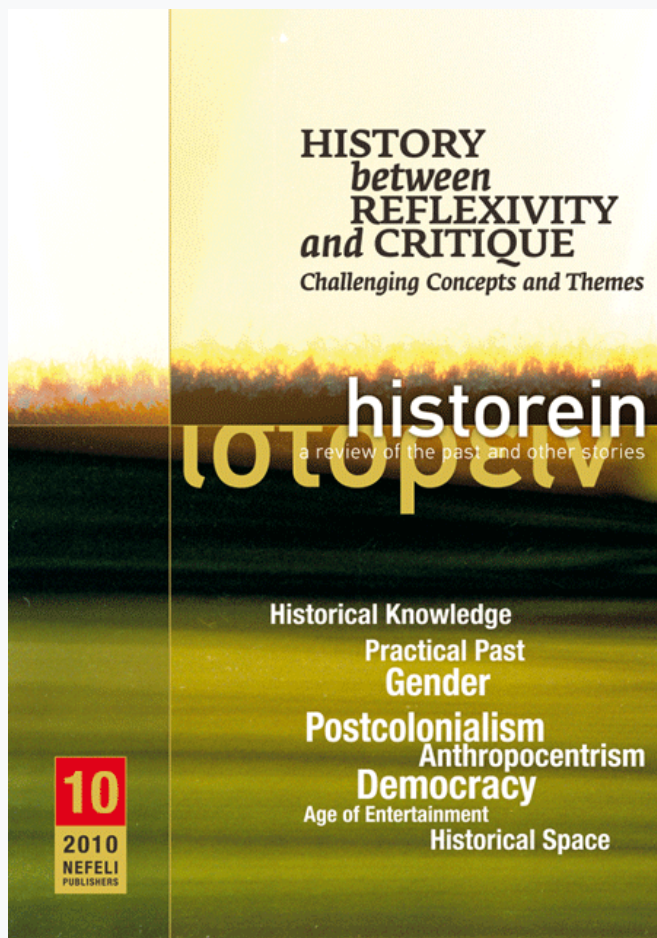


Historein

Vol 10 (2010)

History between Reflexivity and Critique



The Practical Past

Hayden White

doi: [10.12681/historein.2](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.2)

Copyright © 2012, Hayden White



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

White, H. (2011). The Practical Past. *Historein*, 10, 10–19. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.2>

The Practical Past

Fiction is the repressed other of history.

— Michel de Certeau¹

Hayden White

University of California, Santa Cruz

Near the beginning of W.G. Sebald's "novel" *Austerlitz*, we are introduced to the book's eponymous protagonist, "Jacques Austerlitz", by the narrator, who has journeyed to "Belgium" and specifically to "Antwerp" – "partly for study purposes, partly for other reasons which were never entirely clear to me" – and has ended up in the waiting room of the central railway station (the "*Salle des pas perdus*"), where he encounters Austerlitz taking pictures of the waiting room and engages him in conversation about the history of architecture which happens to be Austerlitz's profession. Thus began, the story has it, in the year 1967, a series of encounters between the narrator and Austerlitz, who, it turns out, is searching for information about his family which, he had discovered only at the age of sixteen, were Czech Jews who may (or may not have) perished in the death camps of the Third Reich. The novel relates the many, accidental and planned encounters between the narrator and Austerlitz from that first meeting in the "*Salle des pas perdus*" in Antwerp station down to a final meeting in Gare d'Austerlitz, in Paris, where Jacques Austerlitz relates to the narrator the ways by which the past is able to hide its secrets from the living, even to the point of destroying the monuments attesting the existence of a past (as in the newly built Bibliothèque nationale in Paris: "this gigantic new library, which, according to one of the loathsome phrases now current is supposed to serve as the treasure house of our entire literary heritage, proved useless in my search for any traces of my father who had disappeared from Paris more than fifty years ago.") It is not clear whether Austerlitz ob-

