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INTRODUCTION

Ilsa: Can I tell you a story, Rick?
Rick: Has it got a wild finish?
Ilsa: I don't know the finish yet.
Rick: Go on, tell it. Maybe one'll come to you as you go along.
Ilsa: It's about a girl who had just come to Paris from her home in Oslo ...
(Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart, *Casablanca*)

they [Australian Aboriginal people] believe European culture is in a state of epistemological chaos. White people, they say, don't know what to remember and what to forget, what to let go of and what to preserve. They don't know how to link the past with the present...
(Deborah Bird Rose, *Hidden Histories*, 1992)[1]

What is history? asked E.H. Carr in his influential text of that name, first published in 1961, and reprinted endlessly since. Our question is more limited: is history fiction? Yet in asking if history is fiction, we are also seeking to explore Carr's question, what is history? Like him, we ask about problems of historical truth, the relationship between the historian and the past, and questions of fact, value, and interpretation. Yet we differ from Carr in our

interest in history's literary aspects – constituted through language, narrative, metaphor, rhetoric, and allegory – and the connections we see between questions of literary form and the desire for historical truth.

We have been working on this project for some years now, and when people hear our title – *Is History Fiction?* – they have one of three responses. Of course it is, one group of respondents will say, historians create histories from the perspective of their own time and place, and histories of the same events are thus rewritten, over and over. They see the analyses and narratives produced by historians working in a broad Western historiographical tradition as clearly deriving from one particular way of seeing the world, from particular 'European' notions of time and causal relationships. In these terms, works of history are felt to have no more, or less, truth-value than other ways of seeing, deriving from other worldviews. While such works of history claim to be detached, scientific and objective, they in fact seduce readers with the magic of narrative: 'It's about a girl,' says Ingrid Bergman as Ilsa in *Casablanca*, 'who had just come to Paris from her home in Oslo …'.

A second group answers just as firmly that of course history is not fiction. History is history, and fiction fiction, and the two have nothing in common. On the basis of a notion of fiction as that which is the product purely of invention and imagination, that which makes knowledge insecure, these respondents (usually historians themselves) see history as fiction's antithesis. Where writers of fiction are free to imagine and create characters, events, places, even whole countries, and to set their stories in imagined times, the future as much as the past, historians are not. Historians, they point out, are tied inescapably to their records, whether these are documents, images, objects, sound recordings, or buildings, a variety of textual, visual and material residues from the past. They search for and through these records minutely and meticulously, but if vital information is missing, they cannot fill the gaps, cannot construct an imagined past and call it history. If information is overabundant, they must select from it using strict rules of relevance and representativeness. Certainly, most historians will say, they rely on interpretation, but, they will stress, they are also obliged to attempt to reconstruct the past as best they can from the evidence available. Historians resent the painstaking and detailed research they pursue, often taking years, being airily referred to as fiction by those who are not practising historians.[2]

And then there is a third, and by far the largest group, who reply 'well, is

it?' When we say, well 'yes and no', they ask us not to sit on the fence, to speak up for history's truth, or history's literary qualities, or history's entrapment in the present. For us, the question is extremely complex, and it will take us a book to answer it.

I

So, can historians tell the truth about the past? Should history be written for the present or for its own sake? Is it possible to see the past in its own terms? Should we make moral judgements about people and actions in the past? Are histories shaped by narrative conventions, so that their meaning derives from their form rather than the past itself? These are hardly new questions; historians are not and have never been united about how history ought to be written, and how true their histories are. One of the aims of this book is to show how historians have always pondered the problem of historical truth, and have always markedly differed over how to achieve it. Such differences are evident in the great works of Herodotus and Thucydides, the joint founding figures of Western historical writing; their divided and complex inheritance, in *The Histories* and *History of the Peloponnesian War*, has been argued over ever since, from antiquity to the present. The play of differences and similarities between Herodotus and Thucydides has implications for the gendering of historical writing, and also for the problem of what should be the proper focus of historical enquiry. Should historical investigation focus on the sphere of the political, military and diplomatic, and the actions of states? Or should historical research cast its gaze much more widely, on processes that are everyday, that are social, cultural, religious, erotic, and extend over longer time periods than is usually encompassed by a focus on war and crisis?

In the modern era, a touchstone for such debates is Leopold von Ranke's famous manifesto-like endlessly influential phrase coined in the 1820s: historians, he declared, must seek to show the past 'as it actually/essentially was' – *wie es eigentlich gewesen*.[3] Ranke's views on how to write history, so formative for modern historical practice, we will consider in chapter 3, with, we think, surprising results.

