

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Non-Fictions and Narrative Truths

Journal Item

How to cite:

Matravers, Derek (2022). Non-Fictions and Narrative Truths. Croatian Journal of Philosophy, 22(65) pp. 145–160.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2021 Portal hrvatskih znanstvenih i stručnih časopisa - Hrčak



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.52685/cjp.22.65.1>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Non-Fictions and Narrative Truths

DEREK MATRAVERS
The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

This paper starts from the fact that the study of narrative in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy is almost exclusively the study of fictional narrative. It returns to an earlier debate in which Hayden White argued that “historiography is a form of fiction-making”. Although White’s claims are hyperbolic, the paper argues that he was correct to stress the importance of the claim that fiction and non-fiction use “the same techniques and strategies”. A distinction is drawn between properties of narratives that are simply properties of narratives and properties of narratives that play a role in forming readers’ beliefs about the world. Using this distinction, it is shown that it is an important feature of non-fictions that they are narratives; it is salutary to recognise non-fictions as being more like fictions than they are like the events they represent.

Keywords: Fiction; non-fiction; Hayden White; Noël Carroll; truth; representation.

But when you tell about life, everything changes; only it’s a change nobody notices: the proof of that is that people talk about true stories. As if there could possibly be such a thing as true stories; events take place one way and we recount them the opposite way. (Sartre 1975: 62)

1. Non-Fiction and Fiction

In 1990, the year that launched contemporary philosophy of fiction, Gregory Currie announced that “There can hardly be a more important question about a piece of writing or speech than this: Is it fiction or non-fiction?” (Currie 1990: 1). Philosophers responded to this by attempting to give accounts of fiction—non-fiction being held to be relatively unproblematic. This approach to the issue has remained the orthodoxy; a

look at the titles of a recent slew of books in the area reveals where the focus lies. Currie's own recent book argues for a "deep, non-definitional connection between fiction and the imagination" (Currie 2020: 2); Catharine Abell's contribution is simply called *Fiction: A Philosophical Analysis* (Abell 2020); Jonathan Gilmore has written *Apt Imaginings: Feelings for Fiction and Other Creatures of the Mind* (Gilmore 2020). There is no comparable body of work on non-fiction.

The orthodox position has been challenged. Stacie Friend, following Kendall Walton, has long argued that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is not what contemporary philosophy of fiction takes it to be (see, for example, (Friend 2008)).¹ In my work, I have argued that there are few, if any, philosophically interesting differences between reading fiction and reading non-fiction (Matravers 2014). In some ways, this is a re-run of a debate from fifty years ago when the American historian, Hayden White, argued that history is a form of fiction. This paper will take another look at that debate to see if anything can be learned from it. I shall restrict my discussion, as did White, to narrative fictions and non-fictions although it is interesting to reflect on the extent to which my conclusions apply to, for example, pictures.

White made several different claims about the relation between history and fiction. I shall put to one side a set of claims, drawn from the work of Northrop Fry, which discusses different archetypal styles of writing (the mythic, romantic, scientific) and how those relate to the dominant use of different tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) so as to affect the content of what is written—including the content of history (White 1976: 23–44). This has, I think, worn less well than some of the other claims—and, even if someone might find it worth reviving, my interest lies in his more direct assimilation of history to fiction.

White's claim seems, initially, quite startling. He states that "historiography is a form of fiction making" (White 1976: 23) and that "All stories are fictions which means, of course, that they can be 'true' in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which any figure of speech can be true" (White 1989: 27). His assessment of the likely impact of this claim has, by and large, proved to be accurate.

The characterisation of historiography as a form of fiction making is not likely to be received sympathetically by either historians or literary critics who, if they agree on little else, conventionally agree that history and fiction deal with different orders of experience and therefore represent distinct, if not opposed, forms of discourse. (White 1976: 23)

The assimilation of historiography and fiction can seem absurd; a wilful overriding of a clear and useful distinction. Whatever the philosoph-

¹ The absence of Kendall Walton from this paper might make it appear like a production of *Hamlet* without the Prince. Despite Walton's work, to my mind, being unsurpassed in the field it is unclear to me what he takes the distinction between fiction and non-fiction to be. Because of this, it is unclear to me what his view on the issues discussed would be (Walton 1990).

ical refinements we have to make, history aspires to present accurate statements about the actual world while fiction labours under no such constraint.

