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Epistemic Problems in Contemporary History

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EPISTEMIC PROBLEMS IN CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

MICHAEL HOLLIEN

ABSTRACT

A recent trend in contemporary written history is towards what I term “narrative” history, where the significant events of the past are framed within traditional dramatic structure and told through the personal vignettes of the common people who experienced them. This makes for immersive reading, but the complication in this approach is that history, at least in part, purports to be a true telling of the past. Therein lies the problem. I shall argue that narrative history’s pervasive use of literary technique and witness testimony in order to make truth claims about the past is epistemically unjustified. That does not mean that I believe narrative history is pointless, only that its continued relevance in modern culture is dependent on it having a *practical* use, not an epistemic one. I believe that narrative history does have that practical application.

Keywords: narrative history, dry history, past event, testimony, personal v. impersonal claim, truth

[Joachim von] Ribbentrop [the Nazi foreign minister], while waiting for [the Soviet ambassadors] to arrive, paced up and down his room ‘like a caged animal’. There was little sign of the ‘statesmanlike expression which he reserved for great occasions’.

‘The Führer is absolutely right to attack to attack Russia now,’ he kept repeating as if trying to convince himself. . . .

The two Soviet representatives were shown into the Reichminister’s huge office. An expanse of patterned parquet floor led to the desk at the far end. Bronze statuettes on stands lined the walls. As they came close, [ambassador] Berezhev was struck by Ribbentrop’s appearance. ‘His face was scarlet and bloated, his eyes were glassy and inflamed.’ He wondered if he had been drinking.

Ribbentrop, after the most perfunctory of handshakes, led them to a table to one side where they sat down. [Ambassador] Dekanozov started to read a statement requesting reassurances from the German government, but Ribbentrop broke in to say that they had been invited to attend a meeting for very different reasons. He stumbled through what amounted to a declaration of war, although the word was never mentioned . . . It suddenly became clear to Berezhev that the Wehrmacht must have already started its invasion. The Reichminister stood up abruptly. He handed over the full text of Hitler’s memorandum to Stalin’s ambassador, who was speechless. ‘The Führer has charged me with informing you officially of these defensive measures.’

Dekanozov also rose to his feet. He barely reached to Ribbentrop’s shoulder. The full significance sank in at last. ‘You’ll regret this insulting, provocative and thoroughly predatory attack on the Soviet Union. You’ll pay dearly for it!’ He turned away, followed by Berezhev, and strode towards the door. Ribbentrop hurried after them. ‘Tell them in Moscow,’ he whispered urgently, ‘that I was against this attack.’ (Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad*)¹

¹ (New York: Viking Penguin, 1998), 7-8.

1.

This passage is an account of the morning of June 22, 1941, the date that Nazi Germany commenced a surprise attack upon the Soviet Union.² The assault was codenamed Operation Barbarossa.³ Drawn from the opening chapter of *Stalingrad* by British historian Antony Beevor, the passage concerns an event of significance to world history, but does not appear to constitute a standard historical retelling. For one, the excerpt is very specific, personal, with the invasion itself a secondary focus. The tone centers upon the reaction of Ribbentrop and the ambassadors to what was unfolding. The prose is not formal or analytical, and there are no in-text citations, leaving the source of Beevor's information unclear. The writing has a cinematic flair to it, which allows a clear image of the scene to manifest in the mind's eye. The passage is brief, but the style of the writing and the inclusion of dialogue makes it easy for the reader to grasp what is going on and to empathize with the characters. We can practically feel the defiance in Dekanozov's voice as he angrily warns Ribbentrop that Germany will live to regret its betrayal. And we observe something akin to character development in Ribbentrop himself. The *Stalingrad* selection opens with the Reichminister wandering about his office in a daze, outwardly anxious as to what the prospect of war with Russia entails, and ends with him making that final desperate plea to Dekanozov: "Tell them in Moscow that I was against this attack." Combined with detailed descriptive statements on the minister's appearance and the layout of his office, along with sentences like "[Ribbentrop] *stumbled* [my emphasis] through..." and "It *suddenly* [m.e.] became clear..." and "Ribbentrop *hurried* [m.e.] after them..." and what you have is a historical text presenting the past in a literary way, as if it were a story. In fact, replace Barbarossa with another event and it could easily be a piece from historical fiction in the guise of Tolstoy or Philippa Gregory.

² Ibid., 8.

³ Ibid., 2.