The question 'is history fiction?', we have found, attracts considerable

interest. One reason, perhaps, is that the increased public and legal scrutiny of history and historians has led to greater public interest in the old and fundamental question 'what happened?' History has become a source of public debate and anxiety in many societies in recent years, as differences between historians about the past have become the site for major political contestation and discussion. Sometimes these are debates over alleged wartime atrocities, as in Japan (over the Nanjing massacre in China) and the United States (the *Enola Gay* and the bombing of Hiroshima). In other cases, it is the very foundation of the nation that is in question, as in Australia's 'history wars' over the degree of violence in the course of British settlement. In these debates, nationalist historians seek to justify and praise the nation through a particular version of its past, while revisionist historians aim to question national historical myths through what they see as an honest coming to terms with its darker aspects. These revisionists are then themselves challenged, or revised, with conservative historians fiercely critiquing historical narratives that suggest, for example, that European settler societies were founded in violence, dispossession, cruelty and trauma for the indigenous inhabitants. Public debates in postcolonial societies have been extremely varied, ranging from the examination of the experience of the apartheid years in the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa to the question of the relationship between Asian immigrants and past and ongoing dispossession of the indigenous people in Hawaii.[4]

These public debates over the national past place specific pressures on historians, and give added urgency to the question 'is history fiction?'. Public audiences want what historians say to be true, and do not like it when historians disagree among themselves or suggest that a true answer may never be found. If the question is important, there must be a correct answer; to say there are many truths sounds like obfuscation, fence-sitting, and avoiding one's public responsibilities. Public (and student) expectations of absolute truth lead to a situation where the boundaries between interpretation, error, and 'fabrication' become obscured. In the process of battling it out in the public sphere, historians learn, sometimes at considerable personal cost, that they are even more divided than they knew on issues fundamental to their discipline, such as whether documents can 'speak for themselves', the relationship between 'fact' and 'interpretation', and the role of moral judgment in history. We explore these debates in more detail in chapter 11.

II

We should make it clear from the outset that we do indeed believe in truth and in the search for truth.

No one – including us – would do history, would pursue historical research, unless she and he thought they could arrive, however provisionally, at some kind of truth about the past. We think, however, that the temptation to declare that the historian can objectively establish the truth about the past is to be resisted. There always has to be a question mark hovering over any claim to have attained an objective, let alone scientific, status for one's findings. It is this paradox – the necessity for and difficulty of finding truth in history – that we explore in this book.

Poststructuralism and postmodernism have frequently been perceived as a major threat to the project of scientific objective writing and therefore a threat to the very survival of history as a discipline and profession, as the title of one book putting this case, *The Killing of History*, indicates.[5] They seem to induce epistemological vertigo, shortness of intellectual breath, sense of convulsive death to the West. In their radical questioning of Western historical discourse, indeed of the ability of language itself to refer straightforwardly to a world external to it, poststructuralism and postmodernism have been taken to suggest in an absolute way – wrongly, we will suggest – that the past can never be recovered, that the historical project is impossible, and that history cannot but live by its own fictions, its quixotic belief in its own truth. Recognising this way of interpreting postmodernism as endangering history's continued existence and survival as a profession, many historians attack it as ahistorical, a fatal betrayal. If we cannot see a historical account as true, they ask, then why bother with the difficult and time-consuming processes of research at all? Can the document tell us nothing? Can't we find out anything?

Nevertheless, some cultural theorists' discussions of history and fiction do indeed come perilously close to denying the value of the discipline of history altogether. We find, for example, the work of the postmodern historical thinker Keith Jenkins to be very problematic in this respect. In *Re-Thinking History* (1991), Jenkins ascribes an ideological importance to moral relativism and epistemological scepticism as the 'basis for social toleration and the positive recognition of differences'. Yet Jenkins' metaphors for the

relationship between the historian in the present and whatever occurred in the past are disturbingly loose and even rather careless. Jenkins feels that the 'past and history float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart', and he replaces any language of facts with 'raw material' and 'all that stuff'. Jenkins appears to give absolute primacy to the present, as if a trifle contemptuous of the past, when he writes that historians 'invent all its descriptive categories and any meanings it can be said to have'.[6] In his later *On 'What is History?'* (1995), in the context of arguing that the past can be seen as 'simply waiting for meanings and purposes to be ascribed to it', Jenkins writes that in this sense the 'past can be described as an utterly "promiscuous past", a past which will, as it were, go with anybody; a sort of loose past which we can all have; the sort of past that is, arguably, not much use having in the first place'.[7] Here Jenkins is drawing on curiously traditional sexual metaphors of contempt and disdain for the past. Our approach rejects both this kind of extreme relativism, and historians who claim an absolute objectivity for their findings and interpretations.