As so often, once one starts to look carefully, the claims being made are a less radical than they are made to appear. In his essay, “The Fictions of Factual Representation”, White contrasts two views, which I shall dub ‘the transparency view’ and ‘the narrative view’. The transparency view, White claims, emerged in the early nineteenth century.

History came to be set over against fiction, and especially the novel, as the representation of the ‘actual’ to the representation of the ‘possible’ or only ‘imaginable’. And thus was born the dream of historical discourse that would consist of nothing but factually accurate statements about a realm of events which were (or had been) observable in principle, the arrangement of which in the order of their original occurrence would permit them to figure forth in their true meaning or significance. (White 1976: 25)

By describing this as a ‘dream’, White clearly signals that he finds it inadequate. However, it is not immediately apparent what is wrong with it. As previously noted, unlike fictional discourse, non-fictional should consist of nothing but factually accurate statements. If a statement that is not factually accurate creeps in, the non-fiction is to that extent subject to criticism. I do not mean by this that it cannot contain propositions that are literally untrue, such as metaphors or hyperbole; we can put those to one side as simply part of the mechanism for generating true content. What I mean, rather, is that which Boswell complained of in his “Advertisement” for the first edition of his *Life of Samuel Johnson*: “I have sometimes been obliged to run half over London, in order to fix a date correctly; which, when I had accomplished, I well know would obtain me no praise, though a failure would have been to my discredit” (Boswell 1992: 3). If Boswell had claimed that Johnson had uttered a particular *bon mot* while in the *Turks Head Tavern* when in fact he had been in the *Cheshire Cheese*, he would rightly be criticised for it.

According to Noël Carroll (who wrote a careful appraisal of White’s work to which this paper is indebted) Paul Ricoeur attributed to White a view which denied this obvious truth (Carroll 1990: 135).² However, as Carroll himself points out, this is a misreading. The relevant part of the above quotation (the ‘dream’ part) is that “historical discourse that would consist of *nothing but* factually accurate statements” (my italics). That is, White claims that, while there are factually accurate statements, there is more besides.

As stated above, the ‘more besides’ has tended to be side-lined in contemporary philosophy of fiction, which has generally viewed non-fiction as not generating particularly interesting philosophical questions. Non-fiction has been taken to be a straightforward way of transmitting

² The reference Carroll gives is to (Ricoeur 1984: 33–34). I have not been able to find a copy of Ricoeur’s book.

belief and thus amenable to whatever theory of communication one favours. That is, it is assimilated under testimony; the writer is ‘telling’ the reader what they believe and, *ceteris paribus*, the reader is justified in believing what they are being told. It aims to give us unvarnished access to the way the world is—as here described by another member of the orthodoxy (albeit one that has shown some sensitivity to White’s concerns).

Simple narratives concerning real life will normally aim for high degrees of transparency of transmission, offering up facts as it were, ‘unvarnished’, even if the storytellers are not entirely indifferent to narrative modes. With biographies and autobiographies, it will not be uncommon for readers to attend, and be invited to attend, to the narrative vehicle. This, though, is largely dictated by broader literary concerns with fine writing and stylistic effect. Like all fact-stating discourses, biographies aim to transmit information and are primarily concerned with ‘getting it right’. (Lamarque 2014: 78)

This dovetails neatly with two approaches to the definition of ‘non-fiction’ within recent analytic philosophy. The first focusses on the reader’s view of the nature of the source—in essence, that it has not been ‘made up’. David Davies has formalised this as ‘the fidelity constraint’:

To read a narrative as non-fiction is to assume that the selection and temporal ordering of *all* the events making up the narrative was constrained by the desire, on the narrator’s part, to be faithful to the manner in which the actual events transpired. (Davies 2007)

The second focusses on the mental states that the reader forms on the basis of what they read. Views differ in emphasis, but the core idea is, when reading non-fiction, readers believe what they read, and, when reading fiction, readers imagine or ‘make-believe’ what they read.³ That is, if I read in a reputable newspaper that inflation has risen above 2% I will (if all goes well) believe that inflation has risen above 2%. If I read in Conan-Doyle’s *The Red Headed League* that Mr Wilson answered a newspaper advertisement, I will not *believe* that Mr Wilson answered a newspaper advertisement, but I will (if all goes well) *make-believe* it. It is easy to see how these two definitions are related. If the reader believes that what he or she is reading is non-fiction, he or she will believe that everything in the narrative is only in the narrative because the writer believed it actually happened. Thus, provided the reader has no reason to doubt the writer’s reliability, the reader should believe what they read. In short, not only is non-fiction testimony, but it is also a propitious instance of testimony in that being formally classed as non-fiction provides some assurance that the reader is not being deceived by their interlocutor. In contrast, if the reader believes that what he

