Introduction

History, Narrative, West

The twentieth century has transfigured American historical imagination in dramatic but poorly understood ways. One of the most visible is the growing willingness to imagine America's past as tragic conflict. Once upon a time historians celebrated the making of democracy. Nowadays many imagine that democracy founded on a Native American holocaust. And a suspicion of historical knowledge has accompanied these diverging interpretations.

Can histories tell the truth about the past?

Such questions have proliferated in recent years, with "yeses," "no's," and "maybe's" ringing back in answer. Some of the more provocative responses have come from historiographers like Hayden White who have told us that since historians write narratives, and since no event is narrative in form, histories cannot correspond to their objects. One of the most resounding affirmations of historical knowledge has come from historians Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, who believe that we may, although imperfectly, know that past which is the object of scholarly inquiry. Yet even they concede that "historical narratives are actually a literary form without any logical connection to the seamless flow of events that constitute living."[1]

We often imagine such disputes as conflicts over whether history can be "objective." Peter Novick's magisterial social history of the discipline, *That Noble Dream,* narrates a history of contention between those who believed history was an objective science and those who believed it was not.[2] But characterizing the difference between White and

critics like Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob in "subjectivist" and "objectivist" terms is potentially confusing, since they all share a basic belief that narrative and figurative language are the weak links in historical knowledge. The antagonisms of "narrative" and "literary form," on the one hand, and "logical connection" and "events," on the other, stand on intellectual traditions that are almost immeasurably deep.

The unhappy dichotomy of narrative and knowledge has inspired a series of linguistic purges as historians try to cast out "soft" poetic and rhetorical forms. Some believe we have escaped the old-fashioned narrative history of Great Men, wars, and elections and now can write "analytic" or "structural" histories of culture and society. The more polemical accounts represent the new history as a higher intellectual pursuit and place it at the summit of a lengthy evolution out of narrative evil.[3] American history's creation tale, into which young historians are socialized, has institutionalized the suspicion of historical figures, and it goes something like this:

> In the beginning the Romantic Historians told pretty stories but did not rise to empirical analysis. They were followed by the Scientific Historians, who professionalized history but remained too focused on political facts. The Progressive Historians turned attention to social conflict, although their deterministic rhetoric now looks dated. The Consensus Historians wrote intellectual histories whose quiescent narratives harmonized with conservative postwar politics. Finally, the analytic language of the New Social Historians (New Western Historians, etc.) restored conflict and commoners to their proper, privileged places.

One can tell a historian's political allegiances by where he or she places the narrative summit. Does "New Western History" represent the rise of the New Left heroes or does it threaten a hellish future of fragmentation and nihilism? Morals vary, but the basic story—a "march of science" narrative—dominates our professional image. As told by New Western historians like Patricia Limerick and Donald Worster, the story implies that we have advanced from the literary priestcraft of patriarchs like Frederick Jackson Turner to the rigorous scholarship of New Western History: History has (or will) heroically overcome its enslavement by metaphor and rhetoric. Since recent criticism demonstrates that literary forms remain a crucial part of historical discourse, the general plot has become suspect.[4]

Such march-of-science narratives can also reproduce some unhappy politics. Modern science has traditionally legitimated its often brilliant instrumental success by contrasting its factual and logical language

with "other" figurative languages. It has associated "soft," "poetic" forms with savages (myths), women (old wives' tales), and children (fairy tales). Science has held out the objectification of a feminized nature as its ideal, and thinkers from Plato to Bacon have employed metaphors of rape and violence to describe rational inquiry. As Evelyn Fox Keller's *Reflections on Gender and Science* (1984) glossed current usage, "When we dub the objective sciences 'hard' as opposed to the softer (that is, more subjective) branches of knowledge, we implicitly invoke a sexual metaphor, in which 'hard' is of course masculine and 'soft' feminine. Quite generally, facts are 'hard,' feelings are 'soft.' " If we carry this basic insight into our discussion, we learn that here too androcentric language structures current debates. Historiographers have feminized figurative language to contrast it with more rational masculine forms. When a New Western historian like Donald Worster denounces the dominion of "myth," "romance," "dreams," "idealization," and "impulses" over the prose of older generations and contends that "detached observers" now use "cool, rational analysis" and "hard evidence" to become "masters of ideology" and let the "truth" come "breaking in," such old codes find new life. Ironically, many of those historians devoted to fighting oppression write their own historiographies in racialized and gendered languages. That such coding is usually tacit rather than intentional has not much weakened the common understanding that the measure of the discipline's maturity is the degree to which it has successfully mastered its effeminate metaphors.[5]

