Acts of the imagination: postmodern thought and the writing of history

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Acts of the imagination: Postmodern thought and the writing of history

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Graduate College
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Your support and patience

have been remarkable.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: THE REJECTION OF POSTMODERNISM BY TRADITIONAL HISTORIANS

“Historiography” and “postmodernism” are two words that, until very recently, never occupied the same sentence yet alone the same discipline. However, given postmodernism’s preeminence in rhetoric and literature, it is surprising that history, a discipline that largely concerns itself with written texts, has never felt the full effect of the “linguistic turn.” Rather, most historians let out a collective groan when the word “postmodernism” is even mentioned. It is widely assumed by those both inside and outside of the historical discipline that postmodernism is a philosophy confined only to a group of fringe historians. As Perez Zagorin writes, “History...has shown itself to be considerably more resistant to postmodernist trends [than literature]. This, at any rate, is the strong impression I have derived from the postmodernist debate among historians as well as from my reading of historical books and articles in diverse fields and from the statements of well-known academic historians” (“History” 9). Zagorin, one of the foremost objectors to postmodernist theory used in relation to historical inquiry continues, “As Kant once said of skepticism, it is not a dwelling place for the human mind; I believe that the same is equally true of postmodernism” (24).

There are several reasons why postmodernism is generally regarded as incompatible with “doing history,” and by exploring them, I will be able to better address the primary goal of this thesis: to articulate one of many possible “postmodernist” methodologies for inquiring into history. Before I do that, however, it will be helpful to look at my working definition of postmodernism, especially since the term is highly overused and misunderstood. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner write:
The confusion involved in the discourse of the postmodern results from its usage in different fields and disciplines and the fact that most theorists and commentators on postmodern discourse provide definitions and conceptualizations that are frequently at odds with each other and usually inadequately theorized. (29)

While I am not prepared to sort out the strands of postmodernism or give a definitive explanation of all the nuances of its different forms, I do wish to address the aspects of postmodernism that I believe could have important bearing on the writing of history.

Although postmodernism is sometimes thought of as being synonymous with relativism, an "anything goes" mentality in the arts, and the decline of Western culture, this popular conception of postmodernism is a gross simplification of it and is reflective of how the media portrays cultural life in contemporary America. However, when I use the word "postmodernism," I am referring to a certain epistemological viewpoint that acknowledges that the truth is difficult—or rather impossible—to ascertain. To me, postmodernism is a scepticism that should lead scholars to adopt a humility that admits that everything we "know" has been shaped by our own particular viewpoints made up of our presuppositions, preconceptions, and prejudices that we bring to the object of our study. Therefore, objectivity is impossible, because scholarship—even the selection of what is deemed important—is highly shaped and determined by the personality of scholar.

Postmodernism, in response to a plurality of perspectives that seem equally valid and yet produce different answers to the same questions, holds to the tenet that there is no ultimate truth, or if there is, it is unknowable. This is in some ways a reaction against the logical positivists who were operating at the end of the nineteenth century, who believed that
the entire universe was potentially knowable through the application of scientific methods to
the objects under study. The positivists thought that everything could be explained by
scientific laws. Of course, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* has shown
that knowledge—even scientific knowledge—is largely contingent upon language and
symbol systems, and this book helped to dismantle a positivism that was already on its way
out of the academy. While most historians today are squeamish about postmodernism, they
cannot be said to hold to its opposite extreme, naïve positivism.

Moreover, because postmodernists contend that there is no knowable ultimate truth, it
follows that there is no absolute basis for meaning; instead, meaning is socially constructed.
In other words, people make sense of their world by constructing self-referential systems that
supply their own foundations from which knowledge can be built. Therefore, historical
accounts ultimately impinge, not on reality, but on social conceptions about how that reality
works. This means that there can be no “grand narratives” (to use Lyotard's term) or theories
that explain life for all times and all cultures and all peoples (Best and Kellner 27). Insofar
as some historians seek to find “covering laws” to explain historical occurrences,
postmodernists assume that this is a vain endeavor.

Additionally, postmodernism denies that the historian can be an objective observer of
historical evidence and an objective author of historical accounts. Historians tend to see
what they want to see from the evidence, and their own persuasions and biases about the
evidence will ultimately surface in the narratives that they write. In fact, narrative, because it
endows events with an interpretation of their meaning, can never be objective—there are no
objective perspectives from which to write. Therefore, postmodernism would ask that
historians stop writing history in such ways so as to assume a pretense of objectivity.
Instead, postmodernists want historians to be as self-reflexive as possible so that their readers can be more aware of some of the biases behind the writing of history.

Finally, postmodernism assumes that texts are not transparent, that is, authorial intent cannot be perfectly extracted from the text by the reader. Therefore, when the historian interprets past texts or pieces of evidence, he or she will face hermeneutical problems that can never be completely overcome. Moreover, the historian can never perfectly transmit an existential set of events through his or her account because readers of that account will face similar complications of interpretation.

At this point, the reader might already recognize some qualities of postmodernism that seem to conflict with the epistemological basis that is usually required in order to “do” history. However, to explore these incongruities between postmodernism and traditional conceptions of history systematically, I am providing the following list of ten reasons as to why postmodernism has not yet made a significant mark on the historical field.

**Historians Do Not Pay Much Attention to Theory**

Although it is only partly a factor, a large reason why the mainstream of the historical discipline has not embraced postmodernism is that most historians pay little attention to historical theory. Other historians, who might occasionally read articles that deal with theoretical matters, find theory mildly interesting but do not actively seek to apply theory to their historical methods. Across the discipline, there is a general feeling that historical theory is largely irrelevant to the practice of being an historian, as Zagorin claims, “[T]he majority of professional historians...appear to ignore theoretical issues and...prefer to be left undisturbed to get on with their work...” (“History” 2). Brian Tierney, a renowned medieval
scholar, confesses, “Metahistory is a fascinating subject in its own right, considered as a branch of epistemology or linguistics, but it has little to do with the activity of the simple working historian” (qtd. in Zagorin, “History” 2-3, n. 3). For a discipline that hardly gives heed to theoretical concerns, we should not be surprised if postmodernism has had little effect.

**Historians Have Been Influenced by Lawrence Stone and Ugly Debate**

For those historians who do pay attention to theory and the philosophy of history, many of them have been influenced by Lawrence Stone’s 1991 article, “History and Postmodernism,” which was a scathing indictment against postmodernism. This is not to say that individual historians are not able to make up their own minds about postmodernism; however, this article set the highly antagonistic tone of the debates between the supporters and haters of postmodernism in the discipline of history. Those historians who were not directly involved in the debate might have been repulsed by such hostility, damning postmodernism—its cause—along with it. At least, Geoff Eley and Keith Nield believe that this might have been the case. Eley and Nield argue that Stone set the tone of the conversation between those in favor of postmodernism and those who are not by “call[ing] the profession to the defence of its integrity against the corrosive influences of relativism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and other contemporary ideas” (356). Because of the alarmist stance Stone’s article took, it is likely that historians who read it were left at least a little wary of postmodernism.
Historians Embrace the “Ideology of the Real”

One of the largest objections to postmodernism is its seeming rejection of the real. Postmodernist historian Patrick Joyce labels this particular incongruity between traditional historiography and postmodernism the “ideology of the real” (78), that is, most (if not almost all) historians believe that historical events are real; true reality does exist; things did happen in times past. Many historians are under the assumption that postmodernism denies this basic tenet, which is so central to the pursuit of historical knowledge.

For example, Chris Lorenz puts it poignantly that “history is a discipline and not a form of art” (314). As such, it deals with truth claims, not the imaginary or the unreal. Moreover, Lorenz argues that history is “an empirical discipline” (326, emphasis in the original). Lorenz believes this is so because, unlike the novelist, the historian interprets evidence that is known to others in his or her field; likewise, the historian must be able to withstand public criticism of his or her work. If history were not based on real knowledge, then challenges to historical accounts by other historians would be impossible. However, historians are constantly trying to determine “which narratives are empirically adequate” and which are not (323). Therefore, the historian is accountable to others in his or her field to produce narratives that square with the evidence. As Lionel Gossman says, “Modern historiography, like modern science, is a professionalized and regulated activity in which no individual can any longer imagine that he or she works alone or enjoys a special relationship to the past” (qtd. in Lorenz 326). Moreover, since the reconstruction of history is largely a collective pursuit, historical evidence cannot be arbitrarily cast aside. Historians cannot ignore part of the available set of evidence “or make of it whatever they please” (Zagorin, “Historiography” 272).
However, Joyce argues, "What is at issue is not the existence of the real but—given that the real can only ever be apprehended through our cultural categories—which version of the real should predominate" (78). It is safe to say that postmodernists also believe that real events occurred in history; however, the second an historian (or anyone else) attempts to articulate those events in language, an interpretation is occurring, obfuscating those real happenings. David D. Roberts, not a full-blown postmodernist but an historian whose work has been shaped by postmodern influences, acknowledges the "widespread misunderstanding" among historians that postmodernism "deny[es] reality and truth" (391). However, Roberts also defends historians against postmodernist claims that they purport to know objective truth: "[H]istorians have shied away from claiming full presence, the whole story; provisionality, incompleteness, and an element of guesswork have long seemed inherent to the historian’s enterprise" (391). If historians would only switch their conceptions, seeing postmodernism as the dogma that denies that one can fully know reality and truth, they might find it fitting to their discipline.

**Historians Hold to a Less Exacting Definition of “Knowledge of Truth”**

One of the rifts between postmodernism and historiography is caused by the different views of truth of the postmodernists and historians. Although postmodernists believe that historians’ attempts to portray objective truth are futile and deceptive, historians argue that they are aware that their accounts will be eventually revised; they genuinely believe in the tentativeness of their claims. The misunderstanding here arises, according to Lorenz, because the postmodernists view knowledge as *episteme* (that is, unimpeachable knowledge) while the historians view it as *doxa* (opinion) (322). Although this may seem like a reversal
of roles (postmodernists deny that episteme exists and wish for historians to see that they propound doxa, or a “truth”), Lorenz argues that postmodernists see a faulty “opposition between knowledge and interpretation” while the historical discipline inherently recognizes that all historical knowledge is merely interpretation of the evidence. Likewise, Roberts, who bridges the gap between postmodernist and traditional historian, argues that history is provisional (391).

However, the potential unification of postmodernism and history is not advanced when Lorenz blames the disintegration of differentiating between these two kinds of truth on the former. “[S]ince episteme proved to be a false ideal, its distinction from doxa has evaporated, and fallibilistic truth-theories have taken the place of foundationalism and its picture theories of truth” (325). If anything, postmodernism can be defended from this charge by asserting that most historical accounts at least pretend to be objective, which means that they state claims as if they were episteme even if their authors know those claims to be doxa. At the same time, if those authors believe the truth claims that they assert in their writings to be doxa while the postmodernist is telling them that the truth cannot be known, those historians are likely to think that the postmodernist knows absolutely nothing about the nature of the historical discipline.

Historians Perceive Postmodernists as Misinformed about the Nature of History

Part of the reason why most historians express hostility towards postmodernism is that they perceive postmodernists as unknowledgeable of the historical discipline and at the same time trying to tell them what to do. Hayden White claims that there is no set way of doing history, and therefore not much special training is needed in order to be knowledgeable
of the discipline; however, many historians disagree with White on this point. These historians believe that historical evidence naturally dictates how accounts are logically put together and that those who deny this obviously are not well enough acquainted with the practices of the discipline. In rebutting the thought of the two "postmodernists" most frequently attacked by traditional historical theorists, Hayden White and F. R. Ankersmit, Lorenz argues,

White’s narrativism is built on two distinctions that do not show up in the practice of history: first, a distinction between literal and figurative language, and second, the exclusive use of literal language during the phase of research and the use of figurative language—read metaphor—during the phase of composition or writing. The same distinctions and presuppositions are, as we observed, crucial for Ankersmit’s narrativism. (327-8)

Clearly, Lorenz believes White and Ankersmit to be uninformed about the true nature of writing history. Thus he continues, “The ‘metaphorical turn’ as formulated by White and Ankersmit is therefore inadequate as philosophy of history and should be replaced by analyses that suit the practice of history better” (328, my emphasis). Lorenz speaks for most historians who, having never been educated to see the practice of writing history as a literary event, do not like to be told by those perceived as outside the discipline that they need to embrace more postmodern techniques of historic portrayal. Eley and Nield also comment about how historians react against postmodernism because of its practitioners’ “sometimes peremptory, exhortatory timbre, its apocalyptic and apodictic tone” (355). Accordingly, most historians feel that the postmodernist camp is saying, “Historians must do this, they cannot ignore that, they had better get their general act together” (355).
Of course, this hortativeness does not rest well on the ears of historians who feel that the postmodernist does not have an accurate conception of the nature of "doing history." Zagorin points out what could be the most salient reason why historians tend to ignore or despise postmodernism: "most [professional historians] are unwilling the accept [postmodernism's] view of history because they find it so contrary to their own personal understanding and experience of historical inquiry" ("History" 9-10).

**Historians Operate from an Epistemological Base Nurtured by Their Discipline**

By now, it should be obvious that the disciplines of history and language arts rest on epistemological foundations that are at variance with one another. These differences in epistemology largely explain the cool reception of postmodernism in the field of history. Historically, these differences arose because of the stratification and specialization of knowledge that occurred in the early part of the twentieth century. As Zygmunt Bauman says:

In the vast realm of the academy there is ample room for all sorts of specialized pursuits, and the way such pursuits have been historically institutionalized renders them virtually immune to pressures untranslatable into the variables of their own inner systems; such pursuits have their own momentum; their dynamics subject to internal logic only, they produce what they are capable of producing, rather than what is required or asked of them; showing their own, internally administered measures of success as their legitimation, they may go on reproducing themselves indefinitely. (qt. in Joyce 80)
If we take Bauman’s words literally, it seems as if postmodernism will never stand a chance of penetrating the inner ring of mainstream historiography, for the two operate on different, incompatible systems of processing knowledge. As long as future historians continue to be trained by present historians, historians will keep insisting that with more evidence, they can arrive at increasingly more accurate pictures of the past and express them in nearly transparent language. Education seems to replicate the epistemological basis for each discipline. However, the possibility exists (and I think history shows) that epistemologies occasionally evolve into different ways of knowing. With today’s increasingly accepted interdisciplinary pursuits, the chances that epistemologies will cross and produce new ways for determining what counts as knowledge will multiply. While the tendency for systems of knowing to become field-specific certainly explains why historians have been cautious of postmodernism, it does not pronounce definitively that the two will always be incompatible.

As in the case of the discipline of history, postmodernism has had few serious takers in the discipline of philosophy, probably because philosophy believes postmodernism would wipe it out.³ “[O]f all the various areas of the humanities,” Zagorin claims, “philosophy is the discipline in which postmodernism has made the fewest inroads and gained the fewest converts” (“History” 4). Zagorin has used postmodernism’s poor reception amongst American philosophers to buttress his opinion that the theory is bad for the practice of history. Ironically, however, his claim seems to affirm the postmodernist idea of discursive communities that decide what their version of the truth is. While Zagorin believes that literary theorists and some fringe historical theorists are bad philosophers because they accept postmodernism while the philosophical discipline does not, this serves to show that disciplines tend to have their own epistemological hegemonies and are therefore entitled to
socially construct their disciplinary knowledge. Of course, by this same argument, rhetoric and other fields currently influenced by postmodernism should leave history alone. It is likely that if postmodernism is to play a significant role in historiography, a more collective approach to knowledge irrespective of disciplinary boundaries will first have to be operating.

**Historians Believe That Postmodernism is Just One of the Many Approaches to History**

Some historians do not reject postmodernism per se; what they do object to, however, are postmodernists who believe that theirs is the only way to construct an accurate history. A good case could be made that the discipline of history is not generally opposed to postmodernism when postmodernism merely regards itself as one way among many of assessing history. In fact, postmodernism has entered the debate among historians on how to do historiography as a number of recent articles in *History and Theory* suggests. Eley and Nield point out that historians "have been giving [postmodernist] issues some thought" and further insist that the discipline of history supports a pluralism of approaches to historical inquiry and historiography (356). Moreover, they, like several other historical theorists who are generally opposed to postmodernism, believe that postmodernism could have positive effects on historical practice when taken in bits and pieces. In reflecting on the proper relationship between historiography and postmodernism, they remind historians and postmodernists alike that postmodernism, just like any other theory, does not have to be "swallowed" whole by the discipline of history (358).