In our view, the search for historical truth brings with it not a rejection but rather a greater awareness of the cultural specificity and the necessary limitations of historical practice. A self-conscious recognition of the fictive elements in historical writing, we argue, strengthens – not weakens – the search for truth. The historian, in being more open about his or her active role in representing the past, assists the reader to approach histories of all kinds (in books, film, video, television, museum exhibition, historic site) with appropriate suspicion. The historian does not assume or claim omniscient knowledge, or suggest that the historical sources can be read and presented as if the past is speaking in the present, unassisted, unmediated in extensive and complex ways. It is possible to respond to the challenge of cultural theory with a desire to explore the possibilities of kinds of historical writing that seek to relate multiple narratives, and to self-reflexively foreground our awareness of our own present relation to the past.

Further, and this point is very important for our book, such historical awareness and writing, we will suggest, is not a discovery of contemporary 'postmodern' literary and philosophical theory, but is present at the very birth of Western historical writing itself, in the protean figure of Herodotus: a post-modern historian, we might say, *avant la lettre*.[8]

III

In debates on the question of history, the Holocaust is often referred to as proof of the dangerous absurdity of the ideas of those who see strong fictive elements in the historical enterprise. Poststructuralist and postmodernist historians are accused – wrongly, as we argue in chapter 10 – of removing the grounds for opposing Holocaust denialism. Yet it seems to us that in the case of a historical event as profound as the Holocaust, it is particularly important to scrutinise the practices of historians, to notice the political and historical specificity of histories of the Holocaust.[9]

A methodological principle of Michel Foucault was to suggest that any notion or concept has its own history, its own context and conditions of coming into being. Peter Novick's *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* outlines a postwar history for the Holocaust as a concept, with a capital 'H'. In particular, he suggests that in the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s there was no developed concept of the Holocaust because of the cold war and an American desire to minimise criticism of postwar Germany, now an ally. The specific concept of the Holocaust as referring to the murder of six million European Jews developed during the 1960s and has become institutionalised in all sorts of ways in American life, including in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. Novick points to how much the concept of the Holocaust has been used by various political organisations and groups for their own specific ideological ends. He also refers to the angry critiques by Native American and African American writers protesting at what appears to them as an attempt to sequester the term holocaust so that it can only refer to a World War II catastrophe that occurred in Europe, rather than to catastrophes that occurred as well in North America, in its history as a settler-colony. Novick quotes James Baldwin's sad caustic observations made in the latter 1960s on the gathering view that American Jews were somehow the quintessential victim community in the United States:

> One does not wish ... to be told by an American Jew that his suffering is as great as the American Negro's suffering. It isn't, and one knows that it isn't from the very tone in which he assures you that it is...
>
> It is not here, and not now, that the Jew is being slaughtered, and he is never despised, here, as the Negro is, *because* he is an American. The Jewish

> travail occurred across the sea and America rescued him from the house of bondage. But America *is* the house of bondage for the Negro, and no country can rescue him.

In this powerful passage, Baldwin suggests that white Americans are performing an act of displacement, that they cannot bear to confront the history of mass death and cruelty that occurred in the United States itself, the history that was and is the condition for the emergence of the white nation. White Americans cannot bear to confront the horror of what their forebears have done in their name, the originary horror by which they exist, build a society, prosper, and attempt to dominate the world. They cannot bear, that is, to possess – as Baldwin does – a tragic consciousness.

Novick's historiographical point is that the Holocaust as an idea in American life can never be a given, an agreed understanding, but itself has a history, shaped in part by the United States' own riven traumatic history of colonialism, slavery, and race relations.[10]

If ever there was an event, or series of events, more likely to be open to a range of interpretations, historical representations, metaphoric and figurative understandings, surely the Holocaust is it.[11]

IV

The act of remembrance through history, the desire to impose 'form on formless time', lies deep in Western culture.[12] In Western societies historical thinking is inescapable, we cannot think without or beyond distinctions between future, present, and past. This is not the case in all cultures, as Claude Lévi-Strauss remarked: historical thinking is not *necessary* thinking, is not essential to our humanity.[13] The anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose tells us (see our second epigraph) that Australian Aboriginal people find Westerners' sense of the past very odd. For many Aboriginal peoples, past and present are linked indissolubly through place and belonging; the idea of a past separate from the present, to be understood in terms other than those of the present, is strange indeed.