Stalingrad was the standard-bearer for a new wave of historical non-fiction. In a 2012 retrospective review on the legacy of the book, *The Telegraph's* Keith Lowe wrote that before its publication in 1998, the “history genre was considered suitable only for retired colonels and armchair fantasists – after *Stalingrad* it became the sleek attention-grabbing subject that has never since been off the bestseller lists.”⁴ Lowe credits this to Beevor’s skill at storytelling:

While he always kept a grip on the view of the battle from above, his true skill was in describing the way it looked from below, from the point of view of the ordinary soldiers caught up in vast and terrifying battles. . . . Every chapter was peppered with poignant vignettes of life among the ranks, and had a sense of pacing and of character that made them read almost like chapters in a novel.⁵

What I take from this quote is that *Stalingrad* signaled a shift in the way that popular history is done, away from what I consider “dry” history – the predilection of an older breed of historian to bombard their readers with sentence after sentence of bland statistics and general fact – and towards something more creative, which I shall call “narrative” history.⁶ This brand of history reads, to paraphrase Lowe, like a novel.⁷ The historian steps back from her more traditional role as an interpreter of the past and assumes the part of bard. She becomes less like Herodotus and more like Homer. We can see this in the *Stalingrad* excerpt. Ribbentrop’s handshake with the Soviets is described as “perfunctory”. Dekanozov’s height is given as barely reaching to the Reichminister’s shoulder. Statuary is noted as adorning the walls of Ribbentrop’s office. That cryptic warning to Ribbentrop is dramatic, ending the passage on a suspenseful note. All this, the adjectives, the dialogue, the very flavor of the excerpt, seem needless in a historical text. I imagine

⁴ Keith Lowe, “In praise of Antony Beevor,” *The Telegraph* (2012), ¶2.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/9412691/In-praise-of-Antony-Beevor.html>.

⁵ Ibid., ¶3.

⁶ For more information on philosophy in history, see the “Philosophy of History” page at the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy webpage: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/history/>.

⁷ It must be said that Lowe is primarily referring to books of military history. This does not pose much of a problem for my essay. I can readily imagine a narrative history on a non-military subject, like the March on Selma. The function remains the same: a creative, personal presentation of a past event.

that most do not read a book on one of the more pivotal battles in history anticipating whole paragraphs devoted to rich descriptions of the interior of some person's study. If one is looking to just to get to the important historical information, then the passage runs about four paragraphs too long. What the writing style does accomplish is grabbing the reader's attention and sustaining it. Historical information is more easily retained. Dry history may present the general facts, but without the immersive narrative flow of books like *Stalingrad* those facts are often forgotten as soon as the page is turned. But from an epistemic standpoint, is narrative history a good thing? I shall argue that it is not – or at least, not unreservedly so.⁸

In this paper I propose to investigate the epistemic merit of narrative history. In particular, I plan to focus on its use of human testimony to make truth claims about the past. I believe and seek to prove that testimony is often unreliable, and since one purpose of narrative history is to provide the present with past knowledge, this renders much of its epistemic value uncertain. Testimony is a problem with dry history as well, but narrative history has an additional, unique wrinkle all its own: the narrative element itself. Proper narratives have protagonists, antagonists, dramatic structure, sharp dialogue. Does the past actually have any of these things? If not, then this makes the narrative part of narrative history just as epistemically problematic as the testimony aspect. I am concerned that these two problems together chance to instill in a reader a false view of the past.

This paper is a philosophical inquiry into the very heart of narrative history. My thesis will be that the method's extensive use of testimony causes any supposed knowledge derived from it to be epistemically unjustified, and that the literary techniques employed when setting the past

⁸ Henceforth, I shall use the shorthand *Barbarossa* to refer to the *Stalingrad* excerpt. I also refer to *the past* in regards to what is studied and *history* for the product of that study.

within a narrative call for a new standard of historical evaluation. Aside from this introduction section, my essay has four parts to it. I will begin with a more detailed explanation of narrative history, centering upon how it differs from its dry variant. Then I will present proofs for doubting the truth-value reliability of testimony. There are a myriad number of reasons that witness testimony of a past event may be false. The testifier could be biased, or lie, or even misremember. I will discuss how narrative history's use of literary language is detrimental to its epistemic value, using Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen's "After Narrativism: Why We Need to Move from Truth-Functionality to Performativity in Historiography" to bolster my argument. But I do not believe these criticisms make narrative history without importance, only that they serve to prove that its use must be practical as opposed to epistemic. To that end, I'll conclude with an examination of Friedrich Nietzsche's "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", wherein the author writes that history can remain relevant *iff* when reflected upon it positively influences the present life in some way. I shall argue that Nietzsche's alternative modes of history reveal how we ought to regard historical non-fiction.

2.