Roberts, a good example of a historian who has embraced postmodernism but not at the expense of getting rid of more traditional approaches, argues for "nuance and differentiation" in historiography, as this results in the "productive tension within the
Western tradition” (391). Perhaps more historians would be open to postmodern ideas if postmodernism were not attempting to have a totalizing effect by declaring any historical account that has the ring of objectivity (i.e., a narrative) a bad one. After all, according to Eley and Nield, “[T]here is a pre-existing pluralism of practices and discussion..., which cannot be disposed of simply by pronouncing the truths of the new” (356). Postmodernism, because it threatens to wipe out old scholarship and methods, is therefore viewed as menacing by most historians.

**Historians Assume that Their Discipline is Threatened by Postmodernism**

Because postmodernism objects to renditions of history that have the pretense of being objective, it would be potentially threatening to past accounts of history, which—with the exception of those accounts that functioned as propaganda—almost always attempted to be objective. At least, most accounts employed an objective tone. In a reaction to the modern, the postmodern mindset jeopardizes previous historical writing that is deemed “insufficiently self-conscious about its own presuppositions and procedures” (Eley and Nield 361). On the other hand, Eley and Nield argue that some of these modern historical accounts are the fruit of good scholarship and therefore should not be cast aside merely because they do not square with the prevailing “anti-positivism” (361).

In responding to the postmodernist tendency to ignore Western history because of its close association with the linear model and purpose of history from the Christian tradition and the inheritance of the myth of progress from the Enlightenment, Roberts insists that forgetting our past would be dangerous. In fact, Roberts does this by appealing directly to the postmodernists:
We cannot be reflexive without grasping the sense in which we belong to the Western intellectual tradition, which continues in our present discussion. [...] It is not so bad—and it forecloses nothing—to recognize that we belong to a Western intellectual tradition and that we continue/it continues us as we respond. To overreact and insist on rupture instead is to limit our possibilities for both self-understanding and critical response. (398)

Eley, Nield, and Roberts all voice concern that postmodernism, carried to its extreme, would seek to eradicate past historical accounts and with them, the sense of history that has made historians who they are today. Roberts calls for a "more productive relationship with our past," something that postmodernism can only do if it accepts the Western-based, objective-toned accounts that past historians left as their progeny. Postmodernists do not have to accept these texts uncritically, but if they are perceived as ignoring or negating these accounts, postmodernism will never gain a large acceptance in the field of history.

**Historians Think Postmodernists Exaggerate the Opaqueness of Texts**

When confronted with the charge that their accounts presume a false objectivity, most traditional historians argue that they know their narratives to be highly tentative; they are not by any means dogmatic arguments about their conceptions of history. However, traditional historians see texts (written or otherwise) as being substantially more transparent than their postmodernist counterparts do. The same goes for their interpretations of evidence. Traditional historians believe that evidence is much more straightforward, lending itself to a common-sensical interpretation, than the postmodernists do. This might be the reason for the use of the objective tone in most historical texts, especially since the historian is less likely to
believe than the postmodernist that he or she has cause to be self-reflexive in his or her historical narrative.

Of course, this difference of opinion about the opacity/transparency of texts (or evidence) has created some of the most major rifts between mainstream historiography and postmodernism. While historians acknowledge that texts are not completely transparent, Lorenz says that this does not lead to the favorite conclusion of postmodernists that language is 'opaque' and not capable of corresponding to and referring to reality, but to the much more 'realistic' conclusion that reference and correspondence must be interpreted as relative and internal to specific conceptual frameworks...

(qtd. in Zammito 343)

Lorenz objects to what he sees as the either-or fallacy of postmodernism, that if a text is not transparent, it must be opaque (314). However, as can be explained by the way that history is epistemologically different from the disciplines that have embraced postmodernism, historians believe that evidence can be reconstructed into likely accounts, which are by no means permanent. Common sense can aid the historian to the point where he or she is fairly certain that event $x$ happened and it in turn caused event $y$ to occur, but the historian knows that this knowledge is never fully unimpeachable. By trying to convince historians that both their evidence and the texts they produce are opaque, postmodernists insult the epistemology that is integral to the historical discipline; if historians were to accept that their texts were opaque, nothing smaller than a revolution would occur; history would be forever changed. Therefore, it is at least understandable why historians are a bit reluctant to take seriously the claims of postmodernism and apply them to their practice.
Moreover, the postmodernist’s claim that texts are opaque and that narrative accounts of history, by introducing the element of human interpretation, do not accurately represent the past, seems a bit hypocritical to the traditional historian. To claim this, the postmodernist is assuming that he or she knows the accurate picture of the past to recognize that the narrative produced by the historian does not match it completely. This makes the postmodernist an empiricist (an ironic charge that many historians bring against postmodernists), as Zammito writes:

[Ankersmit] writes: “history is often shown or interpreted in terms of what has no demonstrable counterpart in the actual past itself.” The notion of “demonstrable counterpart” has all to much the ring of logical empiricism—the search for some discretely observable phenomenon—about it. (344)

Of course, as long as the postmodernists agree that they have no idea whether or not historical accounts accurately reflect the past or not, they can argue inductively that since historians’ interpretations of history can be demonstrated to be subjective (based on the amount of evidence available at the time and the presuppositions that color these interpretations), it is likely that those accounts do not accurately reflect the past, although those accounts may still be useful. If Zammito is right and the historical discipline is not threatened by interpretation but rather knows that its claims are constructed from the available evidence (cf. 339), then historians should not object to agreeing that while their accounts are not completely opaque, they are not as transparent as they commonly presume.

However, there are still many historians who reject postmodernism on the basis that they believe that it is possible to write objective accounts and moreover, even if it is not, it is still more beneficial than harmful that historical accounts have a pretense of objectivity. J. C.
D. Clark, in his comparison of recent American and British historiography, writes, “Conflicts between modernists and post-modernists have revealed a surprising loyalty to objectivist understandings of historical truth” and surmises that this might serve an American civic purpose (795). However, this relates to another objection to postmodernism by historians: if it is widely acknowledged that all historical accounts are subjective, they say, then what forces will prevent history from being written as a propagandistic tool? (Roberts 395). Of course, the postmodernist would retort that historical accounts are already propaganda; by purporting to be objective, they are all the more ominous.

**Historians Consider Postmodernism to be Depressing**

Finally, some of the historical discipline’s rejection of postmodernism is an emotional response based on misunderstandings and popular articulations of the theory. In some senses, postmodernism seems depressing and nihilistic, signaling the end of history. If modernism was largely characterized by the myth of progress, then post-modernism connotes the end of progress, which can only mean stagnation and apathy towards the discovery of new knowledge. Zagorin notes that some historians believe postmodernism to be “a new kind of nihilism threatening the very existence of history as an intellectual discipline, and...tend to regard themselves as a beleaguered minority defending the citadel of reason against its hordes of enemies” (“History” 3). Such is the case for thinkers across the political spectrum; both liberals and conservatives have reacted strongly against postmodernism.

Zagorin, noting that the postmodern is “sometimes also thought of as synonymous with that of a posthistorical age” (“History” 6), admits that historians, in their rejection of postmodernism, might have been influenced by common perceptions of it owing partly to its
historical moniker. He writes, "[P]ostmodernism, as its name implies, carries with it strong connotations of decline, exhaustion, and of being at the end rather than the commencement of an era" ("Historiography" 264).

***

Now that I have outlined some historians' objections to postmodernism, I would like to correct what I perceive to be their misconceptions about the unpopular theory as well as use their valid objections to refine the way in which I will use postmodernism to explore a historical issue centered on two separate U.S. Supreme Court rulings for 1919 cases concerning the freedom of speech. However, before I do that, I would like to look in more depth at the thought of two scholars who spent a good deal of their professional careers engaged in theorizing about historiography: R. G. Collingwood and Hayden White. Although Collingwood's thought is acceptable to more historians than White's, the two have a lot in common, especially as they contemplate how the imagination plays into the creation of narrative accounts of history. Eventually, by showing the parallels between Collingwood and White's thought on historiography, I hope to show that mainstream historians do not need to be alarmist about White's proposals for the writing of history.
CHAPTER 2: THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION: R. G. COLLINGWOOD'S ANTICIPATION OF "POSTMODERN" HISTORIOGRAPHY

The scholarship of Oxford philosopher R. G. Collingwood (1889-1943), sometimes considered the father of the philosophy of history, perhaps represents the extent to which the mainstream of the history discipline is willing to embrace postmodernism. Interest in Collingwood, who is accepted by traditional historians as a brilliant archaeologist of Roman Britain, whose ideas on the philosophy of history are tolerated by historians because he was "one of them" and was knowledgeable of the methods of practicing historians, has grown in the last decade. Some even go as far as to label Collingwood's ideas "almost 'postmodern.'"

For example, David Bates writes:

Certainly, his profound contributions to narrative analysis, his sophisticated historicist position, his "deconstruction" of historical practice, and his original ideas on the intimate link between 'evidence' and questions, put him at the forefront of that twentieth-century intellectual move away from questions about the meaning of history, to studies on how historians create meaning, how the past is actually put together within concrete historical circumstances.

(32)

Yet, just as most historians have rejected postmodernism, they have also mostly ignored Collingwood's ideas about the philosophy of history, even while his posthumously published collection of essays on historiography, The Idea of History, is considered a modern classic. As Joseph M. Levine suggests, part of this undervaluing of Collingwood on the part of historians might be due to the cloistered and unpublished status of many of his writings (86); since 1978, when his manuscripts were placed in the Bodleian Library, and 1994, with
the republishing of *The Idea of History* along with some previously unpublished papers, interest in Collingwood has resurged, even among "traditional" historians.

Although he never uses the term "postmodern," Christopher Parker, in his recent look into modern British historiography, implies that Collingwood anticipated a postmodernist approach to the philosophy of history. However, Collingwood’s epistemological views cannot be neatly categorized as either modernist or postmodernist. While Collingwood hints in his writing that truth is contextually based, there are several places in his *Idea of History* that indicate Collingwood would not be comfortable accepting a postmodern view of truth. Rather, Collingwood’s thought forms an intermediate position between the certainty of positivism and the relativity of scepticism. His methodology for historical inquiry was revolutionary in the sense that he sought to abandon logical positivism and assert that the questions one asks of history are as important as the answers.

In somewhat of a contradictory fashion, Collingwood appears to accept ideas that would be labeled today as both modernist and postmodernist. James Patrick writes, "Austin Farrer … was puzzled by *The Idea of History* because Collingwood seemed to assert that thought makes history, then to stress alternatively the similarities between human thought in all ages and the ability of thought to change the world" (99). However, if Farrer had understood that Collingwood held both essentialist and non-essentialist notions in tension, he might not have been confused. Unlike today’s New Historicists, Collingwood believed that there was something universal about human nature; unlike the positivists of his day, he also believed human events to be unique and unpredictable. Either to assume that human history followed scientific laws or that it was completely unknowable was, for Collingwood, to commit an error of extremism. Some things could be absolute while others relative; not
everything had to be one way or the other. His Idea of History consistently affirms an epistemological position that falls between positivism and scepticism:

It may be argued that history is not knowledge at all, but only opinion, and unworthy of philosophical study. Or it may be argued that, so far as it is knowledge, its problems are those of knowledge in general, and call for no special treatment. For myself, I cannot accept either defence. If history is opinion, why should philosophy on that account ignore it? If it is knowledge, why should philosophers not study its methods with the same attention that they give to the very methods of science? And when I read the works of even the greatest contemporary and recent English philosophers, ... I find myself constantly haunted by the thought that their accounts of knowledge, based as they seem to be primarily on the study of perception and of scientific thinking, not only ignore historical thinking but are actually inconsistent with there being such a thing. (Idea 233)

Because he fought so hard against positivism (which still seems to rule today in the form of nomological theory or “covering law” models in historiography), it is appropriate for me to show how Collingwood anticipates a postmodern approach to historiography. However, because Collingwood is not a full-blown postmodernist, I will point out examples in his writing where he exemplifies foundationalist underpinnings. While I will rely on the scholarship of others who have grasped Collingwood’s thought in more breadth than I have, I will mainly focus on two sections of the Epilegomena from Collingwood’s Idea of History: section two, “The Historical Imagination,” and section four, “History as Re-enactment of Past Experience.” First, I will begin by giving a brief overview of Collingwood’s
methodology; then, I will explain how those methods can be said to anticipate a postmodernist approach to historiography; next, I will call attention to some of Collingwood’s modernist assumptions; and finally, I will draw some conclusions about the implications of Collingwood’s thought on developing a more postmodern approach to historiography that takes into account the uneasiness that historians have concerning postmodernism.

Collingwood’s Methodology

“As works of imagination,” wrote Collingwood, “the historian’s work and the novelist’s do not differ. Where they do differ is that the historian’s picture is meant to be true” (Idea 246). The foundation for Collingwood’s historical method, therefore, was the belief that history exists only in an ephemeral sense; all we can know about history is what has been recorded and remembered. This leads to his most recognized tenet: “All history is the history of thought” (215), or put alternatively, “Of everything other than thought, there can be no history” (304). The reason why history is bound up in human thought is because history only exists as memory; because history does not exist in the present, it is not something that can be examined by empirical means. Moreover, because history cannot be studied empirically, the only way it can be thought about is imaginatively, as Collingwood wrote:

Freed from its dependence on fixed points supplied from without, the historian’s picture of the past is thus in every detail an imaginary picture, and its necessity is at every point the necessity of the a priori imagination. Whatever goes into it, goes into it not because his imagination passively
accepts it, but because it actively demands it. (245)

Because people can only "know" history if they perceive it with their imaginations, it then follows that the only way to gain historical knowledge is by thinking the thoughts of others in history. This idea of re-thinking the thoughts of the past was Collingwood's main contribution to the philosophical study of history; it was, for him, the only way to know the past. Thus he writes, "[T]he re-enactment of past thought is not a pre-condition of historical knowledge, but an integral element in it…" (290).

Collingwood, because he assumed that written texts were more or less accurate records of thought, equated this re-enactment with mentally following the arguments written in these texts. While we can never know a writer's emotions, physical sensations, or even psychological state, we can know his or her thoughts through the written record (Idea 296). Collingwood believed that thought re-enactment was possible because although our present thoughts influence our interpretation of our memories, we can still sort out our thoughts and know the difference between the thoughts we had in the past and the thoughts we have now. If we can know our own past thoughts, Collingwood reasoned that we should be able to know the past thoughts of others. Therefore, he wrote:

If the autobiographer, although from the point of view of simple recollection his past thoughts are inextricably confused with his present ones, can disentangle them with the help of evidence, and decide that he must have thought in certain ways although at first he did not remember doing so, the historian, by using evidence of the same general kind, can recover the thoughts of others; coming to think them now even if he never thought them before, and knowing this activity as the re-enactment of what those men once
Collingwood never recognized the problem of knowing whether or not one is discerning the author’s intention in a text except to say that those who embrace doubts about actually knowing the author’s thoughts are unnecessarily solipsistic.

Even though Collingwood believed that the past could only be known by rethinking the thoughts of others, he envisioned that these past thoughts would be rethought in light of current thought. In other words, the past is never dead (because it is never really “living”) but instead is created by present constructions of it: “Every present has a past of its own, and any imaginative reconstruction of the past aims at reconstructing the past of this present” (Idea 247). Here, Collingwood suggested that history is relative to the present, and because he believed in this historical relativity, part of his historical methodology involved the historian asking questions of the text that were appropriate to his or her current circumstances. Because new evidence is always resurfacing (and other evidence being lost) and the ways by which evidence is interpreted are constantly evolving (not necessarily for the better), “every new generation must rewrite history in its own way; every new historian, not content with giving new answers to new questions, must revise the questions themselves…” (248).

Collingwood also had a method for synthesizing the information gained from asking suitable questions of a text. Like Richard Rorty (perhaps Collingwood was a source for Rorty’s ideas about epistemology), Collingwood believed knowledge to be web-like; that is, knowledge could be formulated only by drawing connections between pieces of evidence (functioning as pegs or “nodal points”). Because history cannot be empirically apprehended, the historian was guided by his or her *a priori* imagination to see connections between these
units of evidence (Idea 242). Of course, what this set of evidence looked like would be
determined by the historian working from a specific point in history. Additionally, rather
than do what Collingwood termed "scissors-and-paste" history, that is, merely use evidence
handed down by "authorities," he suggested that the historian should be responsible for his or
her own evidence. "We know that the truth is to be had, not by swallowing what our
authorities tell us, but by criticizing it; and thus the supposedly fixed points between which
the historical imagination spins its web are not given to use ready made, they must be
achieved by critical thinking" (243).