jects to the inutility of the new Bibliothèque nationale or is simply lamenting the loss of the old one. In any event, Jacques Austerlitz's quest for the identity and images of his parents takes the form of a journey in space, from one "*lieu de memoir*" to another and in which each of them manifests another aspect of the ways in which what had once been presented as a "heritage" is shown to be a kind of impediment to useful knowledge of the past. The ultimate destination (or rather the penultimate one) is Theresienstadt's famous Potemkin village concentration camp, where the transit point to the death camps was given the public face of a vacation spa like Marienbad. This masquerade of a concentration camp as a kind of fancy retirement community provides a kind of image of fulfilment for all of the places of Europe wherein the good old values of humanism and Christianity, of the nation and the community, the state and the church are allowed to appear as little more than "zoological gardens" in which hapless captured animals look out listlessly at the human visitors who think they occupy zones of freedom and responsibility.

Right at the beginning of *Austerlitz*, the narrator (before encountering Austerlitz in the Central Station in Antwerp) visits the "Nocturama" of Antwerp Zoo. The Nocturama is an enclosure for animals which sleep during the day and come out only at night and whose eyes are unseeing in daylight and percipient in darkness. The narrator opens his account of his meeting with Austerlitz in a meditation on the eyes of animals which can see only in the dark and likens them to the eyes of philosophers, such as Wittgenstein (a picture of whom appears in the text), who teach us to see in images rather than in concepts. This section is followed by a long account, first of the proportions and decorations of the waiting room in Antwerp's Central Station; next, of the structure, appearance and history of a series of military fortifications built around Antwerp which went from being utterly ineffectual in defence of the city (and being expanded and augmented with every failure until they became so extensive that they could not be manned) to their use as a Gestapo prison and torture facility during the Second World War. The fortifications of Breendonk serve as a kind of master metaphor of Sebald's narrator's report of Jacques Austerlitz's journey across post-Second World War Europe in his effort to use his expert historical knowledge to establish his own identity or at least that aspect of it that could come with knowledge of his origins.

If *Austerlitz* is, as the cover of the German edition informs us, a "*Roman*", it is a novel in which nothing very much happens, which lacks anything remotely resembling a plot or plot structure (the "failed quest" novel?), and in which everything would seem to turn, in Henry James fashion, on "character", except that, in the cases of both Austerlitz and his narrator, the notion of "character" itself explodes into the shards and fragments of a "man without properties". And yet, the book is chock full of interesting, not to say fascinating, historical information, lore and knowledge. The narrator stages Austerlitz's expertise in his professional field (art history) in a convincing manner and his descriptions of the various historical monuments and sites (*lieux*) of famous historical events are utterly "realistic" in the common meaning of that term. The meaning of this "*Roman*" emerges in the interstices of the successive descriptions of places and edifices that attest to the ways in which "civilisation" has been built on the structures of evil, incarceration, ex-

clusion, destruction and the kind of humiliation endured by that little raccoon which, in the pale light of the Nocturama, “sat beside a little stream with a serious expression on its face, washing the same piece of apple over and over again, as if it hoped (*als hoffe er*) that all this washing, which went far beyond any reasonable thoroughness (*weit über jede vernünftige Gründlichkeit*), would help it to escape the unreal world (*aus der falschen Welt*) in which it had arrived, so to speak, through no fault of its own (*ohne sein eigenes Zutun*)” (English ed., 4 / German ed., 10–11).

