened by expulsion from it by supposedly emancipated postmodernists!

Coleman, *Response to a Postmodernist*, p. 59

Let me begin to answer this quote from Coleman by some quotes from Hayden White who, many years ago, responded to Gene Bell-Villada's critique of himself, a critique that is almost identical to Coleman's pious offering, an offering which, had he been familiar with White's rebuttal (as he perhaps ought to be in his 'concern with theory') might have persuaded him not to bother with this particular protestation. Thus Bell-Valada wrote against White:

Meanwhile, in the face of a domestic socio-political panorama that begins to look vaguely 'Latin American', plus certain South American 'friendly regimes' that behave more and more nazi-like, the only response that the U.S. 'critical establishment' can come up with is its elaborate paraliterary schemes, its war on referentiality and its preachments that 'History is Fiction, Trope and Discourse'. The families of several thousand Salvadoran death-squad victims may entertain other thoughts about history.<sup>16</sup>

To which White replied that, yes, no doubt the families alluded to do indeed have other thoughts about history than that it consists of fictions, tropes and discourse and, he adds, they would be 'as foolish as Bell-Vilada apparently thinks I am if they even entertained such thoughts'. But that is not, he continued, the point of issue. For whilst the histories the Salvadoran oppressed might need ('if they bother to think about history at all') will undoubtedly be about the experiences – both past and present – they have endured, in order to make sense of these experiences they will still have to be troped, made (be fictive) and 'discursive'. Consequently a 'genuine' failure of 'historical understanding' occurs when one 'forgets that history, in the sense of both [previous] events and accounts of events, does not just happen but is made. Moreover, it is made on both sides of the barricades, and just as effectively by one side as by the other'.

In the light of these comments – to which I'll return briefly in a few seconds – I personally have never said (and nor so far as I am aware has

16. Hayden White, "Literary Theory and Historical Writing" in *Figural Realism*, op cit, pp. 1-26, p. 12.

White or Ankersmit, Derrida or Foucault, Lyotard or Butler, Kristeva or Ermarth, *et al*), that people who are oppressed cannot, if they want, frame their resistances historically. And nor have I ever written a text that has not, openly and persistently, urged that histories – if people want them – *should* be written precisely for emancipation and empowerment. Insofar, then, as the ‘writing up’ of the past into a history (with all the enabling Whitean meta-historical – *not* metanarrative – self awareness that is desirable) that wishes to make a difference in the present and the future is produced and distributed within a socio-economic-political moment where to have a history may help – where to have a history is still deemed necessary – then it would be ridiculous to ignore this: in the fight any weapon. But there are still two caveats to make.

The first echoes White’s point that ‘legitimate histories’ are always available on both sides – or on many sides – of the barricade(s). It would be nice, it would be easy, if the past/history was only on the side of the angels. But of course ‘the past’ knows of no sides; no angels, the ‘past’ will go with anyone, be historicised into multiple meanings *ad infinitum*: the fact-value distinction and the *aporia* guarantee this. And second – and this is the position essayed in my *Why History?* to which Coleman constantly refers – I think that, today, we might, in a culture that is arguably so a-historical, ‘forget history’ and begin to live among those ‘posts’ that can further emancipation. This is not to say that there are not hundreds of radical and emancipatory histories out there – and Coleman’s may be amongst them – but I just don’t think they resonate in our culture the way ‘postmodernist’ works of a radical type do. Amongst the most illustrious of ‘today’s’ intellectuals – say Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Rorty, Fish, Butler, Ermarth, Kristeva, Iragary, Cornell *et al* – *none* are historians. And so I have, precisely *for* the emancipatory purposes Coleman thinks I have ignored, pragmatically ‘gone over’ to the ‘posts’ and left, on the whole, historians behind in the way I would argue ‘our’ culture has.

### (7) Last Section

In his article ‘Deconstructions: The Im-possible’, Derrida responds to the request to try and historicise the impact of deconstruction on the USA

'over the last twenty years'. Arguing that no such an account can ever be definitive, objective or true; arguing that every historical representation is always a 'failed representation', he writes as follows:

Since I cannot here reconstruct all the *topoi* and movements of ... the last twenty years, you will allow me to propose, hypothetically, an *emphasis* ... The emphasis would concern a past periodisation that I don't quite believe in, that lacks rigour in my opinion, but is not totally insignificant. In other words it would possess, without being rigorously either true or false, a certain appearance in its favour, and an appearance that we should take account of.<sup>17</sup>

'A certain appearance in its favour'. This brief but brilliant encapsulation of 'the short-fall of the empirical', 'the short-fall of the epistemological', *is as good as it gets*. And it's good enough. Good enough in its recognition of the fact that all the decisions that I make in thinking about 'the before now' – metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, methodological, ethical – are always radically undecidable and thus will always be ones about which I must have interminable doubts: no cut is ever clear-cut. The logic of the *aporia* (and if I were to now try and define post-modernism theoretically, I would argue that it is most plausibly the 'era of the raising to consciousness of the *aporia*') guarantees that our readings have, at best, only a propositional status. But still I must (*il faut*) decide, interpret, appropriate, cut; make-up rules in the absence of rules and then offer up my proposal for a way of thinking about things. And this is the status of my reading of Coleman. I 'know', and I'm happy to know, that I'll never get Coleman 'right'. But I prefer *my* reading of post-modernism and history and Jenkins to *his* reading of postmodernism and history and Jenkins, and I hope, for those who have bothered to read this 'reply', that my side of the story has, at least, that certain appearance in its favour Derrida articulates.

17. Jacques Derrida, "Deconstructions: The Im-possible" in Lotringer, S. & Cohen, S., *French Theory in America*, (London, Routledge, 2001) pp. 13-32, p. 22.