What kind of "critical thinking" was Collingwood calling for? If the sciences can be
said to rely on empiricism to formulate scientific knowledge, then it appears that
Collingwood advocated relying on intuition and personal experience—and not on past
authorities—to construct historical knowledge. He writes:

It is thus the historian's picture of the past, the product of his own a priori
imagination, that has to justify the sources used in its construction. These
sources are sources, that is to say, credence is given to them, only because
they are in this way justified. For any source may be tainted: this writer
prejudiced, that misinformed; this inscription misread by a bad epigraphist,
that blundered by a careless stonemason; this potsherd placed out of its
context by an incompetent excavator, that by a blameless rabbit. The critical
historian has to discover and correct all those and many other kinds of
falsification. He does it, and can only do it, by considering whether the
picture of the past to which the evidence leads him is a coherent and
continuous picture, one which makes sense. The a priori imagination which
does the work of historical construction supplies the means of historical
criticism as well. (Idea 245)

According to Collingwood, the way that the historian could discern truth from error was by
examining how well each piece of evidence fit in with his or her coherent and non-
contradictory web of historical knowledge. Therefore, the “whole perceptible world” could
be evidence for the historian (247); Collingwood’s standard was whether or not the potential
“fact” squared with the rest of the historian’s experience and expertise. It is now appropriate
for us to look at how Collingwood’s historical methodology represents a “pre-postmodern”
approach to historiography.

Collingwood’s “Pre-Postmodern” Influences on Historiography

There are several ways in which Collingwood’s historiography answers the concerns
that postmodernists have about the way most historians write history today. First,
Collingwood was against what we now call the nomological approach to history, or the
notion that history could be analyzed to discover “covering laws” that could be used to
explain historical change. The second way in which Collingwood was a precursor to
postmodern approaches to historiography was by embracing an epistemology that gave
credence to non-empirical ways of discerning “truth.” Finally, Collingwood stressed that
knowledge—at least the historical variety—is socially constructed, and he freely admitted to
the historicity of interpretations of history. Our present thoughts influence our perceptions of
the past, and each generation should ask different questions of the historical evidence—
questions that are tailored to suit timely needs.

The distinctions that I am making between Collingwood’s anti-positivism, pre-
postmodernist epistemology, and tendency to see knowledge as socially constructed are somewhat artificial because the ideas that I have grouped into these three categories are highly contingent on each other. Collingwood was anti-positivist precisely because he valued ways of knowing that presented alternatives to the prevailing scientism; because his epistemology informed him about the historical nature of knowledge of history, he is considered by some thinkers to be a constructivist. Therefore, in no way should these three categories that I am using to systematize Collingwood’s pre-postmodern ideas be thought of as cut and dried entities.

*Collingwood’s Anti-Positivism and Reaction against the “Realists”*

Collingwood’s most obvious similarity with postmodernism is his reaction against logical positivism, or the move to see history in purely scientific terms. According to Parker, Collingwood’s “hostility to positivism became almost obsessive and distorted his own interpretation of the history of historiography and of the philosophy of history” (165). Yet, Collingwood was primarily reacting to the practice of using the methods of natural science to study historical phenomena. In his *Autobiography*, Collingwood wrote that the lack of suitable methods with which to approach history represented a “gap” in philosophy. However, he writes that his ‘realist’ friends, when [Collingwood] said this to them, replied that there was no gap at all; that their theory of knowledge was a theory of knowledge, not a theory of this kind of knowledge or that kind of knowledge; that certainly it applied to ‘scientific’ knowledge, but equally to historical knowledge or any other kind [one] liked to name; and that it was foolish to think that one kind of
knowledge could need a special epistemological study all to itself.

(*Autobiography* 85)

In part because Collingwood recognized that the scientific method was *not* the best way to inquire about historical matters, he was at odds with the realists. James Patrick provides a good summary of realist thought:

The realists considered knowledge, or the act of knowing, to be essentially objective, and sought persistently to rescue metaphysics and ethics for the implicitly personal, and hence implicitly psychological, moral and theological context in which both had been taught at Oxford. Truth was a fact or logical proposition, duty an obligation born of circumstance or context, religion and art emotions. (86)

The realists thought that all knowledge could be grasped by scientific means. They assumed that history followed regular, universal laws that, once discovered, could be used to predict historical outcomes. However, Collingwood believed there to be a difference between the substance that could be properly studied through a scientific approach and the material that the historian examines:

[T]he things about which the historian reasons are not abstract but concrete, not universal but individual, not indifferent to space and time but having a where and a when of their own, though the where need not be here and the when cannot be made to square with theories according to which the object of knowledge is abstract and changeless, a logical entity towards which the minds may take up various attitudes. (*Idea* 234)

Instead of being something that could be objectively perceived by a commonly agreed upon
standard (like, for example, the boiling point of water at sea-level), history, to Collingwood, was "a logical entity" that could only be viewed from the unique perspective of the individual's imagination. Because it was impossible to empirically study a subject that had passed from present existence (Idea 282), all that was left were the historians' a priori ideas of history. As Collingwood wrote, "the historian does not find his evidence but makes it, and makes it inside his own head." According to Peter Johnson, another way in which Collingwood diverged from the ways of the realists was in his insistence of the necessity of language to knowledge; "in Collingwood's judgement, realism is blind to the extent to which the very possibility of thinking depends upon the possession of a shared stock of concepts, in other words, a common vocabulary" (5).

In a manner that prefigures the way certain humanistic disciplines today decry the scientific belief that scientific knowledge is foundational, Collingwood was put off by historians who claimed their work passed the tests of "'scientific rigour'" (qtd. in Parker 175). For one thing, Collingwood knew that it was impossible for the work of a historian to be completely objective because it was colored by the historian's own preconceived assumptions about the subject. "We remember, he said, what we want to remember, not 'what happened'; we perceive 'what we attend to,' not what is there; 'we reconstruct history not as it was but as we choose to think it was.'" He especially disliked the work of those who wrote textbook history because textbooks framed history as a set of facts rather than "'an inexhaustible fountain of problems'" (qtd. in Parker 204).

Collingwood's Epistemology

Because Collingwood did not believe that all truths could be apprehended by
scientific inquiry, he anticipated the epistemological revolution that would stem from the work of later thinkers like Michael Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn. As we have seen, because history is not something that exists in the present, Collingwood believed that it could not be studied scientifically. Discovering historical truth, therefore, could not be the fruit of a positivistic enterprise.

Instead, historical knowledge had to be apprehended by the imagination, and the imagination, after intuitively prioritizing the evidence, was guided by hunches and tacit knowledge gained through experience to construct a coherent narrative—essentially a system of belief. Sociologists today might call this system a “plausibility structure,” others might coin it a “worldview” or a “set of presuppositions,” and still others refer to it as a “cultural myth or narrative.” It is Collingwood’s ability to see himself—and the positivists—in the context of such a system that makes his ideas ahead of his time. Patrick is right when he says:

Perhaps it would be correct to say that, for Collingwood, there was a sense in which every scientific or historical fact is known by faith with respect to its participation in these fundamental presuppositions that render it knowable to all, and known by reason insofar as that fact testifies in its finite relations and characteristics to the accuracy and intelligibility of those fundamental suppositions or presuppositions. (97)

Here, Patrick is suggesting that Collingwood claimed that science, just like any other way of knowing, rested ultimately on faith in a set of “fundamental presuppositions.” Patrick also argues that Collingwood, being a religious person, believed by faith in truths that could not be apprehended by reason (82-3). Because he believed in the transcendent, a spiritual reality
not easily recognized by humans, Collingwood was open to highly intuitive ways of knowing truth; as was fashionable among some academics at the time, he was mildly interested in extrasensory perception (Bates 35). While his religious faith gave him cause to reject logical positivism, the result of this rejection was that Collingwood was open to consider epistemologies alternative to the positivism that prevailed at Oxford.

Instead of believing that every area of inquiry should be approached by science, as the realists argued, Collingwood thought that there was a particular “way of knowing” that best suited the subject under study. In fact, although it makes him seem a little like a nomologicalist, Collingwood saw epistemology—different kinds of epistemology specifically—as something that had evolved over human history. “With a surely very strange echo of Comte,” writes Parker,

Collingwood argued that, like the individual mind, mankind seemed to be progressing through phases of intellectual activity, starting with art, then going on to religion, then science, then history, and finally philosophy. Each was an advance on the one before as with Paleolithic art, Neolithic religion, Greek science, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history, and most recently philosophy, which, as Kant had said, had only just begun. This was very schematic; and he professed that these five forms of knowledge were only provisional; yet he had a scheme of history relating to them (170).

Perhaps Collingwood did not mean for this scheme to imply that human thought was always progressing; rather, he was merely discerning a pattern in the development of epistemologies, a historical pattern, he argued, that had happened to result in epistemologies in ascending complexity as time went on. At the same time, by his detection of this progressive pattern, it
is evident that Collingwood was partially under the influence of the modernists of his time. However, he stood mainly in opposition to these modernists; Collingwood thought that the positivists still operated under the old Enlightenment way of knowing—an epistemology that was fitting for the study of science, but not for history. He likely identified his own epistemology with the epistemology of philosophy and saw it as the proper way of inquiring after history. However, most historians of his day were still using the "historical" (Enlightenment) way of knowing, and they “failed to resolve the dilemma of how they could really know [historical facts], for the historians’ vaunted objectivity hid their subjective selectivity; history and philosophy, therefore, had to merge so that the historians could truly understand their role” (Parker 177). Collingwood’s prescription for the role of the historian in determining historical knowledge will be explored in the next section.

Collingwood’s Method and Social Construction

As I said before in my discussion of Collingwood’s methods, one of the most important factors in his methodology was the realization that “[e]very present has a past of its own” (Idea 247). Although Collingwood believed that the past had an ultimate existence apart from human thought about it, he recognized that present understandings of the past were largely constructed by contemporary intellectual thought. “This is not an argument for historical scepticism,” wrote Collingwood (248). For Collingwood, ultimate Truth did exist, although humans could never quite attain a complete knowledge of it. For example, when writing about the act of reconstructing the past, Collingwood stated: “In principle the aim of any such act is to use the entire perceptible here-and-now as evidence for the entire past through whose process it has come into being. In practice, this aim can never be achieved”
According to Parker, "That still left him, as he put it, 'in some perplexity as to the purpose of history,' if we could never arrive at the truth" (179). However, since Collingwood did in fact continue to study history, he probably saw some immediate social value in constructing narratives of the past; he did say once that "the purpose of history is to grasp the present." 8

Today, rhetoricians and postmodernists would probably refer to the idea that historical accounts change with the times as "social constructionism" because it acknowledges the historical and cultural situation of the historian. Likewise for Collingwood, the acknowledgement of ever-changing histories led to the idea that historical knowledge is contingent upon the historian's perception of data. Although Collingwood would say that certain historical narratives are better than others (because of how well they corresponded to the context they served), he did not believe that there was one way of viewing historical data that held for all time. Johnson refers to this anti-foundationalist strain in Collingwood’s thought as "strikingly modern" (11) 9.

Because all writers of historical accounts are historically situated, the historian needs to be aware of his or her own perspective, if only so that history can be written in contemporary terms. "[T]he historian himself, together with the here-and-now which forms the total body of evidence to him, is a part of the process he is studying, has his own place in that process, and can see it only from the point of view which at this present moment he accepts within it" (Idea 248). This idea that scholars are unable to approach their material of study from an objective viewpoint shows that Collingwood’s thought was very much ahead of its time.

Moreover, Collingwood did not agree with most modern historians when it came to
the selection of evidence. He claimed that “there are for historical thought no fixed points thus given; in other words, ... in history, just as there are properly speaking no authorities, so there are properly speaking no data” (Idea 243). Because nothing could be taken as “given,” it was up to individual historians to decide what “nodal points” were important to the webs of their historical accounts. Of course, it is likely that individual historians would be shaped by their academic climates, cultures, and places in the larger scheme of history. However, it seems that for Collingwood, personal history was as important as collective history: “even a single historian, working at a single subject for a certain length of time, finds when he tries to reopen an old question that the question has changed” (248). Because Collingwood saw history as something that must continually be revisited, Collingwood would likely have objected to the idea of writing a universal historical account that could instruct all times and peoples. Every culture, every generation, even every individual had to keep rewriting history to serve its constantly changing perceptions of the world.

Moreover, Parker points out that Collingwood acknowledged that writing history was only possible when one did not have all of the evidence. “Ancient history is history,’ he said, because we know so little. Contemporary history was ‘unwritable’ because we know so much and because we have not yet digested what we know. Knowledge of contemporary history is ‘too unconnected, too atomic’” (175). Collingwood believed history to be a human invention made possible only by neglecting (or forgetting) a sufficient amount of historical evidence. Parker suggests that these ideas show “a dangerously high level of relativism” (175), and perhaps this is why Collingwood’s ideas, at heart, are unpalatable to most historians.
Anti-Postmodern Trends in Collingwood’s Method

While some aspects of Collingwood’s historical method anticipate the application of postmodernism to historiography, perhaps his methodology can still be relevant to the work of most historians because there are several foundationalist assumptions that undergird it. First, Collingwood assumes that the “idea of history” is an innate idea in the Cartesian sense; he argues that every person has a sense of history. Additionally, Collingwood does not see any potential hermeneutical problems in following the written arguments of others; moreover, it seems as if all texts are to be approached in the same way. It will be helpful to explore each of these foundationalist assumptions in further detail.

Universal Idea of History

Although Collingwood rightly points out that the work of the historian is never done (because the questions he or she asks keep changing with the times), and although he asserts that the historian “can never say that his picture of the past is at any point adequate to his idea of what it ought to be” (Idea 249), he maintains that historical inquiry could only be done via the historical imagination. “But, however fragmentary and faulty the results of his work may be, the idea which governed its course is clear, rational, and universal. It is the idea of the historical imagination as a self-dependent, self determining, and self-justifying form of thought” (249). Unfortunately, Collingwood does not give sufficient reason as to why the historical imagination is “self-dependent, self-determining, and self-justifying,” although he does give ample defense why one cannot know history except through the imagination. According to Collingwood, the historian’s use of his or her imagination is “not ornamental but structural” (241); it does not merely aid the historian in creating beautiful
prose, but actually assists him or her in arriving at historical material to write about. If
history exists only in thought, then the only way to access it is through the imagination.

However, my main concern here is not Collingwood’s assertion that the imagination
is necessary to the study of history—indeed it is—but his claim that the “idea of history” is
“clear, rational, and universal.” Perhaps using “the idea of history” as the criterion for
historical truth would be practical if that idea were specifically situated for a given culture
(e.g., a Christian idea of history is vastly different from an Hindu one), but Collingwood
shows that he believes that this idea to be universal. He continues:

That idea [of history] is, in Cartesian language, innate; in Kantian language, a
priori. It is not a chance product of psychological causes; it is an idea which
every man possesses as part of the furniture of his mind, and discovers himself
to possess in so far as he becomes conscious of what it is to have a mind.

Like other ideas of the same sort, it is one to which no fact of experience
exactly corresponds. (Idea 248)

Of course, New Historians would cringe at Collingwood’s use of the phrase “the furniture of every man’s mind.” Even if intuitive ideas (i.e., ideas “which no fact of experience exactly corresponds”) adequately describe reality, Collingwood’s suggestion that some intuitions are present in “every man” betrays his persistent foundationalism. Collingwood does not even explain what he means by his “idea of history” because he assumes that as it is an innate idea; his reader supposedly already knows what it is. However, as for the idea of history being an innate one, there is no concrete proof that all humans have a sense of history and/or change in time; in fact, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob argue that even one’s perception of time is largely conditional on social and technological factors.10
However, when we explore the reasons why Collingwood cast the historical imagination as a universal concept, it becomes possible to understand his foundationalist claims. Collingwood wrote:

Evidence is evidence only when some one contemplates it historically. Otherwise it is merely perceived fact, historically dumb. It follows that historical knowledge can only grow out of historical knowledge, in other words, that historical thinking is an original and fundamental activity of the human mind, or, as Descartes might have said, that the idea of the past is an ‘innate’ idea. (Idea 247)

Because the past must be thought about in its historicity, the historical imagination is a “fundamental activity” of the mind; Collingwood’s reaction to the positivists, who were trying to perceive history as a set of “facts” that could be uncovered by empirical study, led him to insist that the idea that evidence can only be interpreted in light of the present was a universal phenomenon. In other words, Collingwood was insisting upon the relativity of historical reconstruction based on present conceptions of the past.