The Western-ness of history poses problems for writing the history of non-western peoples and societies. In his *Provincializing Europe* (2000), Dipesh Chakrabarty investigates the problem of trying to write the history

of a country like India.[14] Modern history, he argues, is a European discourse, for the very idea of historicising carries with it some peculiarly European assumptions about disenchanted space, secular time, and human sovereignty. Yet European historical approaches remain essential and inescapable if we wish to understand history on a more global scale. European thought, then, 'is both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical in India'.[15] Chakrabarty helps us see the specificity of professional history as a practice. Yet, in pointing to history's inescapable Europeanness, he also oversimplifies it. His argument carries the danger of homogenising Western historical writing from Herodotus and Thucydides onwards, especially in seeing it as necessarily and consistently secularist, rationalist, and universalist. Talal Asad is more precise in his *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003) when he links secularism and its rationalist and universalist assumptions to a specific phase in Western history, to modernity and especially liberalism.[16]

Historical thinking has been continuously influenced in profound ways by the West's classical and Judeo-Christian heritage. In the classical heritage there is an unresolved tension between secular and sacred/mythic conceptions of history. Herodotus considered that the gods intervened in historical happenings (*The Histories*, 9.100). Thucydides in *History of the Peloponnesian War* wonders if the terrible plague that descended on the Athenians and the Athenians alone, not their enemies the Spartans, soon after the war began may have been a divine judgement (1.23, 2.54). Judaic narratives, as in the stories in Exodus of servitude in Egypt, flight through the desert and revelation on Mt Sinai, are conceived as historical; in Judaic thought more generally, history is unpredictable, the messianic, or catastrophic, may occur at any moment, unrelated to previous patterns of events. In Christianity, the stories of Christ's suffering, crucifixion and resurrection are conceived as historical, the basis of Western calendrical time. Notions of the centurial, the *fin de siècle*, and the millennium recurrently intensify the salience of Western calendrical time, with an accompanying abundance of visions of utopia and dystopia, foreboding, dread, and hope.[17]

Modern scientific history may attempt to present history as secular, but European and Western historical writing both past and present has many religious, sacred, and mythic elements. In this book, we evoke in

'postsecularist' fashion the Western experience and phenomenology of time as double, as secular yet also sacred and mythic. Secular time is as if a line, unbroken, continuous, homogeneous. But time is also as if a substance – sacred, mythic, messianic, prophetic, apocalyptic, millennial, miraculous, nostalgic.[18]

V

A note on our working method in this book. In the introduction to *Orientalism*, the late Edward W. Said wished to modify Foucault's approach to the history of ideas, which was to focus on a kind of impersonal discourse as if it contained no particular authors. To the contrary, Said would focus on the contribution to the making of ideas and discourses by particular intellectual personalities. This will be our approach. Names like Herodotus, Thucydides, Sir Walter Scott, Ranke, Lord Acton, J.B. Bury, Francis Cornford, George Macaulay Trevelyan, Benedetto Croce, Herbert Butterfield, Walter Benjamin, Raphaël Lemkin, Hannah Arendt, Mary Beard, Carr, J.H. Hexter, Foucault, Gerda Lerner, Hayden White, Anna Davin, Sheila Rowbotham, Natalie Zemon Davis, Lois Banner, Joan Scott, Daqing Yang will be somewhat like characters in a historical novel, or figures in a tapestry. We might even think of them in the way that the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* have considered important and enduring philosophers in history as 'conceptual personae' or 'thought figures', or the ways Arendt in *Men in Dark Times* discussed thinkers in terms of biography, anecdote, vignette, and social genealogy.[19] It is only in considering key books or essays by particular historians with particular 'intellectual personalities' and sensibilities that the historian of ideas can reveal the ambivalences, contradictions, and quirkiness that 'grain' intellectual history and make it so interesting. So we investigate what historians say they do, and what they do. We are interested in their commitments and obsessions, their passions, especially their frequent desire to play an important advisory role in the Western nation-state. We are interested in their bodies, even their dress, how they wish to appear to the world. We are interested in historians' dreams and nightmares, their inevitable eccentricities and idiosyncrasies.

VI

The frequent opposition in modernity between history and literature has left many historians scarcely able to recognise history's inescapably literary qualities.

History cannot escape literature, as Hayden White, one of the writers who has most insisted on the fictive character of history, has famously suggested. History cannot escape literature because it cannot escape itself: history presents the results of its enquiries, its research, as narrative, and so necessarily enters into and partakes of the world of literary forms. We also agree with White that literary qualities and literary forms and genres are not something decorative or merely added to an account or analysis, but help *explain* what the historian in the present takes to be the meaning of past events and occurrences.

VII

Our general argument will be that the very doubleness of history – in the space between history as rigorous scrutiny of sources and history as part of the world of literary forms – gives it ample room for uncertainty, disagreement, and creativity.[20] And perhaps this doubleness is the secret of history's cunning as a continuing practice, an inventive, self-transforming discipline. Herein lies our enjoyment of, our fascination with, our affection for, our love of, history.

We also recognise that history's doubleness, its divided character from its very beginning, means that it is also frequently at war with itself. It is a scene of differences and disputes, sometimes amiable and cooperative, sometimes angry and bitter. Given history's doubleness, such differences and disputes are inevitable, often dramatic, and always interesting: they, too, are part of history's very nature.