³ Philosophers such as Gregory Currie, David Davies, and Kathleen Stock take it that a proposition is fictional if the author intends by an utterance, via the usual Gricean mechanisms, that the reader make-believe a proposition (Currie 1990; Davies 2007; Stock 2017). Kendall Walton takes it that the reader is mandated to imagine a proposition on the grounds of there being an appropriate prop in a game of make-believe (Walton 1990).

or she is reading is fiction, he or she will not believe that everything in the narrative is only in the narrative because the writer believed it actually happened. Thus, the fact that a fictional narrative claim such-and-such provides the reader with no reason to believe such-and-such. Instead, the reader adopts a different attitude: he or she imagines (or make-believes) it.

This picture is not as neat as I have painted it. As I indicated above, there are elements of even reliable non-fictional works that are not 'faithful to the manner in which the actual events transpired' because the writer did not believe they reported literal truths: metaphors, speculations, counterfactual reasoning, and other flights of fancy. This can be dealt with by some caveat suggesting that these devices are only there in the service of conveying reliable beliefs. In addition, there are elements of even the most outré fictional works that not only are true, but that the author intends us to believe. This could be dealt with in various ways, including seeing narratives as a 'patchwork' of fiction and non-fiction. Furthermore, as stated above, there have been more fundamental criticisms from myself and from Stacie Friend. Debate over these issues has occupied, and continues to occupy, those who write on these matters. However, for current purposes, I only want to set up this view of non-fiction in order to see what White thinks is wrong with it.

White's point emerges once we counterpose the transparency view with the narrative view.

What should interest us in the discussion of 'the literature of fact' or, as I have chosen to call it, 'the fictions of factual representation' is the extent to which the discourse of the historian and the writer of imaginative fictions overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other. Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events, both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same. In addition, in my view, the techniques and strategies they use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional, level of their texts. (White 1976: 21)

White seems to be making two claims. First, that "the discourse of the historian and the writer of imaginative fictions overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other", and, secondly, that both history and fiction use the "same techniques and strategies". Taking the points in reverse order, White is claiming that both historians and writers of fiction are employing the techniques and strategies characteristic of producing narratives and, as a result, what each produce resembles and corresponds to the other with respect to being narrative. This two-fold claim seems both true and important, and, despite White's work, does not carry sufficient weight in the current debate.

To substantiate White's claim, we would have to show that it is constitutive of a representation being in narrative form that it gives the representation some epistemologically interesting property over and above the truth value of the propositions that make up its content.

White cites the following passage from Louis O. Mink with approval (this passage is quoted in (White 1987a: 46)).

One can regard any text in direct discourse as a logical conjunction of assertions. The truth-value of the text is then simply a logical function of the truth or falsity of the individual assertions taken separately: the conjunction is true if and only if each of the propositions is true. Narrative has in fact been analysed, especially by philosophers intent on comparing the form of the narrative with the form of theories as if it were nothing but a logical conjunction of past-referring statements; and on such an analysis there is no problem of *narrative truth*. The difficulty with the model of logical conjunction, however, is that it is not a model of narrative at all. It is rather a model of a chronicle. ... It should be clear that a historical narrative claims truth not merely for each of its individual statements taken distributively, but for the complex form of the narrative itself. (Mink 1978: 143–44)

It is ‘the complex form of the narrative itself’ that Mink claims is epistemologically interesting. He bases this on the claim that a narrative has, as part of its content, truths that are over and above the truths of individual proposition contained therein—what he calls ‘narrative truth’.

2. *Narrative*

Let us first stipulate some terminology. Following Davies, I will call some episode, of a reasonable duration, that has a certain unity to it, an ‘event’. Thus, for example, the Battle of Waterloo is an event. I shall call the various happenings, of a shorter duration, that make up an event, ‘incidents’. Thus, to stay with our example, Lord Paget losing his leg, the closing of the gates at Hougoumont, the charge of the Scots Greys, and the retreat of the Old Guard, are all incidents. However, incidents do not need to be notable; the death of some forgotten soldier, a visit to the privy by a French officer, and some cavalry horse farting, are also incidents. There are various ways in which a description of this event could be constructed. An annal would merely list various of the incidents, one after the other. A chronicle is richer in structure than an annal, but no attempt would be made to link the various events into one overarching story.⁴ Richer still is a narrative. Peter Goldie presents us with a nice definition:

A narrative is a representation of events which is shaped, organised and coloured, presenting those events, and the people involved in them, from a certain perspective or perspectives, and thereby giving narrative structure—coherence, meaningfulness, and evaluative and emotional import, to what is narrated. (Goldie 2012: 8)

For Goldie, it is a defining property of narrative that it presents events from “a certain perspective or perspectives”. What does this mean?