*Texts are Transparent and are Qualitatively the Same*

Another way in which Collingwood’s writings demonstrate that he held some foundationalist beliefs is that they reveal the optimism with which he believed one could know the meaning of an historical text. Although he made a distinction between historical and “merely philological knowledge” (Idea 283), Collingwood really seemed to believe that the historian could accurately think the thoughts of others.

However, postmodernists have several problems with this. First, language is not
inherently transparent, and the meaning that an author of a text is trying to convey might not
be the same meaning that the reader is receiving. In addition to the usual problems of
hermeneutics, even if the historian discerns the author's meaning correctly, according to
Collingwood, "Merely reading the words and being able to translate them does not amount to
knowing their historical significance" (Idea 283). While this statement could be accepted by
postmodernists and historians alike, Collingwood suggests that historians discover this
significance by "envisaging [the text] just as [the author] envisaged it" (283). Unfortunately,
the only way Collingwood gives as to how this feat can be accomplished is by pretending
"[the author's] situation were [the historian's] own, [and seeing] how such a situation might
be dealt with; he must see the possible alternatives, and the reasons for choosing one rather
than another; and thus he must go through the process which the [author] went through in
deciding on this particular course" (283). However, the only way for the historian to detect
the author's motives in such a case, then, is by assuming that they are congruent with the
historian's own. While this would work if human nature were uniform (then human behavior
might also be predictable), because people act in radically different ways for reasons that go
beyond measurable factors, it is not really possible to say that one has determined another's
thoughts merely by reading a text he or she has produced and imagining oneself in the same
situation.

To be fair to Collingwood, I am compelled to give his rebuttal of a similar objection
to my own. When confronting the idea that we can never know for sure what another is
thinking, he writes:

...this appears a satisfactory account of historical thought only to persons who
embrace the fundamental error of making for history that form of pseudo-
history which Croce has called "philological history": persons who think that history is nothing more than scholarship or learning, and would assign to the historian the self-contradictory task of discovering (for example) "what Plato thought" without inquiring "whether it is true." (Idea 299-300).

This excerpt from *The Idea of History* is puzzling because it seems to fly in the face of some of his other ideas, for example, Collingwood's insistence that the questions historians should ask of historical evidence will necessarily change.

However, perhaps Collingwood's main concern here was the linking of knowledge and practice—he appears to have been intellectually captivated by the concept, writing in the opening sentence of *Speculum Mentis*, "All thought exists for the sake of action." Although not everything could be known in its entirety, to Collingwood it was only ethical that that which could be known be put to use. According to Johnson, for Collingwood, "The 'big' problem [of learning] was how to find a satisfactory 'rapprochment' (A, p.77), between philosophy, history and practice" (4). Perhaps Collingwood thought that merely the illusion that one was thinking the thoughts of others could produce a type of knowledge that could be benevolently applied to help humankind. Parker also stresses that he "had a conviction that intellectual activity was supposed to make a difference, that it was not just an intellectual game, and ought to relate to life" (168).

Yet another problem that postmodernists would detect in Collingwood's historical methodology relates to the observation that not all historical texts are set up as arguments to be followed; therefore, to assume that there is one method (i.e., following the logic of the author's thoughts) with which to approach all texts is unfounded. This is especially ironic since Collingwood himself felt the frustration when others insisted that he use a
scientifically-inspired methodology for the study of history. Even if one admits that Euclid’s thoughts—as long as what one means by those thoughts is the sequence of logic involved with the proof that the two angles are equal—can be reasonably followed and, therefore, rethought, what if the document under examination is a diary, a letter, or even a declaration of war? How is it possible to rethink another’s thoughts unless the writer systematically guides the reader through them in a detailed manner? Although every written document can be viewed as an argument for something, that document might obscure the author’s motivations behind the writing; in that case, we could never know what the author was thinking; we might not even know where to begin, particularly if we know little about the context of the document.

To be fair, I should mention that Collingwood did not think that the historian’s reenactment of the past was a complete one; Parker believes that Collingwood meant that “because we are not that original person in that original circumstance, we cannot share the emotions that accompanied that scientific discovery or that military victory. The only emotion we feel is that of historical discovery” (186). Also, rethinking another’s thoughts does not mean, according to Collingwood, reliving the past in its original identity. In an oft-quoted passage, he admits, “We shall never know how the flowers smelt in the garden of Epicurus, or how Nietzsche felt the wind in his hair as he walked on the mountains; we cannot relive the triumph of Archimedes or the bitterness of Marius” (Idea 296). However, Collingwood continues this thought and like a positivist asserts, “…but the evidence of what these men thought is in our hands; and in re-creating these thoughts in our own minds by interpretation of that evidence we can know, so far as there is any knowledge, that the thoughts we create were theirs” (296).
From this passage, it appears that Collingwood endowed “thought” with the characteristics not only of logic and reason but also with universality. True, we could never know the emotions or the experiences of the author of a text, but we could know his or her thought, if only because it followed the same patterns that our thoughts do. However, this is clearly evidence of Collingwood’s underlying essentialism, and while his ideas about history existing only as a product of the *a priori* imagination might seem valid, his belief that historians can accurately re-think the thoughts of others poses problems for the postmodernist.

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In the above discussion of the thought of R. G. Collingwood, I hope that I have shown how the thought of this Oxford philosopher was historically more advanced than the scientific positivism that guided the historiography of his time and yet cannot be fully thought of as “postmodernist.” Because Collingwood was perched between modernist and postmodernist thought, his ideas provide a logical mediation point for historians of a more traditional bent and rhetoricians who are concerned about the false pretenses of objectivity that historians tend to operate on. Just as Collingwood longed for a “rapprochement” between history and philosophy, his ideas might form the basis for a rapprochement between history and rhetoric, two disciplines that have epistemologies that are currently at odds with one another.
In my view, history as a discipline is in bad shape today because it has lost sight of its origins in the literary imagination. In the interest of appearing scientific and objective, it has repressed and denied to itself its own greatest source of strength and renewal. By drawing historiography back once more to an intimate connection with its literary basis, we should not only be putting ourselves on guard against merely ideological distortions; we should be by way of arriving at that “theory” of history without which it cannot pass for a “discipline” at all. (H. White, Tropics 99)

If Collingwood believed that history consisted of the historian’s narrative of it, Hayden White was quick to point out that one should never confuse narratives with history. Yet, ironically, these two thinkers shared much in common in their conceptions of history. Collingwood stressed that history—as a set of actual events—was something that could never be studied directly, and therefore “history” was merely how humans decided to write up those events. White developed Collingwood’s first idea and said that because we could never communicate those events in an objective manner if we used narrative, it was wrong to think of those events as being congruous with what had been written about them in story form. White himself said that his conception of historiography bears a number of striking resemblances to those of Northrop Frye and the late R. G. Collingwood. Both of these thinkers
analyze the element of “construct” in historical representation, the extent to which the historian must necessarily “interpret” the “data” given him by the historical record in order to provide something like an “explanation” of it. (57)

White struggled (and still does) during his academic career to get historians to realize that by writing historical narratives, they are imbuing events with meaning and essentially participating in an enterprise that varies little from the novelist’s. However, this is hardly a new insight; we heard this before from Collingwood: “As works of imagination, the historian’s work and the novelist’s do not differ” (Idea 246).

It is frequently pointed out that traditional historians are inimical to White’s ideas, but surprisingly, these same historians claim to like Collingwood. However, there is a continuity between the ideas of Collingwood and White that should not be ignored. Perhaps the similarity in their thoughts stems from the influence that Giambattista Vico and Benedetto Croce had on both of them—both Collingwood and White can be thought of as the direct heirs of the thought of these two Italian philosophers. In this chapter, after providing an overview of White’s contributions to historiography, I hope to show that White’s ideas share a peculiar resemblance to Collingwood’s, although the former thought that the latter did no go far enough when it came to stressing that events do not come to the historian laden with meaning (H. White, Tropics 84).

Specifically, I will examine two of White’s essays from his collection Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism, “The Burden of History” and “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact.” Richard T. Vann notes that these are two of White’s most cited works (144), and they provide ample entrée into White’s historiographic theories. While many scholars have concluded that White’s thought is highly inconsistent with itself, so too is the
interpretation of White; nearly everyone gives a different "reading" of him. Although most scholars (particularly those from the history discipline) familiar with White characterize him as a postmodernist, some have been as savvy as to point out that he is more of a structuralist, or at least that he shows some foundationalist assumptions and is very taken with formalist literary theory. At any rate, I consider these two essays of White's to be representative of his thought, and it is particularly fitting to look at these pieces because many the ideas contained within them have caused traditional historians to dismiss White.

**White's Major Contributions to Historiography**

Before I delineate the similarities between the thought of Collingwood and White, it would be best for me to summarize White's contributions to the philosophy of historiography as much as it is possible to encapsulate these ideas. Vann writes, "Extracting from him—or imposing upon him—a systematic philosophy of history is impossible, and it may seem that he is only ushering the flies into new fly-bottles. His forte is fecundity, not fixity, of thought" (161). Yet, one must start somewhere, and it serves my purpose to discuss several themes that I discern in White's writings: (1) the inherent meaninglessness of past events; (2) the historian's "emplotment" of those events into one of Frye's archetypal plots: romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire; (3) the historian's use of literary tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) to describe those events; (4) the evaluation of historical accounts on the basis of internal consistency with the historian's purpose; (5) the belief that historical knowledge should be useful to the present concerns of society and the academy; and (6) an ultimate appeal to move away from narrativity in constructing the past. Except for White's suggestion that the historian find other ways of communicating the past other than by using
narrative, each of the other themes can be traced back to similar ideas expounded by Collingwood. Therefore, White’s ideas should not be regarded as incredibly revolutionary; his writings are a reaction against the nineteenth-century realist historians for the same reasons that Collingwood’s were. If White’s thought can be said to be a development beyond Collingwood’s, it is because White acknowledged the subjectivity of narrative and, unlike Collingwood, he was not fully comfortable with it. For White, an ideal historical account would be objective, which is why he considers narrative accounts to be less than perfect.

The Meaninglessness of the Past

Narratives, because they endow past events with meaning, can never be true accounts of history since they add something to it. White believed that historical events did not have any inherent meaning; rather, their meaning, or interpretation, was bestowed on them by the historian. This is part of the reason why the same event can have different meanings for various peoples and times, as obviously the dropping of the atomic bomb means something different to the Japanese than it does to the Americans. “[N]o historical event is intrinsically tragic…. For in history what is tragic from one perspective is comic from another” (H. White, Tropics 84).

Because events do not have intrinsic meaning, it follows that narratives—written accounts that show the relationships between events—do not exist in nature either. White writes, “[T]here has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (Tropics 82). Meaning is a social construct given to detached
elements, and historians, whether they know it or not, give the past meaning when they turn events it into a story. In an echo of Collingwood, White writes,

The events are *made* into a story by the suppression of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motif repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternatives descriptive strategies and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or play (84).

Many historians and philosophers of history, including Noël Carroll, have criticized White's assertion that stories do not exist in nature by pointing out that the events in individual lives can be said to constitute stories. Against White's premise that "We do not *live* stories even if we give our lives meaning by retrospectively casting them in the form of stories" (90), Carroll contests that people often plan the series of events in their lives and then go about living them according to the script (143). However, Carroll neglects to see that if it were possible to predict accurately events that eventually transpire, it is still by act of interpretation that we impose a story on these events before the fact. It does not matter if this story is given to the events before or after they occur; a story still represents a human construct that has been added to events.

A more sound criticism to White's claim that past events are meaningless apart from human interpretation of them (besides the idea that they could be given meaning by God, an idea that Carroll rejects but nonetheless points out on p. 148) is that events could be said to have an inherent meaning found in their causal relationships with other events. While the dropping of the bomb has disparate meanings for people living in Japan and America, the events that ensued because of the bombing are universal because they occurred regardless of
human interpretation of them. In a sense, then, the bombing meant that other events would thus occur. One could argue that an account that merely showed the causal relationship between a series of events would constitute a story (because it shows events in a chronological fashion) and yet be untainted by the meaning that humans confer upon those events. Unfortunately, such an argument presupposes that causal relationships between events are easy to detect; also, it ignores the fact that one event may trigger several, innumerable and immeasurable events. Therefore, even when the historian attempts to show the causal relationships between two or more events, he or she is still imposing an interpretation upon them by (1) arguing that they indeed share a causal bond and (2) “subordinat[ing] certain of them and ... highlighting others” (H. White, *Tropics* 84).

Since events do not have meaning apart from the meaning given to them by human constructions of a series of events (for meaning is also conferred upon history when the historian selects the beginning and the ending events in an account), White contends that the way historians give meaning to history is by aligning events into one of the generic plot structures.

**Emplotment: Framing Events into Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Satire**

If White thinks that the historian is the responsible agent for “emplotment”—or giving events their meaning, he also believes that there are a limited number of plot structures from which historians can choose: those that are predetermined by their culture. By “emplotment,” White means “simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with ‘fictions’ in general” (*Tropics* 83). White believes that the plot
structures catalogued by Frye (romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire) are genres that people in Western societies readily recognize and use to construct meaning. White claims, “The historical narrative thus mediates between the events reported in it on the one side and pregeneric plot structures conventionally used in our culture to endow unfamiliar events and situations with meanings, on the other” (Tropics 88).

If we are to analyze seriously what White’s ideas mean for the writing of history, the four Fryean plot structures deserve to be defined in detail. In The Harper Handbook to Literature, of which Frye is an editor, romance is described in broad terms as “a continuous narrative in which the emphasis is on what happens in the plot, rather than on what is reflected from ordinary life or experience” (401). Although it is obvious that most literary romances have some kind of love story, it should not be forgotten that romances frequently concern adventure or a threat that must be overcome by the hero. Eventually, the hero succeeds and ends up together with the heroine at the “end,” which is never really the end because there still exists the potential for more adventure. In U.S. history, many accounts of the western expansion were written as romances, with settlers exploring the unknown land and facing possible danger from the American Indians. The ideal of “Manifest Destiny,” with America claiming the land between both oceans, was the obvious end to this romance, although once this ideal was achieved, more adventures in “taming” the land were sure to play out.

Frye’s definition of comedy is one that has two sides: “one an absurd reversal of the normal order, the other pragmatically more sensible” (110). Although comedy can either be absurd or realistic, its typical plot structure involves an underdog hero who wants to marry a woman who is his social superior. A comical, charismatic villain tries to keep them apart,
but to no avail once "[a] mystery of birth, affecting either hero or heroine, [...] bring[s] about the comic resolution" (111).

*Tragedy*, according to Frye, is "a serious fiction involving the downfall of a hero or heroine" (465). There are three main themes evident in a tragedy: (1) isolation of the main character from the rest of the community, (2) violation and revenge, and (3) a tragic flaw or obsessive passion (466).

Finally, *satire* is defined by Frye as "[l]iterature that ridicules vices and follies" (413), but he also points out that satire "now means [...] a tone of antagonism between the writer and the material which may be found in any genre" (414). Closely related to satire is *irony*, which Sheridan Baker, Frye's co-editor, generally considers to be "the perception of a clash between *seems* and *is*, or between *ought* and *is*" (250). Baker also sheds light on the interrelation of Frye's plot structures:

In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northrop Frye sees Irony as one of the four archetypal *mythoi*, or ways, in which we perceive the world and its works. Irony, or *Satire*, is the polar opposite of *Romance*, the wry realities opposite the wishful dream, just as *Tragedy* is the opposite of *Comedy*. If we think of a circle, with Romance at the top and Irony at the bottom, Tragedy at the right and Comedy at the left, we can see how the four modes blend. The arcs of Romance and Irony have their tragic or comic tinges at one end or the other.

(252)

While White believed that Frye's "pregeneric plot structures" provide historians with guidelines on how to construct the meaning of events, events themselves do not dictate themselves into one plot archetype over the others. "Historical situations are not inherently..."
tragic, comic, or romantic,” writes White. “They may all be inherently ironic, but they need not be emplotted that way” (Tropics 85).

There is some question as to whether White should have also included “epic” in his list of the standard plot structures, and indeed he even makes mention of this genre in one of his lists of the structures. However, the issue of whether or not to include “epic” as an archetypal structure poses a more serious criticism: why does White believe that there are only four or five plots that the historian has to choose from when relaying a series of events? To the true postmodernist, this problem seems to align White with the formalists. Later, White added “pastoral” and “farce” to the list of emplotment structures (Vann 160), but it seems as if White’s work would be better served not by focusing on the nomenclature and use of these structures as ways of classifying plots but by asserting that the historian applies an emplotment structure to a series of events when he or she transforms it into a narrative. However, it does not matter what kind of plot structure is employed by the writer of history; White’s main point is still not lost: without a structure that gives events meaning, narrativity is impossible.