Even in more specialized corners of historiography, the antipathy of narration and knowledge has been affirmed and applauded, racialized and gendered, forgotten and revised. Critical philosophy of history has traditionally divided along specialty and topic. Analytic philosophers like Carl Hempel and Morton White have studied epistemological questions largely to the exclusion of other topics, and the preferred mode of epistemology in Anglo-American philosophy is the logic of "ordinary language" emptied of aesthetic and emotional baggage. Such analyses have had mixed results, but the literature has generally described an array of logically valid forms of historical explanation rather than a single algorithm of knowledge. Scholars approaching history from literary theory, Hayden White the most notorious, have focused on aesthetic forms: modes of emplotment, figures of speech, and so on. White and others have skillfully demonstrated that while historians often employ the apparatus of scientific discourse ("test," "findings," "generalization"), their monographs rely heavily on artistic conventions.

The division of critical labor into logical analysis and literary criticism echoes the common belief that scientific and imaginative or factual and figurative languages are essentially different. Since history has some claim to being "scientific," opposing facts and figures has severe consequences. If histories must be strictly logical to be scientific, then their reliance on narrative and metaphor deals a devastating blow to historical knowledge. As a result, the division of philosophy of history into logical analysis and literary criticism has led to varieties of skepticism. If all we have are "stories" about the past and if we cannot match them to any single "true" story, then we have no epistemic basis for judging one history superior to another. As White puts it, events are not "intrinsically" tragic or comic, so if one historian narrates a tragic account of the European occupation of Native America and another tells a happy story of the "same" events, then any choice between them depends on aesthetic and moral tastes rather than verifiable scientific knowledge. We might say that White sees a claim like "Europeans killed Indians" as a testable, factual statement. We need not doubt whether the "event" took place. But a claim like "The European killing of Indians was a tragedy" is not testable because it moves from a neutral observation language to a language of aesthetic and moral judgment. "Tragedy" carries us from simply observing a historical fact to opining about its value.

Historiographers like White have helped to persuade many historians that even structural histories cannot escape narration, but the old divorce of masculine fact and feminine figure continues to shape the ways we think about history. Even authors who do not tell march-of-science stories of our escape from Turnerian romance indulge in accounts of historical practice which radically separate sentences and stories. In 1987 James Axtell in "History as Imagination" told readers that all histories have a "story line that connects the value-free facts of the past into an intelligible pattern of meaning," adding that "since most historical sequences or collections of facts about past events can be 'emplotted' in a number of different ways so as to provide different interpretations, the historian makes an *aesthetic* choice based on the perceived fit between the facts as he [*sic*] knows them and a number of pre-coded plots." While Axtell seemed to believe that this conclusion affirmed the doctrine of free will, he did not explain how one might adjudicate competing aesthetic choices. In 1992 William Cronon's prize-winning essay "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative" deployed the dichotomies of fact and figure to explain interpretive conflict in the nation's

origin story. Emplotment, Cronon argued, goes "beyond nature into the intensely human world of values." Like White, Cronon believed that historians can verify individual descriptions, or "facts," but that we subsequently impose the "human artifice" of narrative onto those neutral observations: "Nature and the universe do not tell stories; we do." Aside from the unhappy implication that humans are not part of nature and the universe, Cronon's construction leaves the impression that "nature" and the "universe" *do* speak in observation sentences.[6]

Divorcing fact and figure, sentence and story, analysis and narration, will not help us to understand narrative traditions in historical discourse. As John Dewey told us years ago and as a host of works in the philosophy and history of science has shown, the old, hard-and-fast cleavages between neutral observation language (fact, sentence) and theoretical language (value, story) cannot be so simply upheld. As philosophers of science like to say, all observations are "theory-laden." So far as histories go, we might say that factual descriptions are always "narrative-laden" and that "aesthetic" and "moral" meanings color the most banal historical facts. In other words, the statement "Europeans killed Indians" is neither neutral nor purely descriptive but depends for its meaning on the reader interweaving it with lots of other words, sentences, and stories that, although they may not appear adjacent on the printed page, are necessary for the statement to be anything more than a mess of inky chicken scratches. Such a sentence is saturated with narrative long before any historian fits it into a monograph. And while even monographic narratives are emplotted much like novels and plays, so long as we share understandings of what sorts of situations count as tragic or comic, those patterns are also subject to our messy public practices of authentication. The process of reaching agreement on which narratives are plausible and which are not does not differ in kind from the process of reaching agreement on which statements of historical fact are plausible. There is no magical essence in story or metaphor that lifts either out of the realms of cognition and science.