Goldie himself breaks the perspective into three elements. A nar-

⁴ White himself contributed much to the discussion as to what is distinctive of narrative rather than an annal or a chronicle (White 1987b).

rative is coherent, in that it reveals “connections between the related events, and it does so in a way that a mere list or annal, or chronicle, does not”. The second element is internal meaningfulness; that is, “making sense of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people who are internal to the narrative”. Finally, there is evaluative and emotional import: “things matter to people, and a narrative involving people can capture the way things matter to them” (Goldie 2012: 14–25). In short, in constructing a narrative, narrators will impose some form on the sequence of incidents.

We are now in a position, I think, to give a diagnosis of White’s two claims and the nature of his opponents’ disagreement. It all turns on the relation between three things: a fictional narrative, a non-fictional narrative, and the event as it actually happened. White’s two claims were as follows: that “the discourse of the historian and the writer of imaginative fictions overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other”, and, that both history and fiction use the “same techniques and strategies”. Again, taking them in reverse order, the second claim is that a non-fictional narrative represents the event differently to how it actually happened; and the first claim is that (therefore) non-fictional narratives can be assimilated to fictional narratives (in that they do not track the truth).

White’s interlocutors have tended to skip past the second claim, which, as I have reconstructed his argument, is the grounds for the first. Instead, their counterarguments have focussed directly on the first claim: that non-fictional narratives do not track the truth. Here is Andrew Norman:

Of course historians select their facts and obviously the stories they tell are incomplete. But by itself this does not mean that the result is distorted or false. To say so is to posit implicitly an evaluative ideal of a history that is complete and non-perspectival. But this is incoherent. I have never read a history that claimed perfect objectivity or completeness, nor do I expect to. (Norman 1991: 132)

Noël Carroll has made a similar point:

Narratives are a form of representation, and, in that sense, they are invented, but that does not preclude their capacity to provide accurate information. Narratives can provide accurate knowledge about the past in term of the kinds of features they track, namely, the ingredients of *courses of events*, which include: background conditions, causes and effects, as well as social context, the logic of situations, practical deliberations, and ensuing actions. (Carroll 1990: 142)

These rebuttals are sufficient to block the first claim: that is, the fact that both non-fiction and fiction both have narrative form does not entail that non-fictions cannot convey accurate information about the world. To that extent the orthodox view, that non-fiction is testimony, survives. However, and this is my main claim in this paper, there is still much to be learned from the second claim: that both history and fiction use the ‘same techniques and strategies’. In particular, the fact

that history uses these techniques and strategies makes it the case that it does not give us 'transparent access' to reality—the orthodox view oversimplifies the nature of non-fiction.

Let us begin with an elucidation of the second claim from White.

What I have sought to suggest is that this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary. The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, day dreams, reveries. Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see 'the end' in every beginning? (White 1987b: 25)

The point here seems to be that narrative representations of actual events exhibit properties of narrative (such as coherence, internal meaning, evaluative and emotional import, and selection) and these are not features of the actual event. This full import of this claim—that a non-fictional narrative represents an event differently to how it actually transpired—is not dealt with by Norman and Carroll's replies (as we shall see, Carroll does attempt to black this claim later in his paper—an attempt, I shall claim, which is unsuccessful). Our access to events that are not present to us, either because they are distant in space or in time or both, is via representations. We grasp these events in the way they are represented to us. Hence, the nature of that representation will affect the nature of that grasp. In particular, the nature of narrative will affect the nature of that grasp. This point, which seems to me important and worth discussing, is largely ignored in the contemporary philosophy of fiction and narrative.⁵

Events themselves just happen. They do not have coherence, internal meaningfulness, and evaluative and emotional import. What difference does it make if we encounter these events via a narrative? In the quotation above, White claims that properties of the representation (the narrative) are attributed to the event that it represented. That is, he claims that narratives represent events as having "the formal attributes of stories". This is too quick; such a claim cannot be made without further argument. We cannot assume that representations represent events as possessing the properties of those representations. A black and white photograph may represent a wedding, but it does not represent the wedding as being in black and white; it represents it as being in all the colours the event was actually in.