The Four Tropics: Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony

White posits that it is possible that historians do not recognize that their narratives are humanly constructed rather than found in the relationships between events because of the way that historical events are described or rendered in their minds prior to their writing of narratives (Tropics 94). Just as there are four (at least in his original conception) emplotment structures that can be used to illustrate the relationships between events, White gives four ways of describing events: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. These four
descriptive techniques (tropes or tropics) are taken from Vico, who merely reproduced “a Renaissance tradition in reducing the figures of speech to four” (Domanska 177). White calls these the “four principle modes of representation” and partly defends their use in history by something he heard Geoffrey Hartman say at a conference: that writing history meant placing events in their contexts, or relating a part (event) to a whole (context). “[Hartman] went on to suggest that as far as he knew, there were only two ways of relating parts to wholes, by metonymy and by synecdoche” (Tropics 94). This triggered in White a remembrance of Vico’s tropes, and he concluded that because history “has not yet become disciplinized to the point of constructing a formal terminological system for describing its objects” (95), the historian had to use one of these tropes when describing an event.

What Constitutes a Good Historical Narrative

For White, a good historical account was one that did not purport to be universal. Writing that an account should “be judged solely in terms of the richness of its metaphors,” White continues,

Thus envisaged, the governing metaphor of an historical account could be treated as a heuristic rule which self-consciously eliminates certain kinds of data from consideration as evidence. The historian operating under such a conception could thus be viewed as one who, like the modern artist and scientist, seeks to exploit a certain perspective on the world that does not pretend to exhaust description or analysis of all of the data in the entire phenomenal field but rather offers itself as one way among many of disclosing certain aspects of the field. (Tropics 46)
White is arguing here that the historian should give up all attempts to construct an objective account of the past. Even if the historian knows that his or her account cannot be objective, it is unfair to the reader if the historian represents history in a form that confers the illusion of objectivity upon the narrative. However, if the historian admits to his or her readers the ways in which his or her views on a subject are limited, then the historian will gain more credibility, and the account will be “one way among many” of representing the truth. For White, historical accounts should be appraised in the same manner that art is; he points out that we do not have to decide which painting—Cézanne’s or Constable’s—is “more correct” (*Tropics* 46). Lest anyone accuse White of being a relativist, he argues:

> The result of this attitude is not relativism but the recognition that the style chosen by the artist to represent either an inner or outer experience carries with it, on the one hand, specific criteria for determining when a given representation is internally consistent and, on the other, provides a system of translation which allows the viewer to link the image with the thing represented on specific levels of objectification. (46-7)

White seems to be implying that when the historian writes in a certain method of emplotment, his or her readers will recognize that genre and thus be able to interpret the information the historian gives them in light of that genre. For example, when a Japanese historian is describing the dropping of the atomic bomb in terms of a tragedy, the reader can realize that this is merely one reading of the event—an event that surely has a tragic side, but also one that can be interpreted as bringing about the end of a war and thus possibly saving more lives.
Giving History Its Meaning Back

In “The Burden of History,” White gives a history of how the discipline of history has come to be despised by the other academic disciplines, using as his evidence novels like those by Ibsen, Eliot, and Camus that have portrayed historians as having a morbid fascination with the past and failing to see the benefit that such historical knowledge could bring to the present. White claims that unlike the other areas of academic inquiry, history never evolved beyond its early nineteenth century stage—its golden age. Rather, “historians, for whatever reason, had become locked into conceptions of art and science which both artists and scientists had progressively to abandon if they were to understand the changing world of internal and external perceptions offered to them by the historical process itself” (Tropics 42). Pointing out that history sees itself as situated midway between art and science, White argues that it failed to adopt the continually metamorphosing theories of either art or science and now operates without a theory other than one that combines a romantic notion of art with a positivistic view of science. Moreover, the “theory” or methodology that the discipline of history operates under is not very substantive:

After all, historians have conventionally maintained that neither a specific methodology nor a special intellectual equipment is required for the study of history. What is usually called the “training” of the historian consists for the most part of study in a few languages, journeyman work in the archives, and the performance of a few exercises to acquaint him with standard reference works and journals in his field. For the rest, a general experience of human affairs, reading in peripheral fields, self-discipline, and Sitzfleisch are all that are necessary. Anyone can master the requirements fairly easily. (40)
sees no value in knowing the past for its own sake. Thus he says, "The contemporary historian has to establish the value of the study of the past, not as an end in itself, but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time" (Tropics 41). White merely wants historians to use the opportunities their discipline affords them for productive and benevolent purposes:

The methodological ambiguity of history offers opportunities for creative comment on past and present that no other discipline enjoys. If historians were to seize the opportunities thus offered, they might in time convince their colleagues in other fields of intellectual and expressive endeavor of the falsity of Nietzsche's claim that history is "a costly and superfluous [sic] luxury of the understanding." (48)

Moving Beyond Narrative

Although some scholars claim that White stressed the value of narrative in communicating history, ultimately this is a faulty conclusion that should not be drawn merely because White focused so much of his work on narrative. In actuality, White was working to show that narrative could never represent accurate history because it always added a human dimension to it. Contrary to the charges of some of his critics, White believed that past events were real, and his definition of "history" diverges from Collingwood's in that history was comprised of these real events. For White, the problem with narrative was that it gave meaning to these events, and thus it ceased to portray reality. In The Content of the Form, White asked, "Is narrativity itself an ideological instrument?" (81). While White does not directly answer that question himself, he seems to imply that in some cases, at least,
Therefore, White’s ideal was history in a non-narrative form. Vann draws attention to White’s idea of a narrativeless historical account mentioned briefly in *The Content of the Form*. According to Vann, it “seem[ed] plausible” to White to “refus[ed] to attempt a narrativist mode for the representation of its—history’s?—truth” (160). Rather, White encouraged the historian to “reconceiv[e] conventional notions of time so that, for example, events can be seen not as successive episodes of a story, but as random occurrences” (160-61). He hinted that this approach to history would result in the “historical sublime”:

> If [...] it is possible to imagine a conception of history that would signal its resistance to the bourgeois ideology of realism by its refusal to attempt a narrativist mode for the representation of its truth, is it possible that this refusal itself signals a recovery of the historical sublime that bourgeois historiography repressed in the process of its disciplinization? And if this is or might be the case, is this recovery of the historical sublime a necessary precondition for the production of a historiography of the sort that Chateaubriand conceived to be desirable in times of “abjection”? A historiography “charged with avenging the people”? This seems plausible to me. (*Content* 81).

However, perhaps because White knew that he would be going too far to suggest that historians give up their techniques of telling stories to record the past, he believed that narrative could be redeemed if historians would only be aware of—and admit to the reader—the fictitious spin they were adding to historical accounts by constructing them as narratives. At the same time, an ideal historical account would not use narrative—which, for the
historian, usually took on the flavor of an early 19th century novel—at all.

In "The Burden of History," White praises Jacob Burckhardt for his attempt to tell the past without putting it in story form. White notes that Burckhardt, refusing to adhere to the old historiographical methods that had stagnated in the discipline of history, experimented with the artistic techniques of his day to produce a unique perspective on his subject—a perspective not tied down by chronological conventions. White writes:

[O]nce he was freed from the limitations of the "storytelling" technique, he was liberated from the necessity of construction a "plot" with heroes, villains, and chorus, as the conventional historian is always driven to do. Since he possessed the courage to use a metaphor constructed out of his own immediate experience, Burckhardt was able to see things in the life of the fifteenth century that no one had seen with a similar clarity before him. Even those conventional historians who find him wrong in his facts grant to his work the title of a classic. What most fail to see, however, is that in praising Burckhardt they often condemn their own rigid commitment to conceptions of science and art which Burckhardt himself had transcended. (Tropics 45)

Narratives, insofar as they blinded the historian from seeing the subjectivity of his or her own historical account, were not benign in White's opinion. Moreover, they tended to give the reader the impression that there was no narrator—thus making accounts of the past seem to be impartial and accurate reflections of the past.

So that narratives would lose their illusory effect of objectivity, White advocated writing in what he called the "middle voice." In English, we usually speak of language as either being in the active or passive voice, but Greek adds to this distinction a middle voice.
F. R. Ankersmit describes the middle voice as "'elousamēn,' meaning "I wash myself," which is therefore indeed somewhere midway between the active 'I wash' and the passive 'I am washed'" (189). It is only in this middle voice that White believed history can be accurately represented because the middle voice eliminates the notions of objectivity and subjectivity: the object and the subject of the sentence are the same. So what does writing in the middle voice look like? Ankersmit mentions Roland Barthes's idea of "'I write myself,'" in which the author discovers his or her true self only through the act of writing (190). To this, Ankersmit adds, "'Especially if we think of the monologue intérieur, that hallmark of the modernist novel, we will see that this literary device destroys all clear boundaries between subject and object, between the self and what is outside the self" (190).

Because so many consider him to be a postmodernist, it is ironic that White actually believes that the representation of history achieved through abandoning narrative constructs can be an objective one. As Vann points out, just as it would be inappropriate to narrate the events of the Holocaust in either a pastoral or comic emplotment, White thought it would be best to give up on narrative in order to portray a realistic account of the facts (160). Vann says the White believes this could be done if it is a modernist realism employing a "middle voice" (neither active or passive), and requiring a narrative without a narrator of objective facts, not taking any viewpoint outside the events it describes, exhibiting a tone of doubt about the interpretation of events seemingly described, open to a wide variety of literary devices (like interior monologues) and reconceiving conventional notions of time so that, for example, events can be seen not as successive episodes of a story, but as random occurrences. (160-1)
While this type of historical account would be fascinating to observe if only because it would share a lot of qualities with modern art, I disagree with White that such a “narratorless” narrative would be objective. Portraying events as random occurrences is a type of interpretation forced upon history, just as portraying them as a coherent pattern would be. No one really knows whether or not the events in history have a meaning; what we can know is that humans, when they write history, attribute a meaning to the events they witness or encounter from other historical accounts. Saying that these events do not have meaning, however, is to endow them with an anti-meaning—and yet this is still an interpretation. Contrary to Hayden White’s hypothesis that if one can free oneself from narrative one can write objective history, historians will always be forced to write from positions of subjectivity.14

Comparison of White and Collingwood

Nancy Partner argues that “[m]ore than any other theorist,” White “has brought historians to acknowledge the relevance of literary critical concepts and rhetoric to their work and has given the linguistic medium of history an intellectual visibility it never had before” (167). However, Collingwood also recognized that the work of the historian was ultimately literary. Partner also suggests, “The constructedness of narrative and the principle of selection that inform all historical explanation are taken-for-granted notions these days and that is largely [White’s] doing” (167-8). However, Collingwood pointed out long before White that historians had to make selections about what to include in their narratives, and he also stressed that asking different questions of the evidence would yield different accounts. Moreover, Collingwood advocated asking different questions of the historical evidence; he
Table 1. A Comparison of Some Ideas of Collingwood and White

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Historical Writing</th>
<th>Collingwood</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The historian’s and novelist’s work do not differ except the historian’s writing is supposed to be true.</td>
<td>The historian’s work has literary implications.</td>
<td></td>
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| Narrative as Constructed | Constructions of history differ depending on what questions are brought to the evidence. | Constructions of history differ depending on what is emphasized/subordinated by the historian. |

| How to overcome objectivity/subjectivity problems | The problem of objectivity/subjectivity is confronted by re-thinking the thoughts of others. | The problem of objectivity/subjectivity is addressed by using the middle voice (thinking one’s own thoughts in the form of an interior monologue) |

| Nomological Theory | Against discovering “laws” that govern history, but there seems to still be a discernible pattern to events: epistemic progress; this pattern is linear and progressive. | Against discovering “laws” that govern history, but there seems to still be a discernible pattern to events: transition between Vico’s tropes give rise to new ages; this pattern is cyclical. |

| Definition of “History” | “History” consists of the human interpretation of past events; “history” is the narrative. | “History” consists of real events uninterpreted; “history” cannot be described in narrative form. |
believed that each generation should rewrite history for itself.

In many ways, then, the ideas that have shown up in White's writings are not new ones to the discipline of history; they are merely ideas that have reached a larger audience during his lifetime than Collingwood's ideas did. Therefore, White has had the opportunity to develop into the controversial figure that Collingwood was not. Table 1 outlines some areas in which White's ideas can be seen as an extension of Collingwoodian thought. While I have hinted at the similarities between the thought of Collingwood and White throughout the chapter, I would like to take each of these six categories of ideas represented in Table 1 and explain in more detail why I see Collingwood and White as essentially sharing the same conception of historiography.

Nature of Historical Writing

Although many credit White with articulating that writing history is essentially a literary enterprise, this notion was put forth at least thirty years earlier by Collingwood. In *The Idea of History*, Collingwood frequently draws parallels between the historian and the novelist:

Each of them makes it his business to construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events, partly a description of situations, exhibition of motives, analysis of characters. Each aims at making his picture a coherent whole, where every character and every situation is so bound up with the rest that this character in this situation cannot but act this way, and we cannot imagine him as acting otherwise. The novel and the history must both of them make sense; nothing is admissible in either except what is necessary, and the judge of this
necessity is in both cases the imagination. Both the novel and the history are self-explanatory, self-justifying, the product of an autonomous or self-authorizing activity; and in both cases this activity is the \textit{a priori} imagination.

(245-46)

To be entirely honest, although Collingwood saw these similarities between the historian and the novelist, he did give three reasons why their work was different: (1) the historian's account must take place in a real place and time, (2) the historical account had to be consistent with the other accounts of history the historian accepted, and (3) the historical account needed to be informed by existing evidence. However, this differentiation between the work of the historian and the novelist is not something that White would disagree with Collingwood about. Despite the charges of some of his critics, White believed in real events, and does not advocate that historians represent these events as occurring in a fictitious place and time. Also, White would have certainly subscribed to the idea that a historian's written historical accounts should not contradict other accounts that he or she holds to. Although each account could only give a certain perspective on reality, White advocated coherence within this perspective. Finally, it is likely that a historical account not based on evidence would cease to fall under the domain of history for White. While he praised Burckhardt's non-narrative accounts despite the fact that they contain inaccuracies, it is clear that these inaccuracies are not elements that White desired.

\textit{Narratives as Constructed}

Just as Collingwood tended to see historical accounts as being comprised of connections between nodal points (events), so too was White's conception of historical
narrative based on the idea that a story was the result of the historian placing emphasis on certain events and incorporating them into a coherent whole. In fact, the thought of both historians can be represented in a way true to their writings by the models shown in Figure 1.

![Diagram of Historical Narrative Models](image)

**Figure 1. Historical Narrative Models**

Both Collingwood and White viewed the historical narrative as something that had been constructed by the historians after they selected their evidence (which both pointed out was not "given"—each piece of evidence had to be weighed on its own by the historian). In both of the diagrams above, the letters represent events (or what Collingwood called "nodal points"). For hypothetical historical narratives #1 and #2, I have used the lower case letters to denote the nodal points that do not play a role in the historical account and capital letters to symbolize the evidence (or events) that the historian has chosen to focus on. The lines that link the capital letters signify that the historian has shown, in his or her historical account, relationships between the events that these letters stand for. For example, in historical narrative #1, only events B, C, E, and H are deemed relevant by the author. Moreover, the historian of this particular account is showing a causal relationship between nodal point B
and points C and E; events C and E, in turn, have a causal relationship with event H. In historical narrative #2, the historian has chosen to focus only on events B, G, and H, showing that event G caused events B and H. If we follow Collingwood’s injunction to ask different questions of the evidence (evidence here is being represented by a, b, c, … g), it follows that different accounts would be constructed when nodal points A, D, and F are included. This is part of the reason why White acknowledged that historical narrative could never give a true picture of reality; real history was merely description—as soon as relationships between events started coming into play, the historian’s account ceased to be history and began to be interpretation.

White was also displeased by what Collingwood called “scissors and paste” history. In an echo of Collingwood, White writes, “Many historians continue to treat their ‘facts’ as though they were ‘given’ and refuse to recognize, unlike most scientists, that they are not so much found as constructed by the kinds of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomena before him” (43). In the above diagram, whether nodal point “a” should be understood as “A” or “a” is something that is left for the historian to decide, but he or she should realize that certain questions will prompt the evidence to be read as “A” rather than “a.” Collingwood concurs with this notion, saying:

The evidence available for solving any given problem changes with every change of historical method and with every variation in the competence of historians. The principles by which this evidence is interpreted change too; since the interpreting of evidence is a task to which a man must bring everything he knows: historical knowledge, knowledge of nature and man, mathematical knowledge, philosophical knowledge; and not knowledge only,
but mental habits and possessions of every kind: and none of these is unchanging. (Idea 248)

For Collingwood, a permanent historical account could never be written because people’s ways of apprehending historical evidence would always be in flux. In this manner, both he and White acknowledge that narratives are temporal human constructs of historic events.