The predominance in Sebald’s book of real-world, which is to say historical, empirical and documentable “fact”, makes it difficult to classify it as “fiction”. “Literature” or literary writing it certainly is; it is as self-consciously “fashioned” and assertive of its “techniques” as any recognisably “poetic” artefact could be, as in, for example, the famous sentence describing the camp at Theresienstadt which runs on for ten pages in the German (English ed., 236–44/German ed., 339–349). At the same time, all this artifice is being used to summon up before the imagination a real, historical referent: what Walter Benjamin might have recognised as an account of what our vaunted “civilisation” owes for its benefits and advantages to modern man’s peculiar forms of cruelty to its own kind. In other words, the literary devices disposed by Sebald in *Austerlitz* serve to produce a fictional lens by which to justify a judgment (ethical or moral in kind) on a real world of historical fact. It has to be said that there is no “argument” that we might extract from the book regarding the “true” nature of the historical world thus displayed before us by means of the narrator’s account of the “fictional” quest of Jacques Austerlitz for information about his “fictional” parents. Or rather that, if there is an argument to be extracted from it, it is one that can only be inferred from the way the events reported over the course of the (non) action are encoded figuratively. To be sure, every narrative or every account of a series of events related in a narrativising manner, which is to say, given the shape and form of a story, can be translated into an apparatus purely conceptual in nature, after the manner in which the linguist George Lakoff treats all metaphorical statements (i.e., as masked concepts). But it has to be stressed that what gives to Sebald’s account of a real historical world the aspect of fictionality is precisely the way he resists any impulse to conceptualise either his narrator’s role or the “meaning” of his protagonist’s “imaginary” journey in search of a lost origin.

On the other hand, this book is manifestly *not* a history even though its “content” and its ultimate referent is manifestly “the historical”, which means, one might argue, that the book, quite apart from the melancholy which arises from the suggestion that a merely “historical” knowledge of “history” will raise more problems than it solves, when it is a matter of seeking a meaning for an individual life or existence, verges on becoming a kind of philosophy of history, though a philosophy of a decidedly “practical” (rather than “theoretical”) kind. Again, as with Walter Benjamin, the story of Jacques Austerlitz’s inquiry into the recent past of Europe seems to reveal only that the people who have “made history” were – like the Nazis – as much interested in hiding evidence of their deeds as they were in celebrating and monumentalising their intentions. It turns out that, if we can draw any lessons from contemplation of the Austerlitz story, it might consist of the discovery that there is no such thing as a “history” against which we could measure and assess the validity of any “antihistory” or “mythifications” intended to cover over and obscure the “truths” of the past. It is all antihistory, always written as much “against” as well as on behalf of some “truth”.

So maybe we might classify *Austerlitz* as a historical novel, a kind of postmodernist version of the genre invented (so the legend has it) by Sir Walter Scott and brought to consummation in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which, so it seems to me, at once realises and "deconstructs" the genre of the historical novel as it had been cultivated at the hands of Scott, Manzoni, Dumas, Hugo, Dickens, George Eliot, Flaubert and God knows how many others in the nineteenth century in Europe. We could say that although *Austerlitz* can be read as an allegory of the impossibility of, or, to cite Nietzsche, the disadvantage (*Nachteil*) of, history "für das Leben". As thus envisaged, it can be viewed just as well as a contribution in a peculiarly postmodernist mode to that discussion over the relation between history and literature, or factual and fictional writing, or realistic and imaginative or rational and mythical writing opened up by the so-called "crisis of historicism" (*Historismus*) in the early twentieth century. And if our purpose were to enter into that discussion, we would have to account for the fact that the genre of the historical novel in the time of Scott, Goethe and Byron enjoyed virtually universal popularity among the literate public while, at the same time, enduring universal condemnation at the hands of professional historians who regarded its mixture of fact with fiction, its constitutive anachronism, and its attempt to examine the past by the instruments of imagination as a crime, not to say a sin, of Mosaic amplitude – "Thou shalt not mix the kinds." The authority and prestige of this literary genre waned with the constitution of a new kind of science in the late nineteenth century, underwent a mindbending transformation at the hands of the great literary modernists (Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Stein, Proust, Kafka, Virginia Woolf, etc.), and was openly revived in a different mode and register by virtually every writer that we might wish to praise or condemn with the label "postmodernist". As Linda Hutcheon and Amy Elias have demonstrated (to my satisfaction, at least), the dominant genre of postmodernist writing is "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon) or "metahistorical romance" (Elias).