⁵ Kendall Walton stressed that the salient contrast for those interested in fiction is between two sorts of representation, not between a representation and the world: "Our present concern is not with 'fiction' as opposed to 'reality' nor with contrasts between 'fiction' and 'fact' or 'truth' ... The difference we are interested in is between *works of fiction* and *works of non-fiction*. The potential for confusion here is considerable and has been amply realised" (Walton 1990: 73). Our sub-field would look very different had due attention been paid to his advice in this matter.

Although White was wrong to make that assumption, sometimes representations *do* represent events as possessing the properties of those representations. Indeed, this generally seems to be the case. Consider once again the narrative describing the Battle of Waterloo and Goldie's three properties of narrative. There are at least two ways in which *coherence* could be achieved (there may be more). The first is that narratives frequently explain incidents by citing their causes: the formation of the British infantry into squares is explained by the attacks by French cavalry, plus the background in information that forming squares was the standard infantry response to attacks by cavalry. The second is by the unfolding of plans. Napoleon's strategy was to keep his best troops in reserve until he sensed a weakening in his opponent's line, after which we would commit them. That explains why the remaining ten battalions of the Guard advanced when they did (the rest having been committed earlier to hold off the Prussians). The fact that the course of the battle can be explained represents the event as being a coherent set of incidents rather than a set of incidents that happen at random. Such causal connections, and working out of plans, were part of the actual event, hence the narrative is correct to represent it as such.

The same could be true in a representation representing an event as *meaningful*. As the event in our example is a battle, rather than an event focussed on a small number of individual actors, the salient 'meaning' is not so much Goldie's 'internal meaning' ("making sense of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people who are internal to the narrative") but historical meaning: the battle was such that it brought about an abrupt change in the passage of events. The Battle of Waterloo did so in several respects. It was the end of the Napoleonic wars that had dogged Europe since 1803, and it precipitated the Congress of Vienna which laid the foundations for the modern nation state. It also brought about the change to modern warfare; large numbers of men, dressed in highly coloured uniforms, and exposed to modern military weapons, was no longer an option. A narrative can represent the battle as having these properties. Of course, White is right that such properties do not "present themselves to perception" (in that they could not literally be seen by someone present at the battle) but that is hardly relevant. Whether that is true or not (a theory of perception that allowed rich perceptual contents may well accommodate such properties) does not belie that fact that the event itself, the battle, possessed such properties.

White asks rhetorically "Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends?" Again, whether it is "presented to perception" is beside the point; events have many properties that may not be detected by sight at the time. As to the question whether they have beginnings, middles, and ends, that could be interpreted as an empiri-

cal claim: was there an incident of which it makes sense to say it began the battle (say, approach of the French cavalry to the Eastern flank at 11.00am on the 18th June) and an incident of which it is true to say that it ended the battle (say, the retreat of the Guard)? It is worth noting that Napoleon himself seemed to think the event itself had these properties of narrative:

A battle is a dramatic action that has its commencement, its middle and its end. The order of battle taken by the two armies, and the first movements to come to action, constitute the prelude. The contre movements of the attacked army forms the plot. This causes new dispositions, brings on the crisis, and whence springs the result. (From Napoleon's *Memoirs*, quoted in (Clayton 2015: 363)

I have more to say on this matter below.

Goldie's third set of properties were those that fell under "*evaluative and emotional import*": "things matter to people, and a narrative involving people can capture the way things matter to them". Once again, it will be a property of the event itself that it deserved to be, and was, the object of evaluations and emotions including admiration and sadness. A narrative can bring this out by describing the properties of the battle that showed that it merited such reactions (the astonishing bravery of soldiers on all sides) and that it did elicit such reactions (from the families of those among the 40 000 dead).

Is there anything left of White's claim that the way a representation represents an event is different to how it actually transpired? I think there is. We have not yet considered the full import of Goldie's fundamental point about narratives: that they present events from "a certain perspective or perspectives". Goldie means 'perspective' in a "metaphorical, evaluative sense". That is, a sense in which the perspectives of two people might differ, in that an action that might seem reasonable from one perspective might seem "thoroughly unreasonable" from another (Goldie 2012: 12). This gives us a new way to frame White's challenge. The properties of the representation that are attributed to the event being represented are such that they embody a perspective, and the attribution might seem reasonable from one perspective and unreasonable from another. Hence, a narrative of an event will not present that event in a neutral (that is, universally acceptable) way. Events themselves just happen; but narrative representations of events necessarily come as a stacked deck.