How to Overcome Objectivity/Subjectivity Problems

While Collingwood saw the destruction of the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity when one re-thought the thoughts of others, White overcame this barrier by proposing that the historian write in the middle voice, using sentences in which the narrator was simultaneously both subject and object. Both thinkers, however, were highly conscious of the problem of human subjectivity when conveying history objectively was the historian’s goal. Admittedly, White takes this a step further than Collingwood, if only because Collingwood appeared to be more interested in showing the artificial differentiation between subjectivity and objectivity than in actually attempting to escape subjectivity altogether. While Collingwood stressed that scholarship could never be purely objective because the researcher would always be a part of the research, he was not alarmed by this subjectivity. White, on the other hand, seemed to suggest that once narrative is abandoned, something that approaches an objective view of history can be obtained. Although each man reached different solutions of how to overcome problems relating to the impossibility of pure objectivity, that they both spent great efforts investigating these problems at all suggests that they might have shared a common intellectual influence.
Nomological Theory

Actually, both Collingwood and White shared an intellectual heritage from Vico and Croce, and both men drew from Vico's pattern of the evolution of history to come up with nomological theories of their own. One would not expect that Collingwood, who was at odds with the logical positivists, would delineate a “covering law” model that explained history. Yet ironically, he perceived a progressive pattern in history, probably because of his fondness for the thought of Vico, who first proposed different ascending and cyclical stages or eras of history: poetic, heroic, and human. Because Collingwood saw human history primarily as intellectual history, he believed that each new era of history was ushered in by a change in the epistemological basis for knowledge. Therefore, human knowledge progressed from artistic to religious, from religious to scientific, from scientific to historical, and finally culminated in a philosophical age. Not only did these five stages apply to human history, Collingwood also believed that individual human intellects developed in this pattern.

Perhaps also because of White's admiration for Vico, he also saw similar patterns in history as writers moved from telling accounts from one emplotment structure to another. Although Collingwood's model was a linear one, White stayed truer to Vico's model, believing that the shifts in emplotment structures were ultimately cyclical. However, the nomological theories of both men suggest that despite a growing tendency to view them as postmodernists, we must keep in mind that some of their ideas were tenaciously rooted in a much older tradition and actually conflict with postmodern ways of viewing the world.

Definition of History

One of the ways in which Collingwood and White differed was in their definitions of
history. Yet it is in their varying definitions that we find that their conceptions of the actual events of history in relationship to narrative accounts of those events was actually the same. Although Collingwood considered history to be written accounts of past events and White considered it to be real events in the past, both thinkers knew that events that had happened could not be accurately portrayed in writing. Moreover, as I stressed before, both men saw historical knowledge as inchoate and web-like. While their conceptions of past events and human grasp of them appear to be the same, each thinker merely assigned the term “history” to different notions that they actually held in common; therefore, the nature of history would not have been a point of disagreement between them.

* * *

In conclusion, the same historians who embrace R. G. Collingwood’s philosophy of history need not be fearful of the ideas of Hayden White, if only because so many of his ideas run in the same vein as those of the former Oxford don’s. While all of White’s ideas might not be palatable to traditional historians, this does not excuse their rejection of his thought merely because it is his. Most of the important concepts that White contributes to historiography are notions that have their origins in Collingwood, ideas that flowed from Croce to Collingwood and had an earlier beginning in Vico. If historians had only applied the historiographical concerns of Collingwood to their work the first time around, perhaps White would not be the controversial figure in the discipline of history that he is today.
Now that I have examined the objections to postmodemism by traditional historians and looked at the thought of two philosophers of history who offered ideas on how to write history from a "postmodern" viewpoint, I would like to develop a methodology for writing history and test it on a concrete example. Although I am calling my methodology "postmodern," it is only very loosely so, especially as I wish to acknowledge some of the concerns about postmodemism that are voiced by traditional historians. Moreover, I am seeking to refine and apply the thought of two thinkers who, although they are denigrated as "postmodernists" at times, cannot be thought of as postmodernists in the purest sense of the word.

I should add that the application of this new methodology is highly experimental; I am testing these ideas against a problem of history to see if they will indeed work when applied to historical narrative. If my methodology derived partially from Collingwood and White is only modestly successful, I can comment on why this is so and suggest future steps to correct my methodology. The reader should be aware that my methodology represents ways in which the thought of Collingwood and White might be invoked; it is certainly not the only way to apply the ideas of these two thinkers.

My "Postmodernist" Methodology

Drawing heavily from the thought of Collingwood and White, I have come up with the following six principles that I wish to follow when constructing my own historical narrative:
1. Start with an epistemological view that is suitable for the study of history.

2. Explore the context that one brings to the body of evidence on one’s subject.

3. Ask questions of the texts under examination that are related to the pressing concerns of one’s time and culture.

4. Given that knowledge is web-like and one’s account certainly cannot take into all factors that were possible influences on the subject, one should try to admit what one is leaving out of one’s narrative.

5. Attempt to discern and point out a “pregeneric” plot structure in one’s narrative; if one cannot, at least make mention of the way that one’s attempt to write a narrative is endowing meaning to the events.

6. Link the historical knowledge in one’s account with some sort of practical application; such a practice would move away from doing history for its own sake, but use history to serve another purpose.

In this section of my paper, I will offer more detailed description of my six principles. Then, with these principles in mind, I will begin my narrative about the development of the written opinions in two 1919 U.S. Supreme Court cases: *Schenck* and *Abrams*. These two cases were part of a series of cases that were later termed the “Speech” cases because they were amongst the first cases that required the Court to consider the meaning behind the freedom of speech clause of the First Amendment. The notable thing about the two cases is that although they were parallel cases decided in the same way, the Supreme Court used different precedents in their written majority opinions for them. Most of the material contained in my narrative is from a seminar paper that I wrote for a course in Cultural Studies; I was attempting to
explain the reason why the Court failed to use the “Clear and Present Danger” test in Abrams when they had used it less than a year earlier in Schenck by looking at how the concept of hegemony played into that decision. However, I have revised the paper by taking out the references to Cultural Studies theory (although Cultural Studies undoubtedly has influenced how I have discerned relationships between certain events and not others) and instead focussing on my six principles of my methodology for “postmodernist” historiography. After the narrative, I will draw some conclusions about how well my six principles worked and what this might mean for the future of postmodernism and historiography.

Using an Epistemology or View of Knowledge Appropriate for History

At the heart of Collingwood’s debates with the realists was disagreement over the best epistemological viewpoint from which to study history. The realists wanted to study history using scientific empiricism; Collingwood desired to help develop a different approach to historical inquiry. Regardless of whether one is a positivist or a postmodernist, all would agree that history is unknowable to a degree (whether great or small) by virtue of unreliable and lost evidence, and therefore one should consider writing history with a tone of tentativeness. For example, to show my limited degree of certainty about the nature of the relationship between past events, I could write, “Given that Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., was upset that many people had misinterpreted his written opinion in Schenck, he might have dissented from the Court in Abrams because he wanted a chance to clarify what he meant by “clear and present danger.” Although I am under the assumption that most current historical accounts communicate a degree of uncertainty in their presentations of events anyway, I would make it more of a visible practice.
Of course, it seems as if historians and postmodernists misunderstand one another when it comes to representing the "truth." As we saw in Chapter One, both Chris Lorenz and David D. Roberts believe that history today is represented in provisional ways. It is probable that no historian writes with the belief that his or her account is unimpeachably true. As new evidence emerges and as ways of interpreting that evidence change, so do historical accounts. This is what Collingwood was trying to show in the age of positivism.

Because postmodernism informs us that there are a plurality of epistemological viewpoints—many of which are equally valid—a good basis for the study of history seems to be one that incorporates a high degree of humility and tentativeness towards the statements one makes. We do not really know what happened in the past; based on the evidence that we have, all we can do is make well-informed guesses about probability. Writers of history do their readers a disservice if they write in a way that obscures this fact.

Describing the Historian's Context

Just as writing a comprehensive historical account is impossible, so is fully describing the context one writes from, and yet I advocate that it be done because it is better to know a little about a writer's context than nothing at all. Collingwood pointed out that the historian's context is part of his or her study (Idea 248), and White saw context as a major factor that led one to match a plot structure with events (Tropics 85). Before plunging into their historical narratives, historians might explain how they perceive their own contexts—the historical, cultural, social, and personal facets of that context. Also, there will be certain factors influencing historians' interpretations of the evidence that they are blind to; therefore, historians might want to remind their readers that there are inevitable omissions to the
historians' own descriptions of their contexts. Even though explaining one's context would be just as problematic as writing history, doing so would be better than assuming a stance as an unbiased observer who can produce an objective account. Moreover, the resulting document might eventually serve as an historical record of how the historians perceived his or her own context and how he or she made the past fit present concerns.15

Asking Questions that are Relevant to the Present

Collingwood's idea that every generation needs to ask different questions of the historical evidence has profound implications for a "postmodern" historiography. When synthesized with his notion that historical knowledge should be useful and applied to the present, this idea becomes very powerful. When approaching a text, the questions that the historian asks of it should fit the needs and concerns of the society that historian serves. Historians probably do this intuitively (and therefore automatically) today, but it would be better if more conscious thought be given to the questions that a historian asks.

Acknowledging the "Web-Like" Structure of Historical Knowledge

If one accepts Collingwood and White's view of knowledge as "web-like," then conclusions about the relationships between pieces of evidence that are nodal points of the web must be drawn. Because of this, when writing a history, I would try to inform my readers about what pieces of evidence I am foregrounding and what factors I deem to be less important to my account. Of course, it would be impossible to acknowledge all of the factors that could potentially be evidence (e.g., does the fact that it was unusually warm in the room where Justice Holmes was writing his dissenting opinion contribute somehow to the
expressive language that he used?), so even by admitting that I am highlighting certain bits of
evidence and considering others irrelevant, I am forced to select what I include in the
irrelevant category. At the same time, by pointing out to the reader that historical knowledge
is web-like and that my account has certainly not taken everything into consideration, I will
not mislead my readers into thinking that my account is objective.

Identifying Plot Structures/meaning Makers

After composing my narrative, I think it would be a good idea to analyze it and see if
a “pregeneric” plot structure, to use White’s terminology, is identifiable. If a “pregeneric”
plot structure is present, it could be that I am attempting to give the events of the account
meaning by using a structure by whose terms I have been enculturated to view the world.
Even if a “pregeneric” plot structure cannot be determined from my narrative, because I am
still attempting to make meaning by showing the relationships between events where they
might or might not exist, White would want me to make this clear to the reader in some
manner.

Linking Historical Knowledge with Practical Benefits

Like Collingwood, I do not think that history should be done for its own sake. At the
same time, it is not necessarily the historian’s responsibility to make practical use of his or
her scholarship; that may be done by others. Yet, because White laments that there is little
connection between historical inquiry and use of that knowledge by other fields, at least
some historians should start putting the knowledge that they gain to use or at least offer
suggestions as to what problems in other fields that knowledge can elucidate. For example,
showing the disasters caused by Justice Holmes's initial ambiguity in his written opinion for *Schenck* could help instruct rhetoricians and writers about the importance of writing as concretely and specifically as possible. Writing that can be broadly interpreted might initially create the illusion that compromise has been successfully reached between various opinions, but this is no substitute for genuine agreement based on similar perceptions of the issues at hand. Such knowledge, derived from the set of historical events that I have retold in the following narrative, could be useful in all sorts of practical arenas such as political science, international relations, business management, and law.  

**Application: “Postmodernist” Historiography and *Schenck* and *Abrams***

**Narrative: The History of the Written Opinions Handed Down by the Supreme Court in *Schenck* v. United States and *Abrams* v. United States**

Because both intellectual history and legal history fascinate me, I am going to relate to the reader what I perceive to be the development of the written opinions in two 1919 “Speech” Cases. Specifically, my focus is on the question why the Supreme Court used different legal precedents for the two cases when they were almost identical. I have chosen to look at this particular set of cases because I personally believe that government should not interfere with speech; instead, I think that speech should be regulated by social pressures, and those who transgress speech norms should have the right to become societal outcasts if they would rather face this consequence than the self-censorship of their speech.

Because of my own opinions regarding the freedom of speech, I believe that *Schenck* and *Abrams* were decided wrongly, although they did bring about two of the most eloquent judicial opinions that I have ever read, both penned by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.
However, Holmes did not always write for the winning side; while he wrote for the majority in the first case, he dissented in the second. Like most judicial historians, I believe that this shift in opinions on Holmes's part was due to regret and personal growth during the time between the cases; however, Holmes claimed that his legal opinion never changed; it was merely differences of severity of the two crimes that led him to decide in a heterogeneous fashion. While the truth can never be fully known, the following is a narrative showing why I see the evidence pointing in the direction of remorse on Holmes's part.

In Schenck v. United States, a unanimous Court agreed to convict the Socialist appellants for violating the Espionage Act of 1917 because they mailed leaflets to Americans who had been drafted, urging them to stand up for their rights and resist the draft. One of the arguments used in Charles T. Schenck's defense was that the Espionage Act violated his First Amendment right of freedom of speech. This was the first instance in American history that the Supreme Court had been asked to interpret the free speech clause of the First Amendment. Holmes wrote the opinion of the court, expressing what came to be known as the "clear and present danger" test:

The question in every case is whether the words are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about the substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent. It is a question of proximity and degree. When a nation is at war many things that might be said in time of peace are such a hindrance to its effort that their utterance will not be endured so long as men fight and that no Court could regard them as protected by any constitutional right. (qtd. in Epstein and Walker 229)
In conjunction with the *Schenck* opinion, Holmes also wrote the opinions of *Frohwerk v. United States* and *Debs v. United States*, companion cases also dealing with anti-sedition laws. In all three cases, the Supreme Court affirmed the rulings of the lower courts.

When the 1917 Espionage Act was crafted, the United States was at war. According to John E. Semonche, the Espionage Act was the most "repressive ban on speech" since the Sedition Act of 1798 (170). The Espionage Act was justified in the minds of most Americans, who—like their counterparts in Europe—were seized with zealous forms of patriotism and nationalism. If we were to view these events as part of a romantic plot structure, we could emphasize that when President Woodrow Wilson declared war, even the party lines between Democrats and Republicans were essentially destroyed—so intent were politicians in uniting America against Germany. A speech addressed to the Senate on April 4, 1917, by Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge elucidates a common sentiment of the time: "The worst of all wars is a feeble war. War is too awful to be entered upon half-heartedly. If we fight at all, we must fight for all we are worth. It must be no weak, hesitating war. The most merciful war is that which is most vigorously waged and which comes most quickly to an end" (725). Probably because it threatened to prolong the war, resistance to the United States' war effort was viewed as not only a challenge to democracy and capitalism but also as an endangerment to the lives of American soldiers.

In such an environment, it was probably highly unpopular for the Court to overturn the convictions of Schenck, Frohwerk, and Debs. It might have been impossible to exonerate Schenck even if the majority of the justices had wished to uphold a literal interpretation of the First Amendment. After all, the Amendment states that "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech" (emphasis mine). Granted, a sizeable percentage of
Americans did not surrender to the rabid patriotism that characterized the spirit of the age. Zechariah Chafee, Jr., a Harvard law professor who was a champion for free speech, noted at the time that “thoughtful men and journals” objected to the Espionage Act and the restriction of the freedom of speech that it imposed (7). But given the historical context of the aftermath of WWI, when questions of individual rights conflicted with the right of government to protect national security, it is likely that the majority of the nation sided with the government’s interest. It is possible that the Supreme Court affirmed the lower court’s decision in *Schenck* because to do otherwise would have diminished the leadership of the Court.

In *Schenck*, the Court’s decision was unanimous; the opinion issued by the Court accommodated its members’ diverse legal reasoning in one singular statement. Even though it was possibly a major factor, the influence of American patriotism only partly determined the Court’s ability to reach a unanimous decision in the case. Unanimity was only possible because other factors as well convinced each member of the Court to vote against the appellant. For instance, the Court’s most liberal member and one most likely to rule in favor of free speech—Justice Louis Brandeis—probably did not think very deeply about the Espionage Act’s implications on the First Amendment. Later, Brandeis would tell Justice Felix Frankfurter, “I have never been quite happy about my concurrence in the *Debs* and *Schenck* cases. I had not then thought the issues of freedom of speech out. I thought at the subject, not through it” (qtd. in Cohen 21).