It has to be said that the rebirth of the historical novel in the forms given it by writers as different as Pynchon (*The Crying of Lot 49*, *V*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason and Dixon*), De Lillo (*Libra*, *Underground*), Philip Roth (*American Pastoral*, *The Plot Against America*), the Israeli writer Michaw Govrin (*Snapshots*), Robert Rosenstone (*The King of Odessa*), Norman Mailer, William Gass, Cormac McCarthy, Pat Barker, and so on, has to be set within the context of the post-Second World War discussion of Nazi crimes against humanity, the genocide of the Jews and Gypsies, homosexuals and the mentally disabled – the whole question of the meaning and significance of the Holocaust, the felt need to "come to terms with the past", not only in Europe but also in the rest of the colonial world, the demand by the casualties, victims and survivors of new kinds of events made possible by the very science and culture that had allowed the West to destroy what it could not incarcerate, domesticate, intimidate or otherwise humble and humiliate. This widespread effort to "come to terms with the past" involved not only the uncovering of what had been ignored, suppressed, repressed or otherwise hidden from view in the past of nations, classes and races and, yes, genders, too – it also entailed or seemed to many to entail the necessity of thinking once more about the utility, the worth or value, the advantages and disadvantages of the kind of knowledge of the past produced by the new cadres of professional historians that had been established in the late nineteenth century for service to the European nation-state but which, also, laid claim to the status of a "science" (*Wissenschaft*) and had been authorised to determine what kinds of questions could be asked by the present of the past, what kind of evidence could be ad-

duced in any effort to answer these questions, what constituted properly “historical” answers to those questions, and where the line was to be drawn for distinguishing between a proper and an improper use of historical “knowledge” in any effort to clarify or illuminate contemporary efforts to answer the central question of moral and societal concern: what Kant called the “practical” (by which he meant the ethical) question: what should I (we) do?

It is here that I come to the subject of “the practical past”. It has been a long time coming, but I had to approach it by this route, through a discussion of the historical novel, of postmodernist literary writing, and of Sebald’s particular take on history and the historical, in order to be able to say something worthwhile about that statement of de Certeau that I have used for my epigraph: “Fiction is the repressed other of history” or “The repressed other of history is fiction”. My argument, which here cannot be developed as fully as I wish, is that, yes, one of the ways that history in the early nineteenth century succeeded in constituting itself as a scientific (or parascientific) discipline was by detaching historiography from its millennial association with rhetoric and, after that, from *belles lettres*, an activity of amateurs and dilettantes, a kind of writing that was more “creative” or “poetic”, in which the imagination, intuition, passion, and, yes, even prejudice were permitted to take precedence over of considerations of veracity, perspicuity, “plain” speech, and commonsense. So, “*à bas a la rhétorique!*” This, Victor Hugo’s sentiment, was shared by the proponents of what would come to be called “the realist novel”, most prominently by Gustave Flaubert, whose own brand of realism took the form of a disparagement of rhetoric on behalf of what he called (and probably invented) “style”. But the exclusion of rhetoric (considered as a theory of composition by which a certain body of information was worked up for different practical uses, persuasion, incitement to action, inspiration to feelings of reverence or repulsion, etc.) from historiography had an effect on historical studies quite different from what a similar exclusion of rhetoric from “literary writing” will have had on “literature”. For in throwing out the “bath water” of rhetoric, historiography also threw out – or thought it had thrown out – the “baby” of “fiction” as well. But this same “fiction” was understood by the new “literary realists” as the discursive instrument by which a reality understood as “historical” in the modern sense of the term could be viewed as a theatre of “practical reason”, a place whereon fact and value could be woven together through the narrativisation of events in which human agency was displayed in the activity of making a world rather than simply inhabiting one.