In their rejoinders to White, Norman and Carroll appear to have this in mind. Norman is happy that non-fiction is perspectival (or, at least, he claims never to have read a history that is 'non-perspectival'). To remind ourselves, Carroll says "Narratives can provide accurate knowledge about the past in term of the kinds of features they track, namely, the ingredients of *courses of events*, which include: background conditions, causes and effects, as well as social context, the logic of situations, practical deliberations, and ensuing actions". Consider the properties that we have claimed a narrative of the Battle of Waterloo

attributes to that event: that various incidents stand in causal relations; that the battle marked an abrupt change in the passage of events; and that it was both an apt object, and in fact an object, of evaluation and emotion. Norman and Carroll seem to be saying that whether the Battle of Waterloo really possessed these properties is a matter of fact. That is, they are saying that claim that the British formed squares as a reaction to attacks by French cavalry is assessable as true or false (and so on for the rest of our examples). This seems correct; at least, if an historian says that the Battle of Waterloo did not, say, precipitate the Congress of Vienna he or she will be in factual dispute with those historians who claim that it did.

What of the claim that the battle has “a proper beginning, middle, and end”? Here White seems on stronger ground; what began and ended the battle does not seem a matter of fact but of interpretation. There seem to be two replies open to White’s opponents (each of the answers might be appropriate in different circumstances). The first is that, although the narrative has a beginning, middle and end, the narrative *does not* represent the event as having these properties (analogously to the photograph not representing the wedding as being in black and white). The narrative must begin somewhere and let us say it begins with the French cavalry approaching Wellington’s Eastern flank. The narrative can begin in this way without representing the battle having begun with this incident. The second reply is that the narrative *does* represent the battle as having these properties. The obvious way to interpret such a claim is that the author is claiming that the battle is ‘best thought of’ in this way; that taking such incidents to be the beginning and the end of the battle is the most illuminating way to think of it. Such a claim would be perspectival, and context-dependent in that whether it *is* the most illuminating way to think of the battle would depend on the author’s broader explanatory purposes. Once again, however, this does not seem to support White’s thesis: whether it is illuminating to think of such an incident as the beginning of the battle, and such an incident as its end, seems to be a claim *about the battle* that historians can (and do) dispute.

So far, then, we have not found anything to support White’s claim that a non-fictional narrative represents the event differently to how it actually happened. However, the properties of narrative that may, or may not, be attributed to the event being represented we have considered does not exhaust the list of relevant properties of narrative. A further, obvious point is that a narrative of some event will include reference to some incidents but not to others.⁶ Indeed, on any plausible method of counting incidents, it will omit most of them. A narrative of the Battle of Waterloo is likely to include the closing of the gates at Hougoumont, the great cavalry charges, and the retreat of the Old

⁶ I say “further”, although Goldie would almost certainly have included this feature under one or more of the aspects he mentions.

Guard. However, it is unlikely to include the less notable incidents I enumerated earlier: the death of some forgotten soldier, a visit to the privy by a French officer, and some cavalry horse farting. This matters because the perspective embodied in a narrative will, in part, be constructed by the selection of incidents to be included in the narrative. To be clear, it is no part of my claim that selection is the *only* additional feature of narrative that can be used to construct a perspective; there are others, including the examination of motives (part of Goldie's 'internal meaning') and whether certain personality traits are put in the foreground or in the background.⁷ However, for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the selection and omission of incidents.

Consider, for example, Richard Attenborough's highly acclaimed film charting the life of Gandhi (Attenborough 1982). The perspective embodied in the film presents Gandhi as a humane man; someone committed to the value and dignity of human life—even the lives of his political opponents. To this end, Attenborough (or John Briley, who wrote the screenplay), included incidents such as the non-violent protests in South Africa, the 'salt march', and Gandhi's valiant attempts to prevent violence between Hindus and Muslims in the run up to partition. Amongst the incidents they chose to omit were Gandhi's pronouncements about the relative importance of Asian people over Black people. Speaking in Bombay in 1896 of the position of South Africans of Indian extraction, Gandhi said "Ours is one continual struggle against a degradation sought to be inflicted upon us by the Europeans, who desire to degrade us to the level of the raw kaffir whose occupation is hunting, and whose sole ambition is to collect a certain number of cattle to buy a wife with and then pass his life in indolence and nakedness". Nor was this an isolated expression of such a view; a raft of similar pronouncements is documented.