Ironically, Justice Holmes, the author of the *Schenck* decision and the most pivotal justice in the 1919 speech cases, personally did not want to convict Schenck and the others. However, Holnes opted instead to follow his legal philosophy, which required him to sustain
the convictions. Holmes's philosophy of law was very controversial; he was an ultimate pragmatist and positivist who believed that laws needed to be clear so that a transgression of them would bring about a predictable punishment. “Law was not to be understood as politically liberal or conservative, but as a systematic approach that aimed for scientific consistency” (Cohen 61). Probably partly because he was an agnostic, Holmes believed that moral arguments should be kept out of the courtroom because they could have no basis in fact and thus would interfere with the predictability of the law (64-65). “Holmes also argued that the law did, and should, adopt a definite policy of requiring only outward conformity” (Rogat and O’Fallon 1363). To him, laws were prophecies that told people how to act if they wanted to avoid certain consequences. The justice once told an audience of law students, “People want to know under what circumstances and how far they will run the risk of coming against what is so much stronger than themselves” (Cohen 63-64). Holmes believed that bad laws should be corrected, but this was only to be done by the legislature and only after competing social groups had battled until one set of beliefs became triumphant (Rogat and O’Fallon 1367-68). In his book, The Common Law, Holmes wrote, “The law embodies the story of a nation’s development through many centuries...” (5). It appears that he believed that the judiciary had no business in tampering with the nation’s development; the courts should only enforce the laws that already exist.

Because he did not think that the Court should override legislation, Holmes was committed to the rule of law, which required Schenck's conviction because he had clearly (to Holmes at least) violated the Espionage Act. While it appears that Holmes thought the Espionage Act to be bad legislation, his view of legislative law as in a state of constant evolution assured him that Congress would eventually change the law, and, barring that, the
President could step in and pardon Schenck and the others.

Additionally, Holmes was led to agree with the majority of the Court in *Schenck* because he, like Brandeis, probably did not thoroughly consider the implications of the Espionage Act on the First Amendment. In a letter to a friend dated April 5, 1919, Holmes admitted that he had “dealt with [free speech] somewhat summarily in ... *Schenck v. U.S.*” (Howe, *Holmes-Pollock Letters*, 7). It appears that Holmes did not consider the speech clause of the First Amendment the major factor in the case. It probably never occurred to Holmes that he was crafting a weighty opinion that would forever influence how questions of the legal limits of free speech are decided in the United States. “Judging from the Justice’s attitude in [the speech case] decisions, moreover, it would almost seem that the reference to ‘clear and present danger’ in the *Schenck* case was a casual remark, a bit of neat verbalization on the part of a man given to terse expression” (Konefsky 201).

Immediately after writing the opinions for *Schenck, Frohwerk*, and *Debs*, Justice Holmes seemed to regret his actions. In a letter to Harold J. Laski, a friend and instructor at Harvard more than fifty years Holmes’s junior, dated March 16, 1919, Holmes wrote

> I sent you yesterday some opinions in the *Debs* and other similar cases…. I greatly regretted having to write them—and (between ourselves) that the Government pressed them to a hearing. Of course I know that donkeys and knaves would represent us as concurring in the condemnation of Debs because he was a dangerous agitator. Of course, too, so far as that is concerned, he might split his guts without my interfering with him or sanctioning interference. But on the only questions before us I could not doubt about the law. The federal judges seem to me (again between ourselves) to have got
hysterical about the war. I should think the President when he gets through
with his present amusements might do some pardoning. (Howe, Holmes-Laski
Letters 142-43)

Two days later, Laski replied with the following:

I read your three opinions with great care; and though I say it with deep regret
they are very convincing. The point, I take it, is that to act otherwise would
be simply to substitute judicial discretion for executive indiscretion with the
presumption of knowledge against you. I think you would agree that none of
the accused ought to have been prosecuted; but since they have been and the
statute is there, the only remedy lies in the field of pardon. Your analogy of a
cry of fire in a theatre is, I think, excellent, though in the remarks you make in
the Schenck case I am not sure that I should not have liked the line to be
drawn a little tighter about executive discretion. The Espionage Act tends to
mean the prosecution of all one’s opponents who are unimportant enough not
to arise [sic] public opinion. (143)

In his next letter to Laski more than two weeks later, Holmes does not mention the three
cases any further except to say “a labor union ... yesterday sent me a protest against the Debs
decision, at once cocksure and hopelessly ignorant of all about it” (144). Holmes’s
references to Debs in future letters would always be accompanied by an expression that his
opinion in the case (and presumably in Schenck and Frohwerk) had been misunderstood by
both the public in general and especially by proponents of labor and socialism. This
misunderstanding would become a significant factor of his reworking of the “clear and
present danger” test in Abrams as we will eventually see.
I must pause here and address the nature of the "clear and present danger" test in *Schenck*. Today, this test is applauded by civil libertarians, but in its original context, this test could have functioned as a license for the government to restrict speech according to its own standards of "danger." The test as it stands by itself is ambiguous; *Schenck* left the courts a lot of room to decide on their own what kinds of speech were protected and what kinds were not. This should not be surprising, given that *Schenck* arose from a very inchoate discussion of the limits of free speech. The newness of the test probably caused Holmes to ignore it in his *Frohwerk* and *Debs* opinions. Samuel J. Konefsky contends that "[a] close look at the paragraph in which Holmes introduces the idea of 'clear and present danger' shows that he was not primarily concerned with propounding a new test of constitutionality" (192). Justice Frankfurter, a later justice who was well acquainted with Holmes, did not consider "clear and present danger" to be a legal test, but rather a "felicitous" and "literary" phrase (202).

Jeremy Cohen argues that the "impact of the First Amendment was lost in *Schenck* because Holmes applied the logic of past nonspeech cases to his judicial reasoning. Holmes was unwilling or unable to see the speech component of *Schenck* as a unique issue" (109). Cohen further claims that the methodology that Holmes used to derive the "clear and present danger" test shows that Holmes was more concerned with "criminal law precedent and generalized principles" than the language of the First Amendment (96). However, it is probably helpful to remember that when considering the first case before the Supreme Court to question the meaning of the speech clause, Holmes had to rely on precedent from non-speech cases. Perhaps this is why the emphasis in the opinion Holmes wrote for *Schenck* was not on the defendant's speech, but rather on his actions.
In order to settle the legal questions posed in *Schenck*, it was not necessary for Holmes to interpret the free speech clause of the First Amendment (Cohen 110). Even though Schenck’s lawyers brought up the speech issue, ironically the legal test that they proposed regarding the limits of free speech might have also been a factor that led Holmes to sustain Schenck’s conviction. Schenck’s legal team wanted the Court to decide the case based on “whether an expression is made with sincere purpose to communicate honest opinion or belief, or whether it masks a primary intent to incite to forbidden action, or whether it does, in fact, incite to forbidden action” (35). Perhaps the government prosecutors, John Lord O’Brien and Alfred Bettman, exploited the flaw in the defense’s test when they argued that the case did not involve free speech but rather the *action* of mailing the circulars to those who had already been drafted—an action that involved willfully obstructing the draft. Because Schenck’s own lawyers conceded that action was punishable whereas speech was not, “Holmes said, in essence, that Congress could prohibit an *act* that occurred in the guise of speech” (100-1). In deciding *Schenck*, Holmes apparently did not consider what was written on the leaflets that Schenck printed but rather focused on how his *action* of mailing them to men whom had been drafted constituted an infringement of the Espionage Act.

Because Holmes personally stood in favor of free speech, Chief Justice Edward D. White might have realized that Holmes’s more progressive views had to be accommodated if all nine justices were to stand together on this case. It might seem strange that Holmes was chosen to write the opinion, given that his concurrence with the majority was probably not due to his personal principles or convictions but to his desire that his legal decisions be consistent with his philosophy of law. Less than a month after the *Schenck* opinion had been
handed down, Holmes confessed to Sir Frederick Pollock that he believed that he “should go farther probably than the majority in favor of [free speech]” and that it is probably “partly on that account that the C.J. [Chief Justice] assigned the case to [him]” (Howe, Holmes-Pollock Letters 7). By allowing Holmes to write the opinion for the majority, Chief Justice White might have been trying to appease any of Holmes’s putative impulses to write a concurring opinion or else disagree with the Court altogether in dissent. Moreover, by having one of the two most progressive members of the Court write the opinion for somewhat of a reactionary (although it mirrored the sentiments of the time) decision, the Chief Justice could strengthen the authority of the decision reached by the Court in Schenck. Chief Justice White may have thought that the more progressive sector of the American population would support the Court’s decisions in the speech cases when they discovered those decisions had been penned by their compatriot Justice Holmes.

Eight months after the Schenck opinion was issued, the opinion for Abrams v. United States, yet another anti-sedition law case involving the freedom of speech, was delivered. The two cases were very similar; however, in Abrams the defendants distributed their leaflets in a less calculating way: by throwing them out of windows of buildings in New York City. In the Court’s written opinion for Abrams, all but two of the justices—Holmes and Brandeis—laid aside the more liberal “clear and present danger” test and opted to use the more stringent “bad tendency” test, originally crafted by federal Judge Learned Hand, who had recently derived the test from English common law. This test essentially asks, “Do the words have the tendency to bring about something evil?”—an easier question to answer in the affirmative. The Court could have affirmed Abrams’s conviction under the “clear and present danger” test that proceeded from the Schenck case, so “[w]hy the majority shifted
constitutional standards is a mystery.” (Epstein and Walker 230).

The majority of the Court probably decided to convict Abrams for the same reasons they convicted Schenck, Frohwerk, and Debs. Although eight months had passed between Schenck and Abrams and the war had been over for almost a year, it seems that the majority of the Court failed to take into account this changed environment. Zechariah Chafee, Jr., writes that after armistice, the President pardoned or commuted most of the sentences of those convicted under the Espionage Act, but the trial courts were still filled with cases involving the 1917 Act as well as state anti-sedition laws (52, n. 30). A number of cases involving anti-sedition laws that went to the Supreme Court in the 1920s suggest that although the war was over, patriotism was not. By the time Abrams was tried, the Court had the precedents arising from Schenck, Frohwerk, and Debs to follow for speech cases. Because the free speech clause of the First Amendment had not been seriously considered in these three previous cases, the Court was not compelled to do so in Abrams.

Even though eight months had not made a difference to the majority of the members of the Supreme Court, those eight months in 1919—including a summer recess of the Court—changed the context from which Justices Holmes and Brandeis were to view Abrams. We have already seen that immediately after Holmes wrote the opinions for the earlier speech cases, he was perturbed by what he perceived as the misinterpretation of his ideas in Schenck by socialists and other progressive thinkers. In April of 1919, a group of Italian Communists attempted to mail thirty bombs to prominent officials, one of whom was Holmes—who was presumably targeted for writing the opinions for the speech cases. The justice spoke rather jokingly about the experience in a letter to Pollock: “It is one of the ironies that I, who probably take the extremest [sic] view in favor of free speech (in which, in
the abstract, I have no very enthusiastic belief, though I hope I would die for it), that I should have been selected for blowing up” (Howe, *Holmes-Pollock Letters* 29). He casually mentioned the incident in a letter to Laski in between two comments about British literature: “I suppose it was the Debs incident that secured me the honor of being among those destined to receive an explosive machine” (Howe, *Holmes-Laski Letters* 149). While it is unlikely that Holmes was threatened into dissenting in *Abrams* because of the attempt on his life, the bomb may have alerted him of the dire need to clarify what he meant by the “clear and present danger” test in *Schenck*. He would be presented with the opportunity to rearticulate what he meant by the test in his dissent in *Abrams*.

Although *Schenck* and *Abrams* appear to be parallel cases that should have been decided in congruent ways, for the rest of his life Holmes unwaveringly clung to the position that he had decided rightly in *Schenck*. Even so, many legal scholars agree with Semonche that “the difference between Holmes’s opinion for the Court in *Schenck* and his dissent in *Abrams* reflects the personal education that took place in the eight months between the two decisions” (174). Most scholars attribute this change to Justice Brandeis’s influence on Holmes, but it has even been argued that Laski arranged a tea with Chafee and Holmes where Chafee convinced Holmes that he should use the next opportunity he had to protect the freedom of speech (Rogat and O’Fallon 1378). However, not only would Chafee’s alleged request probably have been repulsive to Holmes’s legal philosophy, but Holmes never once expressed that he wished to recant his position in *Schenck*. In fact, he affirmed his *Schenck* decision in his *Abrams* dissent. While we should not underestimate the influence that his colleague Justice Brandeis had on him during the eight months following *Schenck*, it is a more likely scenario that the one big difference that Holmes perceived between the two
cases—that the nature of the danger posed by Abrams was very minor—played a larger role in his dissent.

Holmes’s legal opinions consistently show that if there were a serious clash between governmental and individual rights, he would decide in favor of the former. However, Holmes did not view Abram’s actions as a serious endangerment of the interests of the government. Hence he expresses in his dissent, “Now nobody can suppose that the surreptitious publishing of a silly leaflet by an unknown man, without more, would present any immediate danger that its opinions would hinder the success of the government arms or have any appreciable tendency to do so” (qtd. in Epstein and Walker 233). Unlike Schenck, who specifically targeted his leaflet to those who had been drafted, Abrams distributed his circulars by throwing them out of a window of a building in New York City. Konefsky argues that in Abrams, “[n]either the majority nor the minority questioned the constitutionality of the legislation under which the indictment was brought; the disagreement between them turned on the evaluation of the circumstances from which danger could be inferred” (209). John H. Wigmore attributed “the opposite interpretations of the majority and the minority [...] to differences of temperament and attitude towards the issues involved” (qtd. in 209). Perhaps this was the case. Holmes later wrote of the triad of speech cases, “I could not see the wisdom of pressing the cases, especially when the fighting was over” (qtd. in G. White 423). Both Holmes and Brandeis did not consider national security to be in such peril that it would necessitate a continuance of the Espionage Act when the war was ended, but then again, Holmes had never seen the need for such a law in the first place. This may be because Holmes did not busy himself with keeping up with current affairs and politics—he rarely read newspapers. Enamored with philosophy and literature instead, he was probably
sheltered from the influence that cultural pressures that united the country behind the war effort. Therefore, unlike most people at that time, it is possible that Holmes did not perceive speech that opposed the American military as threatening.

Another factor that likely contributed to Holmes and Brandeis's dissent from the majority of the Court was that, for the first time, the two seriously considered the implications of anti-sedition laws on the First Amendment. Most scholars assume that by the time of Abrams, Brandeis's own views in favor of the freedom of speech had been solidified; since he had no qualms as Holmes did about deciding cases based on personal moral convictions, he was easily persuaded by Abrams's legal team. Brandeis's own legal philosophy was directly opposite to that of Holmes; Brandeis believed that through their opinions, justices, like statesmen, should help craft the law to fit the expediencies of the times (cf. Konefsky 302ff).

Although his personal opinion of the case conflicted with the view his legal philosophy provided, it is possible that in Abrams, unlike in Schenck, Holmes based his decision on his personal convictions, essentially changing his mind about the preeminence his legal philosophy had over his conscience. It is likely that Brandeis played an integral part in accounting for Holmes's switch. Perhaps Holmes was led to decide Abrams with his heart rather than his head because of a newfound zeal for the benefits of free speech in a democratic society. The external evidence points in the direction that Holmes's views on free speech shifted radically over the eight months between Schenck and Abrams; "until his dissent in the Abrams case, Holmes always discussed free speech from the standpoint of the interests of society in curbing it" (Konefsky 193). Holmes scholar G. Edward White states that Holmes's dissent in Abrams "was to an important extent a response to suggestions
implicitly and explicitly made to Holmes by others” (412). It is perhaps the negative response to his opinion in *Debs* from his young Harvard colleagues, whom Holmes respected, that caused him to foreground his beliefs on free speech in his dissent in *Abrams* (Rogat and O'Fallon 1378).

Ironically, Holmes was not usually inclined to offer dissenting opinions. While Holmes’s eloquent dissent in *Abrams* would earn him the title “The Great Dissenter,” the times that Holmes either concurred with the Court’s opinion or wrote the majority opinion himself outnumber his dissents by what Alfred Lief estimates as “eight or ten to one” (qtd. in Konefsky 103). Holmes abhorred the new sobriquet he earned from his *Abrams* opinion because he did not want to be viewed as a dissenter. Because his dissents were so rare, it is especially notable that he dissented in *Abrams*.