The older, rhetorically structured mode of historical writing openly promoted the study and contemplation of the past as propaedeutic to a life in the public sphere, as an alternative ground to theology and metaphysics (not to mention as an alternative to the kind of knowledge one might derive from experience of what Aristotle called the “banausic” life of commerce and trade), for the discovery or invention of principles by which to answer the central question of ethics: what should (ought, must) I do? Or to put it in Lenin’s terms: “What is to be done?”

Now, the professionalisation of historical studies required, in principle at least, that the past be studied, as it was said, “for itself alone” or as “a thing in itself”, without any ulterior motive other than a desire for the truth (of fact, to be sure, rather than doctrine) about the past and without any inclination to draw lessons from the study of the past and import them into the present in order to justify actions and programmes for the future. In other words, history in its status as a

science for the study of the past had to purge itself of any interest in the practical past – except of course as the kind of error or mistake characteristic of memory, to be corrected by a chaste historical consciousness which dealt only with “things as they are” or had been, never with what had served as desire’s “might have been”. But the practical past, thrown out the window of proper history, came back in through the door provided by the realist novel – the realism of which, as Auerbach has authoritatively demonstrated, consisted of the decision to treat “the present as history”, which is to say, to extend the literary (or poetic) imagination to the examination of the present social world and to view it *sub specie historiae*, to view it as a drama of human beings trying to come to grips with the changes historical in kind that seemed to wash over them, beset them at every turn in “modernity”. “I have tried to write the *history* of the human heart,” said Balzac in a preface to *La comédie humaine*, a project which Flaubert, in conscious competition with Balzac, showed that he knew how to complete in what is arguably the greatest historical novel of the nineteenth century, *L’Education sentimentale*, and especially in the great scenes in which his characters go about their efforts to fulfil their desire, all unaware and unknowing of the great historical events that are going on all around them, fashioning their destinies, and feeding their hopes while depriving them of their necessities. It is not often stressed that the *Bildung* (education) examined in the *Bildungsroman* is a reality that is specifically “historical” in kind. But the “history” being encountered by the hero is not only the past but that part of the past that persists in every present and is presented as making claims on the present of a particularly deontological (which is to say, modern ethical) kind. Such past presences are regarded by modernists as unavoidable aspects of modernist existence. The existence of past in the present and the claims that the past is presented as being able to lay on the living creates – in a way utterly unknown to classical pagan culture – the kinds of enigmas, aporias and paradoxes that have led a certain kind of modern philosopher to despair of ever being able to make sense of them, much less dispel or resolve them. In a sense, ethics ended with the historicisation of human life – an event hailed and celebrated by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals* as heralding a “*vita nuova*” for humankind, a new life because it was now possible to throw off “morality” as a specious invention of the weak and, in the process or rather as a part of this liberation, finally get rid of the “disadvantageous” aspects of historical consciousness and face boldly the problem of how to “use” a critical knowledge of “Historie” (not “*Geschichte*”) *für das Leben*.

But I must now turn to the question that I have used to set up and resolve this enigma of a discourse (history) which, in spite of its claim to realise the truth about the past, continued to utilise a mode of representation common to myth, fiction, legend and romance alike: the narrative. It is by narrative or rather by narrativisation, the imposition on the materials of real life, of the structures and forms of meaning met with only in story, fable and dream. It is through narrativisation that the materials of “history” can be worked up to become a proper object of the practical reason and filled with possible answers to the question: what should I do? Or, what is to be done?

What is the practical past?

The distinction between “the historical past” and “the practical past” is owed to Michael Oakeshott, a well-known British political philosopher and conservative ideologue who died in 1990 at