Narratives are not something we choose or reject at will, nor are they linguistic artifacts we measure against a nonnarrative universe. Stories are what we live in, and in them we find both our worlds and our selves. We differentiate among them, we call some fairy tales and others true stories, and we tend to believe that our favorite tale is the one everyone else should adopt. But we do this from within narrative traditions we can interweave with others but never entirely escape. As our traditions change, so do our histories; as our histories change, so do our worlds;

as our worlds change, so do our traditions. Saying that we live inside narrative traditions is not the same thing as saying that any story is as good as another. It does not mean that we cannot make good instrumental arguments for favoring some histories over others—we do this every day. It *does* mean that we ought to accept the ultimate contingency of those arguments. Such an acceptance is crucial in a pluralist democratic society, for it should encourage us to take seriously the radically different histories of others. It makes real conversation possible. Adopting this attitude means, to use one of Richard Rorty's well-turned phrases, that an inquiry into historical knowledge can only be a "sociohistorical account of how various people have tried to reach agreement on what to believe."[7]

Frontiers of Historical Imagination traces a critical genealogy of the narrative traditions through which historians, philosophers, anthropologists, and literary critics have understood the European occupation of Native America, and it explores how those understandings shaped and were shaped by changing conceptions of history. Either topic could justify a monograph, but each illuminates the other. Historical imagination is typically embodied in some study, attitude, or topic, and while philosophies of history abstract from concrete subjects, like American history, this critical process is parasitic on specific histories. Specific histories, in contrast, often seem independent of what theorists have to say about them, but each specific history presupposes or projects a philosophy of history, however sophisticated or naive. So I will interweave these themes, using philosophy of history to understand histories, histories to understand conceptions of history.

A brief glance at earlier beginnings will help to frame our topic. Frontier history has often been called the history of the American West, and "West" has a history all its own. As Loren Baritz has shown, from Virgil to Thoreau, the West has been a region of truth, beauty, and hope toward which Hellenic (later European) cultures should move. "Western Civilization" and "The West" remain key words of popular and scholarly discourse, and as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) demonstrated, "West" has historically defined itself through exclusion. West is always west *of* something. Traditionally, the "Orient" has defined all that the West is not, giving it an alterego, a sort of absent content that determines the semantic paths "West" can follow.[8]

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1822–1830) Georg W. F. Hegel declared that history had rolled from East to West in great dialectical waves of consciousness and the story of that journey was a

story of liberation. The ancient East, he said, knew only that one is free. The Greeks and Romans knew that some are free. Modern Europe knows that all are free. His telling reconciled secular and divine meanings for history and gave it form, content, and purpose. Its form was written history. Its content was the ethical relations embodied in the modern state. And its purpose was the self-realization of spirit. History thus belonged to certain peoples but not to others. The indigenous inhabitants of the Americas and Africa were peoples without history lost to a "voiceless past." Today we think of Hegel as a reactionary metaphysician. And we often imagine Europe's devastation of other cultures and places as a thoroughly tragic affair. We believe we have escaped Hegel, but his collision between people with and without history still structures public memory.[9]

The American West was once the frontier space where migrating European cultures collided with Native America. In the West the historic civilizations of the Old World met the nonhistorical wilds of the New. Today, many New Western historians try to limit the word "West" to the geographic region west of the Mississippi River Valley. In both uses of the word, though, Americans have imagined the West to have a special relation to American history. West, even as a particular arid region of the United States, always also harks back to "The West" as a cultural tradition from ancient Greece to modern Europe. And since Americans have frequently claimed for themselves a privileged place in the course of history, the West is crucial to understanding history in the abstract. The frontier was not just the place where civilization and wilderness made American democracy, it was the ragged edge of history itself, where historical and nonhistorical defied and defined each other. That historical metaphysics still shapes our pasts and futures. We remain obscurely entangled in philosophies of history we no longer profess, and the very idea of "America" balances on history's shifting frontiers.

Our story divides into four books.

Book One: The Language of History. Modernist philosophy and history tried to rationalize language, and we will begin our journey by tracing the efforts of historians and philosophers to escape myth, metaphor, and emotion. Attempts to formalize historical explanations (in this instance, Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis that frontier expansion created American democracy) will lead us into disputes over the ways and means of scientific method. Philosophy's move away from historicism toward the logic of hard science was part of a larger change in form and focus popularized as the "Linguistic Turn." An increasing

number of philosophers followed the lead of logicians like Rudolf Carnap, proponent of what came to be known as logical positivism. The new "analytic" philosophy imagined itself as a metascience devoted to delineating the underlying grounds of truth claims made by all scientific disciplines. Analytic philosophy of history forsook old questions about the meaning of history in favor of searching out the timeless logical order of historical discourse. By the 1950s it looked as if the scientific elements of histories were precisely those which were *not* historical. Histories explained only as far as they constructed testable propositions cast as timeless or predictive formulae, as in a "frontier thesis" or "Turner hypothesis." But the project of rationalizing historical discourse did not work out so well as many had hoped, and scholars like Thomas Kuhn eventually described even hard science as messier, more artistic—more historical—than theorists had imagined, and the problems of science and history again converged.