In his dissent in *Abrams*, Holmes clarified his opinion in *Schenck* by stressing,

> It is only the present danger of immediate evil or an intent to bring it about that warrants Congress in setting a limit to the expression of opinion where private rights are not concerned. *Congress certainly cannot forbid all effort to change the mind of the country.* Now nobody can suppose that the surreptitious publishing of a silly leaflet by an unknown man, *without more*, would present any immediate danger that its opinions would hinder the success of the government arms or have any appreciable tendency to do so. […] Only the emergency that makes it immediately dangerous to leave the correction of evil counsels to time warrants making any exception to the sweeping command, “Congress shall make no law … abridging the freedom of speech” (qtd. in Epstein and Walker 233).
The above effectively accomplished Holmes's goal of championing free speech, and was intended to show that he had stood for free speech in his earlier decisions, which he argued were decided rightly. Whether or not Holmes really supported free speech at the time of the first three speech cases is not really our concern; what matters is that Holmes was intent on using his decision in Abrams to show his progressive colleagues that they were wrong to interpret Schenck as a stroke against the First Amendment. However, it is likely that Holmes was rewriting legal history—his own legal history—to support his current views on civil liberties.

The Abrams case shows that the majority of the Court had to accommodate the dissenting opinion in writing their own opinion. The majority was unable to apply the “clear and present danger” test because they were beaten to it by Holmes, who probably wanted to use Abrams as a chance to clarify this legal doctrine to exonerate himself from misinterpretations of Schenck. It would have been impossible for both the majority and dissenting opinions in Abrams to use the same legal test for support because the author—and therefore the authority—of that test were on the dissenting side. Had the majority read the “clear and present danger” precedent as justifying the conviction of Abrams, they would have stood in direct contradiction with the “initial” intent of that test, as clarified in the dissent by Holmes. Had Holmes not been present to interpret the “clear and present danger” test in the way he wanted, the majority of the Court could have used it to sustain their opinion.

To sum up my perspective of the evidence, perhaps it is no great mystery why the Court resorted to Judge Hand’s “Bad Tendency” test; only one author—Holmes or Justice John H. Clarke, who wrote for the majority—could claim the test for himself. Because Holmes needed his dissent in Abrams to prove that many had misunderstood his original
opinion in *Schenck*, he took that opportunity. Even if Clarke and the majority could foresee that Holmes's rearticulation of "clear and present danger" would undermine their own opinion in *Abrams* (especially because Holmes had written *Schenck* and still claimed to hold to the opinion he crafted in that case), they could not prevent Holmes from using the test because anyone on the Court can write anything they want. If the majority had used the "clear and present danger" to convict, this would have only exacerbated their propensity to appear on the wrong side of the case. Therefore, the real mystery of *Abrams* is not why the majority of the Court did not use the "clear and present danger" test, but why Holmes and Brandeis were unable to persuade the rest of the members of the Court to see the *Abrams* case their way.

Of course, that last sentence betrays my opinion that Holmes and Brandeis were in the right while the rest of the court was wrong. One (of the numerous) biases in the above narrative is the tendency for it to read as a tragedy by Frye's definition. For example, it was a tragedy for Schenck to be convicted of the Espionage Act of 1917 when he was merely trying to convince drafted soldiers to not join the war effort. It was tragic that the Court affirmed this decision of the lower courts and tragic that Holmes and Brandeis agreed with this decision. However, in this narrative, we see the development of a character. Holmes eventually regrets his initial decision, but he is given a second chance. However, the majority of the Court still voted to convict, so the story ends with the triumph of the villains. At the same time, it is a victory for Holmes because although he could not exonerate Abrams, he had the chance to define the legal precedent that he invented, which would ultimately become some of the most famous words handed down by the bench (thanks in part to Tom Clancy). The reader of my narrative will probably be left with the feeling that Holmes and
Brandeis were the true winners in this case, if only because the rest of the members of the Court's reputations suffered when they could not employ the "clear and present danger" test in their opinion. The reader should be warned, however, that I am giving a certain meaning to these events, although it is a meaning that serves our society well given present attitudes towards the freedom of speech. However, perhaps at the time that the two cases were decided, no one cared to notice that the Court did not use "clear and present danger," and it is only in retrospect that we as an American culture have come to see the 1919 Court in the wrong. After all, some of us have never seen a major war.

Finally, although the above narrative represents my beliefs as to why the Supreme Court used different precedents in the Schenck and Abrams cases, perhaps the knowledge gained from my narrative can be employed in the service of another problem inside or outside of the discipline of history. For example, as politically and culturally important as Supreme Court decisions are, Lee Epstein and Thomas G. Walker assert that "there is considerable disagreement in the scholarly and legal communities about why justices decide cases the way they do..." (42). However, because Supreme Court justices have formally unchecked power, it is of prime importance to know what drives the Court to their legal decisions so that the American populace is assured that it is not being tyrannized by this undemocratic institution. Perhaps the insight we have gained about how the Court decided to employ (or not employ) legal precedent in Schenck v. United States and Abrams v. United States—two similar cases separated by just eight months—might help us understand the inner-workings of the Court and predict under what circumstances the Court will develop new legal doctrines. Perhaps my narrative could aid a political scientist writing an opinion piece on how and why the power of the Supreme Court should be more restricted. At any
rate, my narrative has offered one perspective of the Court that can broaden one's knowledge of legal development.

Conclusions that can be Drawn from My Application

After actually attempting to apply my six principles to a written historical account, I can make some judgements as to which principles were applicable and served me well and which ones did not. It was fairly easy to apply rhetorical strategies that indicated my tentative stance. At the same time, showing my tentativeness was challenging; if readers were to perceive the account as merely one equally valid perspective among innumerable others, they might wonder why I even chose to write about the subject unless I had reasons for believing my account to be more accurate than the others written to date. Although finding the balance between these two extremes is not an easy task, it can be done, as I have demonstrated. Although I did not fully expect it when I was theorizing, another one of my principles that seemed to be successful was making suggestions on how to apply historical knowledge gained from the account to other areas of inquiry. However, finding knowledge that would serve other disciplines could be a challenge for the historian if only because the practical application of historical knowledge is best done by those who have an argument or problem and who are looking for potential evidence or answers. In other words, other disciplines should turn to history; history should not arbitrarily give answers to other disciplines whether they want these answers or not. I can only speculate that the knowledge gained from looking at the relationship between the written opinions for the Schenck and Abrams cases could aid a political scientist or, indeed, any situation in which two groups with competing interests are trying to reach a written agreement that can be interpreted
uniformly by both groups.

One of my principles that was met with limited success was the attempt to communicate to my readers that I was imposing an interpretation in the form of a plot structure upon the events. Even though I futilely struggled to definitively find examples of tragedy, romance, comedy, and irony in my narrative, I did detect a general plot pattern of tragic experiences that are ultimately righted in Holmes's case, and he emerges with the inverse of a Pyrrhic victory: a loss that comes with the great satisfaction of having the opposing side appear to be in the wrong. However, I did point out this bias of mine to my readers at the end and mentioned that at the time, perhaps the American people did not think the majority of the Court looked foolish for reverting to Justice Hand's "bad tendency" test.

Because it was part of my human nature to make sense of and a story out of the details I regarded as important in relation to the events in my narrative, I tried to make it clear that my application of gestalt is not the only one. Although I did not do so, perhaps it would have been appropriate to reformulate the events into alternative plot structures and then respond to them; this would have been a good next step had I the time to review the evidence from a different perspective.

The principle of asking relevant questions of my evidence seems to have been met automatically met by virtue of having a purpose for writing my account. I did not have to consciously think of the questions that I asked the texts and evidence that I was examining; rather, I did this tacitly. This leads me to think that Collingwood was offering description more than prescription when he said that each historian had to recreate the past for his or her own time and culture. Of course, this ensures that written history can never be objective, and as Collingwood mentioned, the historian is always part of the account he or she writes.
Collingwood noticed that he himself always had different questions when approaching the same text at different times, and he probably inferred that others did as well. Given that most (if not all) historians have a motive for studying the topics they do, I think it would be impossible to not ask relevant questions of the evidence. Therefore, this principle is done intuitively (I am perhaps dismissing this issue too quickly) and does not really need to be thought about when one is trying to practice history. Although it would be ideal if the historian could also be self-reflexive about the questions he or she is asking, determining these questions might be just as problematic as detecting history.

Also, I found the principle of communicating to the reader the idea that history is “web-like” was nearly impossible. As much as I could, I included in my account all of the details that might have shaped the justices’ decisions. Of course, I cannot say for sure that I included “all” of the evidence because surely when I did my research, I intuitively selected some factors as relevant and some as not. However, I do not even remember the factors I deemed irrelevant—and they might not be irrelevant for a different context from my own. Therefore, there are various lacunae in my account, but because I do not know what they are, I cannot alert my readers to them. My conclusion about this principle, then, is that while understanding historical accounts as “web-like” knowledge seems to be an accurate perception, it is not really something that the writer can mention in his or her narrative except to say something like, “There could be undiscovered evidence that, if known, could entirely change the structure and meaning of this account.”

Finally, the most difficult principle to apply to my account—and the principle that seems to be most frequently stressed by rhetoricians who write about historiography—was the attempt to explain my context and relationship to my subject or, in other words, to be
self-reflexive. In the opening paragraphs of the account, I attempted to alert my readers to the fact that my personal interest and stake in the subject may have influenced my conclusions about it. While I stopped short of saying it, I tried to let the readers know that I considered Holmes and Brandeis to be the "good guys" of the narrative; the other justices were the "villains." Moreover, I wrote myself into the account, if only to appease White's concern that the narrator appear to be objective and absent. Of course, when I got into the historical details of the narrative, I found it difficult to continue my presence as narrator in the story. The parts of the account that I have explicitly entered are only the beginning and the end. Except once near the end when I wrote, "To sum up my perspective of the evidence" (88), I did not say things like, "I think event A led to event B" in the heart of the narrative; rather, I tended to express subjectivity in terms of tentativeness ("Event A probably led to event B"). Admittedly, my reluctance to experiment with writing myself into the narrative shows that I have been socialized into thinking in terms of what history is and what it is not.

I would like to stress the radical divergence from conventional historiography that postmodern historiography represents. In today's academic climate, "postmodernist" principles for doing historiography are difficult to follow. Even rhetoricians have noted that postmodernist historiography has not been practiced consistently by the members of the discipline of rhetoric; this is one of the points that Victor J. Vitanza makes in his "Notes' Towards Historiographies of Rhetorics; or the Rhetorics of the Histories of Rhetorics; Traditional, Revisionary, and Sub/Versive." Vitanza laments:

...we Rhetoricians are not self-consciously aware of the Rhetorics of Histories when we Write our Histories of Rhetorics. Therefore, I emphasize (again): In
theory, we, occasionally in our journal articles and convention presentations and conversations, understand Rhetorics and Ideologies; in practice, however, we, in our histories, ironically demonstrate a lack of awareness of them. (74)

Perhaps it is so difficult for rhetoricians (and others) to practice postmodernist historiography because at this time there is a relative absence of examples of postmodern-influenced histories. Those that do exist (Vitanza’s article for instance), seem wildly incoherent in places and offer no solid conclusions or knowledge that can be used in service to other disciplines. Maybe the traditional historian is correct: postmodernism is of little use to the discipline of history. It seems, and I hope to be wrong, that in order for history to serve a purpose in the larger world, it must search for covering laws and ways to make meaning out of the past. However, postmodernism resists such conceptions of history. For the time being, hopefully more rhetoricians like Vitanza will attempt to write postmodernist historical accounts that can show how history is useful to other scholarly areas. If Vitanza and others succeed, perhaps the discipline of history will take notice and members of the general community of historians will begin to incorporate more anti-foundationalist approaches into their historiography. If rhetoricians fail in this task, however, then history and postmodernism probably will not have much of a future together.
NOTES

1 "Historiography," of course, has at least three meanings: (1) the literature that has been written about the history of a subject, (2) the methodological principles of historical detection, and (3) the process of writing history. In this thesis, I will use the term to refer to theoretical principles that inform the writing and/or the construction of historical accounts.

2 I apologize for mentioning this work that shows up in nearly every bibliography of articles that deal with postmodernism. Kuhn's book itself has been somewhat mis-adopted by postmodernists, who claim that it is a more postmodern work than Kuhn intended.

3 The responses to Richard Rorty by American philosophers largely attest to this fear.

4 The fact that these articles are centered almost exclusively in one journal does not imply that the discipline of history is ignoring postmodernism as much as it belies historians' general dismissal of all theoretical issues.

5 Of course, this phrase was not used in Collingwood's time. Carl Hempel, one of Richard Rorty's teachers who later told him, "You have betrayed everything I stood for," after reading Rorty's Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (cf. Lingua Franca, Dec 2000/ Jan 2001, p. 42) was the originator of this term.

6 Qtd. in Parker 213 from "The Principles of History," pp. 41-4. This document is part of a larger set called the Collingwood Papers, which are unpublished and housed in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, England.

7 Qtd. in Parker 175 from Speculum Mentis of the Map of Knowledge, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924.
8 Qtd. in Parker 181 from the 1994 edition of *The Idea of History*, which contains previously unpublished material. This quote is from the “Lectures on the Philosophy of History” given in 1926.

9 I am assuming that “modern” in this context means “contemporary” and possibly even “postmodern” rather than “modern” in a sense that refers back to scientific positivism.


11 Many scholars complain about the inconsistencies and contradictions that characterize White’s work. Some attempt to avoid these problems by summarizing White’s thought by a chronological analysis of his writings, although this approach tends to bury White’s core ideas. Noël Carroll, in his highly critical article of White, gives perhaps the most comprehensive and accurate account—rather, the one that matches most closely to my own conception—of White’s ideas.

12 This conclusion might be reached by those who are cursorily informed about White’s works, as one of his essays is entitled “The Value of Narrativity.” However, this phrase should be interpreted as arguing that narrative is not neutral—it has a value, rather than suggesting that narrative is valuable.

13 Vann mentions that L. B. Cebik in “Fiction and History: A Common Core?” *International Studies in Philosophy* 24 (1992), 47-63 claims that a “real” past or “real events” do not exist in White’s mind. Both Vann and I would agree that this is far from the truth.
White would be one of the first to attest that in writing about anything, one must select some aspects of it and disregard the others, but some of what I have left out of my summary of White’s ideas is so major as to deserve at least a brief mention. White augments his lists of four emplotment structures and four tropes of description with four explanatory strategies (Idiographic, Organicist, Mechanistic, and Contextualist) and four ideological perspectives (Anarchist, Conservative, Radical, and Liberal) (70). However, it is difficult enough to find discussions (within the work of both White and others) of how the plots and the tropes inform (or should inform) the work of writing narratives, and it is even more of a challenge to find analyses of how the four explanatory strategies or the four ideologies effect historical accounts. While these schemes represent intriguing aspects of White’s work, until they become of more interest to scholars, it does not make sense for me to include them in a discussion of how White’s ideas could inform a postmodern conception of historiography.

Although, if Collingwood is correct, too much evidence makes the writing of history nearly impossible, and given our modern day fascination with archives and electronic records, it is very likely that any future study of our particular historical age will be a very complex process indeed.

Admittedly, it seems that if knowledge is to be gained from history and applied to other disciplines, this cannot happen unless the historian is attempting to discover “covering law” models. While both Collingwood and White encouraged the first and discouraged the latter, neither of them offers a way in which this contradiction can be overcome. If there is a way by which this can be done (and I hope that there is), I have not thought of it.
Cohen argues that *Schenck* was not a case about the freedom of speech at all; while Schenck's defense argued that the Espionage Act violated the First Amendment's protection of free speech, the only legal questions that the Court could rule on concerned whether or not Schenck's *actions* violated the Espionage Act, and they clearly did. The constitutionality of the Espionage Act in light of the First Amendment was not in the purview of the Court to decide in *Schenck*.

Vitanza says, "We are always already interpreting any text from any archive across at least tacitly present hermeneutical methods. Not to be conscious of those methods is to fall prey to perhaps a form of *ideological terrorism*" (93, emphasis in the original). While I am not saying it is impossible, I think that it is extremely challenging to "be conscious of those methods" (perhaps some are just too lazy to take the time to be self-reflexive), but even more importantly, if one believes that he or she does know the tacit methods used to address the text, one might mistakenly think he or she is being objective in a relative sense. This is dangerous as well. I think the best that can be done is to state one's methods as far as one is aware of them but to also be conscious that it is likely that so much more is still unknown to oneself and others.
WORKS CITED