The Practical Past

the age of eighty-nine. The distinction is useful for distinguishing between modern professional historians' approaches to the study of the past and the ways in which lay persons and practitioners of other disciplines call on, recall or seek to use "the past" as a "space of experience"² (Koselleck) to be drawn on as a basis for all kinds of judgments and decisions in daily life. The practical past is made up of all those memories, illusions, bits of vagrant information, attitudes and values which the individual or the group summons up as best they can to justify, dignify, excuse, alibi or make a case for actions to be taken in the prosecution of a life project. The political, legal and religious pasts can seldom be approached except by way of ideology or *parti pris* of some kind. These kinds of past can be said to belong to "history", no doubt about it, but they are seldom amenable to professional historians' techniques of investigation. Since such pasts are invested less in the interest of establishing the facts of a given matter than that of providing a basis in fact from which to launch a judgment of action in the present, they themselves cannot be handled according to the principle of "first the facts, then the interpretation" so dear to the professional historian's heart. For in inquiries into these kinds of past, what is at issue is not so much "what are the facts?" as, rather, what will be allowed to count as a fact and, beyond that, what will be permitted to pass for a specifically "historical" as against a merely "natural" (or for that matter, a "supernatural") event.

The practical past, according to Oakeshott,³ is a version of the past that most of us carry around with us in our minds and draw on in the performing of our daily tasks where we are compelled to judge situations, solve problems, make decisions and, more importantly, perhaps respond to the consequences of decisions made both by us and for us by those institutions of which we are more or less conscious members. Oakeshott thought that the principal difference between the historical past and the practical past lay in the kinds of purposes motivating inquiry into them. The historical past was that past which could be studied scientifically, disinterestedly, as an end in itself and "for its own sake". Ideally – and this was the founding gesture of modern scientific historiography – the historical past was not inquired into for any ulterior reason other than the determination of what it really consisted of, how it understood itself, and what had happened in and to it to give it its peculiar configuration, outline or trajectory of development.

Above all, the historical past taught no lessons of any interest to the present; it was an object of strictly impersonal, neutral, and in the best cases, objective interest. Finally, the historical past was a past constructed by historians. It existed in books and scholarly essays only. Its authenticity – though not its reality – was guaranteed by other professional historians cleaving to the guild's conventions for the handling of evidence and the investigation of documents and possessing the authority to determine what was legitimate history and what was not. No one had ever lived the historical past because historians were in possession of a wider range and a kind of evidence (or knowledge) that no agent of the real past could ever have possessed. The study of the historical past yields no laws of historical causation and very little in the line of generalisation or typification. The historical past is made up of discrete events, the factuality of which has been established on deliberative grounds and the relations among which are more or less contingent. The use of narrative to represent sets of such discrete events is justified on the basis of the fact that historical events are time and space- (or place-)specific and can therefore be presented realistically (if not truthfully) either as diachronic sequences or as synchronic structures.

All of this, in contrast to “the practical past” which is elaborated in the service of “the present”, is related to this present in a practical way, and from which, therefore, we can draw lessons and apply them to the present, to anticipate the future (or at least the proximate future) and provide reasons, if not justification, for actions to be taken in the present on behalf of a future better than the current dispensation.

Now, it must be stressed that these two kinds of past are rather more ideal typifications than descriptions of actual points of view or ideologies. Moreover, it must be noted that professional historiography was set up (in the early nineteenth century) in the universities to serve the interests of the nation-state, to help in the work of creating national identities, and was used in the training of educators, politicians, imperial administrators and both political and religious ideologues in manifestly “practical” ways. The famous “history as philosophy teaching by examples” and “*historia magistra vitae*” of nineteenth-century European culture was the same history that professional historians brokered as a past studied for itself alone and in its own terms, *sine ira et studio*. But this seeming duplicitousness on the part of professional historians was fully consonant with the contemporary ideology of science, which viewed the natural sciences as nothing if not both “disinterested” and “practical” or socially beneficial at one and the same time. Such a view of science was consistent with the reigning philosophies of positivism and utilitarianism which contributed to the transformation of a scientific world view into a whole *Weltanschauung*, which allowed “history” in general to be conceived as offering unimpeachable proof of the progress of civilisation and the triumph of the white races of the world.