While scholars failed to codify historical explanation, they estranged the languages of science and poesy, and the analytic turns paved the way for more radical linguistic turns deriving from continental hermeneutics, structural linguistics, and a congeries of trends collectively known as poststructuralism. So the postmodern rediscovery of the poetic aspects of historical discourse unleashed dire warnings of relativism *and* inspired calls for the transformation or even abolition of historical imagination. For many thinkers the new turns cast suspicion on the very idea of history. History under any logical description was a final vestige of faith in God's divine plan.

Book Two: From Spirit to System. We can deepen our understanding of these shifts by studying the frontier thesis as part of changing narrative traditions. Turner emplotted the European occupation of Native America as the building of a modern democracy from wild nature. He grounded his project in nineteenth-century idealism and saw the frontier dialectic as part of a cosmic drama of the developing self-consciousness of humanity. In America that universal history manifested itself in a Dantean comedy in which conflicting forces lifted each other up into higher pluralistic resolutions, rejuvenating an evolving democracy along the way. Writers, readers, and researchers institutionalized simple versions of this story, and by 1930 this narrative dominated American history as no other tale ever has. A competing tradition built itself on darker readings as intellectuals like John Dewey blamed many of the nation's social ills on frontier excess. But both traditions focused on a dramatic conflict of nature and history and imagined the story's hero

as white, middle class, and male. This dramatic code deflected attention from interethnic conflict by imagining the defining American moment as an encounter with pristine nature rather than a collision of cultural worlds. For decades stories centered on wilderness and civilization predominated in textbooks, although new scientistic vocabularies gradually replaced Victorian poetics.

While Turner sought to transfigure folk memory into historical consciousness, Dewey's more rigorous historicism speaks to our current debates. Unlike most period philosophers, he did not break language or experience into aesthetic, epistemic, and moral splinters but sought a pragmatic philosophy of history that we may adapt for our own purposes. As he saw it, even the most "neutral" empirical descriptions were always embedded in some larger story and aimed at some particular problem or end that shaped their possible meanings. His telling of frontier history exemplified his narrativist conception of history and countered the upbeat Turnerian tellings. By midcentury, though, Turnerian and Deweyan historicisms had been scientized, as we will see, in the work of Merle Curti, a historian who saw himself as intellectual heir to both men. Curti's frontier history epitomized the analytic turns even as it carried forward the notion that American democracy was a product of American wilderness. Much as analytic philosophers abjured metaphysics, Curti and his peers believed that social scientists should recant the fuzzy ideology of story and metaphor which had burdened the work of their predecessors.

Book Three: Time Immemorial. Meanwhile, across the quad, anthropologists were telling different tales. While Turner had stressed the creative power of wild nature, he had acknowledged the part played by Native America. Victorian ethnographers told a grand story of social evolution which described Native Americans as representatives of an earlier stage of human experience through which Europeans had already passed. For a time such accounts harmonized with those told by historians like Turner. But by the 1920s anthropologists like Franz Boas had installed "culture" as the organizing concept of their discipline, and that one word broke American history into halves. Describing the encounter of European and Native American as a conflict between incommensurable cultures opened up a national memory divided by ethnicity and plot: however happy history may have been for white Americans, for the natives it was ruthlessly tragic. Tragedy dominated anthropology for the first half of the twentieth century, and when in the 1950s the new specialty of "ethnohistory" emerged, its

practitioners commonly incorporated the ethnographic tragedy into their own works. By the 1960s even nearsighted scientists could see that Native Americans had not disappeared. Driven partly by American Indian scholars like Vine Deloria Jr., a new story emerged in which Native American cultures heroically survived and even overcame Euro-American oppression. In today's cultural studies, metaphors of holocaust, democracy, history, and culture circulate side by side.

Ethnographic tragedy also enabled more radical turns. By the late 1920s the culture concept tended to be cast in language that was at best ahistorical. Some works, Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1934) one of the most important, went even further and associated history with European experience and rejected it in favor of alternative modes of discourse. Benedict held out Nietzschean mythopoesis as an alternative to historical consciousness. For many other anthropologists the ahistorical vocabularies of functionalism and structuralism offered more "scientific" languages. In anthropology history looked like an antiquarian devotion to the dead hand of the past. "History may lead to anything," said the famous structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *The Savage Mind* (1962), "so long as you get out of it." Despite their antipathies, the mythopoesy of Benedict and the scientism of Lévi-Strauss shared both a suspicion of history and a romantic enthusiasm for radically "other," nonmodern, non-Western ways of being. In the end, the culture concept threatened to dispense with history altogether.