The point is not to accuse Attenborough and Briley of being duplicitous by representing Gandhi in a partial or sanitized way. Such a claim would run counter to the thesis of this paper, which is that narratives are *essentially* perspectival. Attenborough and Briley had to choose their perspective, and they chose to represent Gandhi in a certain way—as a towering moral figure. Consider an analogy. Red House was designed and built by William Morris and Philip Webb, decorated by Morris and Burne-Jones, and was the site of the foundation of Morris and Co., and the development of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Between Morris moving out in 1866 and it being taken over by the UK National Trust (a conservation body) in 2003 it was lived in by private owners. When the National Trust took over, they needed to decide how to 'present' the house to the public: did they strip out the post-Morris decoration, or did they keep it in situ? They could not keep everything and present a coherent experience. After much adjudication, they de-

⁷ I hope to explore this in further work.

cided to return the house to how it was in Morris's time.⁸ In both cases there is a judgement as to how to represent the subject and, in each case, this was not the only perspective that could have been taken.

There are those who feel that the pernicious legacy of the kind of views that Gandhi expressed on black Africans makes those views too important not to include; there are also those who feel that the modern obsession with 'heritage' leads us to systematically underestimate the artistic and decorative contribution of our own age and our recent past. In short, selection (I reiterate, not only selection) can help build a perspective that is only one of a number of possible perspectives a narrative could embody. That is, there are any number of ways of representing events (whether Gandhi's life, or the history of Red House) and how it is represented is partly a matter of selection—an essential feature of narrative. We do seem to have found grounds to support White's claim that a non-fictional narrative in some way gets between the reader and how the event actually transpired (which, by definition, includes all the incidents).

In the paper mentioned earlier, Noël Carroll rejects this conclusion.⁹ He claims that in addition to the individual claims being true, an historical account "must also meet various standards of objectivity". He goes on to claim that "a historical narrative should be comprehensive; it should incorporate all those events that previous research has identified to be germane to the subject that the historian is seeking to illuminate". He glosses that point with the following paragraph.

Obviously, the selective procedures that historians respect in composing their narratives will be evaluated in terms of all sorts of rational standards, like comprehensiveness, that do not correspond to anything found in the past. However, this does not mean that the selections and deletions in a historical narrative are divorced from literal questions of truth and falsity. For the selections and deletions are assessed in terms of those sorts of standards that experience indicates reliably track the truth. (Carroll 1990: 155)

I do not find this paragraph easy to understand. By 'comprehensiveness', Carroll clearly does not mean to embrace the absurdity of representing an event by (comprehensively) representing every incident in it—he is happy to allow that there will be 'selections and deletions'. However, he does hold that such selections and deletions will be governed by rational standards; some selections and deletions will be a falling away from rationality and others will not. I assume that what Carroll means here is instrumental rationality—it is difficult to see any other candidate. That is, certain patterns of selection and deletion will be irrational in that they do not serve to advance us towards some chosen end. However, what chosen end? The answer Carroll gives us is the end of conveying the truth about the event.

⁸ Thanks to Jeremy Musson (who was involved in the decision-making) for talking through this point with me.

⁹ Although oddly, as it is surely Mink's and White's major point, the discussion is relegated to the final page and a half of a 35-page paper.

Let us grant to Carroll that a regulative ideal of non-fictional narratives is to convey an adequate conception of an event (let us leave it open for the moment as to whether ‘an adequate conception of an event’ is equivalent to ‘the truth about an event’). There are ways in which this can fail: the author may fail unwittingly through absence of information or incompetence, or he or she may deliberately mislead by not mentioning incidents that merit a mention. Carroll’s example, namely, that “a narrative of the outbreak of the American revolution that failed to recount the debates over taxation” will be “inadequate”, could be an instance of either of these (Carroll 1990: 155). However, these are not the cases that concern us. Rather, it is in the nature of narrative that the authors of two different narratives, who make different decisions with respect to selections and deletions, can both convey an adequate conception of an event. If so, then we cannot compare these authorial decisions against each other in terms of rationality. There can be two (or more) non-fictional narratives of the same event, both adequate, that convey a very different impression of that event. In polemical moods, White claims that this shows that non-fictions and fictions are epistemologically on a par. Carroll and Norman are correct to point out that this does not follow. However, they miss the less polemical point: the narrative properties of non-fictions mean that they can stand between us and events in interesting ways.