Of course, over the arc of the twentieth century, this myth of progress and the social Darwinism that sustained it were submitted to devastating critique, to which professional historiography responded by retreating into a kind of commonsensical empiricism as justification for the neutrality and disinterestedness with which it composed its ideologically anodyne pictures of the historical past. This empiricism allowed professional historiography to continue to trumpet its ideological neutrality (“just the facts, and nothing but the facts”) while disdaining “philosophy of history” of the kind inherited from Comte, Hegel and Marx and promoted by Spengler, Toynbee and Croce over the span of the two World Wars, as mere “ideology” or as religious prophecy masquerading as “historical science” (cf. Popper, Collingwood, etc.).

Now, philosophy of history – however prophetic, predictive or apocalyptic it may be – was not in general intended as an alternative to what is called “straight history”. Most philosophers of history – from Hegel on – regarded their work as an extension of or supplement to the work of ordinary historians. They saw themselves as providing procedures for summarising, synthesising or symbolising the myriads of works written by working historians in order to derive some general principles regarding the nature of human beings’ existence with others in time. Whether they did this adequately or not is a moot point. Because whether philosophers of history have used the knowledge and information cooked up by ordinary historians well or badly is not a matter for historians to decide – anymore than it is a matter for physicists to decide how the knowledge they produce may be put to use by engineers, inventors, entrepreneurs or, for that matter, military establishments. Surely there is no difference between a philosopher’s ruminations on the nature of art based on his considerations of specific art objects and the work of historians of art

and the use of historians' works to try to divine not so much the meaning *in* history as, rather, the kinds of meanings that can be derived from the study of a historian's writings.

In any event, I do not wish to follow this line of discussion because, as history shows us, genuine historians are chary of philosophy of history for their own good reasons, and there seems to be little chance of bringing them onto common ground in the foreseeable future. But it has to be said that, whatever else it may be, philosophy of history belongs to the class of disciplines meant to bring order and reason to a "practical past" rather than to that "historical past" constructed by professional historians for the edification of their peers in their various fields of study.

But this differentiation between the past constructed by historians and that constructed by philosophers of history permits insight, or so it seems to be, into a relationship that has been particularly worrisome in modern western scientific culture, namely, the relationship between fact and fiction (sometimes referred to as that between history and literature) within the context of cultural modernism.

In the many discussions of postmodernism that have taken place since Lyotard's famous essay on the topic,⁴ few people have thought it important to notice that the dominant genre and mode of postmodernist writing is the (neo)historical novel.⁵ To be sure, mainstream critics lamented what was taken to be an unfortunate (not to say disastrous) mixture (or scumbling) of the distinction between fact and fiction or reality and fantasy, for it seemed to violate a taboo that had sustained the possibility of a certain kind of "serious" fiction writing, by which I mean a kind of (modernist) writing that the relation between past and present (or memory and perception) as its principal object of interest. I refer to the work of the first generation of modernist writers as represented by Conrad, Proust, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Woolf, Kafka, Stein, Gide, etc., all of whom seemed to turn against "history" as a cause rather than a solution to the problem of how to deal with a present oppressed by the remains of the past. Literary modernism has been charged in recent years with a kind of narcissistic "presentism", with a defective sense of history, with a retreat into irrationalism and psychosis, a disdain for the truth of fact, and return to what T.S. Eliot, in his review of Joyce's *Ulysses*, praised as "the mythic method". All of this may well be, as long as it is realised that the "history" the modernists were fleeing from was not the world they encountered in daily life but that phantom version of the past constructed by professional historians, that "historical past" elaborated by professional historians to drain the past of its "practical" utility.

NOTES

- 1 Michel de Certeau, "History and Science", in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 29.
- 2 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985, 21ff.
- 3 Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays*, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999, 1–48.
- 4 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- 5 For a survey both of the postmodernist novel in the West and the theoretical issues raised by the revival of the historical novel as a dominant genre, see Amy Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960 Fiction*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2001. Some time ago, Linda Hutcheon pointed out that the postmodernist novel was given to the production of what she called "historiographical metafiction", which she characterised as showing "fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured". *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, New York: Routledge, 1988, 120.