Book Four: Histories of Language. In the second half of the twentieth century American historians drifted away from the frontier narrative, but literary critics in American Studies found it central to American culture. Scholars like Perry Miller and Henry Nash Smith declared the nation's relation with nature the key to its sense of selfhood. Many felt the popular belief in a mythic frontier past encouraged political oppression at home and overseas. Again scholars contended that America suffered from narrative traditions saturated with emotion and poesy, and they proposed to replace those mythologies with rational analysis. Some assailed the working language of American studies and argued that the bad old ethno- and androcentric myths were still alive and well in modern literary criticism. Critics like Smith found themselves pressed hard by arguments that if the new analytical languages were to be taken seriously, the traditional justifications for studying high literature were just so much mysticism. At the same time students of race and gender attacked the supposition that works written mostly by Anglo males about other works written mostly by Anglo males could represent some larger "culture" that subsumed the experience of others.

Ironically, while a scholar like Merle Curti saw scientism and democracy as natural allies, in American studies the various crusades to divest language of metaphysics also undermined the search for an American mind or culture. Competing empirical accounts of American experience suggested that it could be subdivided almost infinitely. This discovery accompanied a growing awareness that the rationalization of language had failed to produce its ideal object, the single language of human cognition. From this combination of events two strangely interwoven developments have emerged. In one a flood of "new historicisms" stress the historicity of all discourse, including the sort of literature that had long been thought of as timeless. But a second development has turned away from historicism altogether as some literary scholars follow other social scientists to identify historical imagination with theology and metaphysics. While many applaud the return of history to literary and ethnographic criticism, that return is bound up with antihistorical linguistic traditions.

There are at least two readings of our story. One reading is a happy tale about history's escape from constricted horizons into more open dialogue. Turner saw his own work as a heroic attempt to broaden history to include the common man, the white male frontiersman absent from the Great Man histories that he had grown up reading. A few decades later Walter Prescott Webb contended that the true subalterns were those white middle-class males who lived in the "real" west beyond the hundredth meridian. But even this effort left Euro-American women, Native Americans, Chicanos and Chicanas, African-Americans—all the "others"—outside of the heroic horizon. By the sixties the Turnerian custom of placing new subaltern heroes at the center of the story had produced a widening array of tales and morals. Today we rightly tell happy Whiggish stories of how we have improved our conversation to include voices Hegel and Turner could not hear. Turnerian social history, the interest in local documents, the reconstruction of the everyday lives of common people from statistical data, and the culture concept have all expanded our horizons. Our new histories have unmasked previously hidden forms of oppression, now measured by race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and even species. We celebrate new subaltern heroes, and this is, it seems to me, a happy development. Read this way, our tale is a Dantean comedy of the progress of understanding. It is a narrative of liberation.

But there is a very different reading. Here the story is an unhappy one. We have abandoned much that was good in older historical traditions. We have lost our willingness to tell the big story and to see history

as literary and moral event. We have enlarged our circle, but we have also committed ourselves to a depressingly fragmented and hyperspecialized world. What remains is existential arithmetic and visions of division, categories, and counting as ends in themselves. We have given ourselves over to a darkly bureaucratic existence, and the mark of our despair is our willingness to imagine even oppression as a calculus. The Turnerian custom of cheering for the underdog threatens to devolve into subaltern one-upmanship: My hero is more subaltern than yours; my hero suffers from two oppressions rather than one, or three oppressions rather than two; we have multiple, finite heroes and oppressions that can only be joined arithmetically. Read this way, the tale is a tragic narrative of decline, of the fragmentation of understanding. It is a narrative of enslavement.

The twist is that we must tell both stories, for each calls forth the other. There is a Turnerian connection between Emerson's cry for a poem of America that could transpose our barbarous folk symbols into an allegory of democracy, and our current valorization of our new histories as politically correct literary forms. There is a complex affinity between the democratization and the bureaucratization of American history. The analytic turns of our century have opened a world in which we can imagine history as many broadening circles of experience, but they have also given us a world in which history seems to be something we can cast off at will. But these tales have written us, as we have written them, and so we cannot simply willfully replace science with literature or irony with metaphor or comedy with tragedy or democracy with holocaust. We are all these equations, this is what dialogue is, and we will find our new selves—as our precursors found theirs—in these shifting frontiers.