3. *Conclusion*

The return to White’s discussion has shown us that there is, necessarily, a difference between the way in which a narrative represents an event and that event. This reinforces the much-neglected point that the (so-called) philosophy of fiction errs when it uses conclusions that stem from contrasting fiction and events to characterise the contrast between fictions and non-fictions. Despite his fondness for polemic, White’s point is fundamentally sound. It is an important feature of non-fictions that they are narratives; it is salutary to think of non-fictions as being in some respects more like fictions than they are like the events they represent.

Failure to grasp this point has important consequences. It has spawned a shoal of red herrings, including ‘the paradox of fiction’, problems around ‘imaginative resistance’, and problems around ‘sympathy with the devil’.¹⁰ However, there are other consequences as well of which I will mention only two. First, philosophical work on testimony has focussed on the transmission of beliefs via a single sentence. This entirely neglects the usual case, which is the transmission of perspective via a narrative; something which brings a great deal of complexity in its train. This has been taken up recently by Rachel Fraser, in an article that is consonant with the claims made in this paper (Fraser

¹⁰ I add some detail to this promissory note in (Matravers 2014).

2021). Secondly, as we have seen, perspectives may be disputed; for example, critics might feel that Attenborough and Briley took the wrong perspective. That is, or so their accusers maintain, their narrative—while accurate in every included detail—is misleading. This accusation does not necessarily depend on Attenborough and Briley’s intentions. Their not including an incident might simply be because they were unaware of it; or they might have been aware of it but judged that omitting such an incident gave a more ‘truthful’ perspective overall. Once again, these issues are only now beginning to be explored (see, for example, (Barber 2020; Camp 2018)). We can only hope that with this, and other work, the neglect of non-fiction as a narrative form will soon be a thing of the past.¹¹

References

- Abell, C. 2020. *Fiction: A Philosophical Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Attenborough, R. 1982. *Ghandi*. Columbia Pictures.
- Barber, A. 2020. “Lying, Misleading, and Dishonesty.” *Journal of Ethics* 24: 141–64.
- Boswerll, J. 1992. *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. London: Everyman Library.
- Camp, E. 2018. “Insinuation, Common Ground, and the Conversational Record.” In D. Fogal, D.W. Harris and M.Moss (eds.). *New Work on Speech Acts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carroll, N. 1990. “Interpretation, History, and Narrative.” In *Beyond Aesthetics Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clayton, T. 2015. *Waterloo: Four Days the Changed Europe’s Destiny*. London: Abacus.
- Curie, G. 1990. *The Nature of Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Curie, G. 2020. *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davies, D. 2007. *Aesthetics and Literature*. London: Continuum.
- Fraser, R. 2021. “Narrative Testimony.” *Philosophical Studies*: 4025–52.
- Friend, S. 2008. “Imagining Fact and Fiction.” In K. Thomson-Jones and K. Stock (eds.). *New Waves in Aesthetics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gilmore, J. 2020. *Apt Imaginings: Feelings for Fiction and Other Creatures of the Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldie, P. 2012. *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lamarque, P. 2014. “On the Distance between Literary Narratives and Real Life Narratives.” In *The Opacity of Narrative*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

¹¹ Versions of this paper have been given at Edge Hill University, the London Aesthetics Forum, and the “Fact, Fiction, and Narration” conference in Rijeka. I would like to thank the audiences at each event for their questions and comments. Particular thanks are due to Rafe McGregor, Eileen John, Stacie Friend, Alex Grzankowski, and an anonymous reviewer for this journal.

- Matravers, D. 2014. *Fiction and Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mink, L. O. 1978. "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument." In R. H. Canary and H. Kozicki (eds.). *The Writing of History*. Masison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Norman, A.P. 1991. "Telling it Like it Was: Historical Narratives on Their Own Terms." *History and Theory* 30: 119–35.
- Ricoeur, P. 1984. *The Reality of the Historical Past*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. 1975. *Nausea*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Stock, K. 2017. *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation, and Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Walton, K. 1990. *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- White, H. 1976. "The Fictions of Factual Representation." In A. Fletcher (ed.). *The Literature of Fact: Selected Papers from the English Institute*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- White, H. 1987a. "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory." In *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- White, H. 1987b. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." In *The Content of the Form*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press.
- White, H. 1989. "Figuring the Nature of Times Deceased": Literary Theory and Historical Writing." In R. Cohen (ed.). *The Future of Literary Theory*. London: Routledge.