I contend that the root difference between narrative and dry history is that the former makes impersonal claims about the past and the latter makes personal claims on the particular past. What do I mean by this divide? Consider the titular battle of Beevor's *Stalingrad*. A dry historian would chronicle it like God observing the course of the siege from on high. She might write blanket statements on the number of Germans assaulting the city, why they attacked it. She might say that the fighting within the confines of Stalingrad was house-to-house, and that when the battle at last turned against the Wehrmacht⁹ there was mass starvation and reports of cannibalism within its

⁹ The name for the German armed forces during WWII.

ranks. These are impersonal claims. The characters depicted in a dry history of Stalingrad would be limited to the major players: Stalin, Hitler, their generals, with the chance of appearing in the text diminishing the closer one gets to the bottom of the chain-of-command. Dry history is more the big picture than the little one. The dry historian is a reporter of impersonal information. I am imagining this method akin to what might be found in a standard academic textbook; the reader would get the *what* and *why* of the battle of Stalingrad, but little else. The text would not dig much deeper than what lies at the surface of a past event.

Dry history tells the reader *what-it-was* and *why-it-was* but narrative history conveys *what-it-was-like* to experience. It focuses on the particular past. Stalingrad is a particular event in the context of World War II, but my definition of *particular* is a personal, small-scale scene like *Barbarossa*, an event with no witnesses outside a select few participants. A narrative historian might thus tell the battle of Stalingrad through the personal journeys of the people that lived through it, soldier and civilian alike. And indeed, Beevor's *Stalingrad* is much like this. The purpose is not to just state impersonal information, such as that the Germans were trapped and starving in the city. Rather, narrative history aims to portray the individual struggle of being alone and hungry and losing a bit of hope for rescue each day. The presence of rapid-fire, sharp dialogue of the kind we see in *Barbarossa* adds a cinematic atmosphere and puts the reader in the scene as if actually present to witness it. Further, the plot focus isn't necessarily on the great figures of the past – Nikita Khrushchev was present at Stalingrad and is one of the more dynamic leaders of the past century, yet appears in Beevor's book in a scant fourteen pages¹⁰ -- but on the ordinary people living through an extraordinary event. The spotlight is on the little people because it is harder for a reader to empathize with transcendent leaders like Khrushchev and Stalin, who have over the

¹⁰ Beevor, *Stalingrad*, 489.

course of time accumulated such a mythology about them that any attempt to humanize them would read like alternate history.

Editing also plays a role in how narrative and dry history differ. In the first, actual in-text citations, like footnotes or parenthetical references, are scarce, presumably because their inclusion might disrupt the dramatic flow. Most sources are only found in the appendices. Further, history such as *Stalingrad* unfolds like a story, with plot that continuously builds upon earlier developments in the narrative. Characters act in a way that is consistent with prior characterization. They are not one-dimensional figures meant only to introduce another past event or historical concept, but people with personalities that help to explain why they acted the way that they did. For instance, at the climax of *Stalingrad* (the Soviet counteroffensive which ended up trapping the Germans in the city) the reader is familiarized with Romanian general Mihail Lascar, described by Beevor as “intrepid” and one as one of the few Romanian officers the Germans¹¹ respected.¹² This initial characterization makes Lascar’s subsequent actions personality-appropriate, when a few pages later his army his attacked and surrounded by the Soviets but Lascar himself bravely resists every call to surrender, instead vowing to fight on until the end.¹³ He is not just a puppet on a string acting for no apparent reason; he has reasons for his behavior and they are established in the text. Narrative history does a fantastic job of making past persons seem relatable.

It could be argued by some that my definition of the difference between narrative and dry history, specifically on the first assertion that it is a distinction between personal and impersonal claims, is incorrect. One objection is: Could there not be a personal narrative history on a general historical topic, say the whole of World War II as opposed to a specific event like Stalingrad? Must

¹¹ The Romanian army being a reluctant ally of Nazi Germany.

¹² Beevor, *Stalingrad*, 253.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 256.

narrative history always center on the particular? A second objection is: Is it possible for there to be a particular dry history, such as *Barbarossa* written in an impersonal manner? These objections attempt to refute my definitions of narrative and dry history so need to be addressed before I proceed further.

It is certainly conceivable that a personal narrative history on a general event could be done. The pertinent question is not if it could be done, but whether or not a personal take on a general past instance would be the best form for narrative history. Lowe's *Telegraph* piece is more than just nostalgic praise of *Stalingrad*. It is also the author offering a clarification for why Beevor's then just-released book, entitled *The Second World War*, was receiving more negative criticism than *Stalingrad*. Lowe quotes such unenthusiastic reviews like "[*The Second World War* lacks] some of the pizzazz of [Beevor's] earlier offerings" from *The Independent*.¹⁴ *The Sunday Times* lamented the absence of the same soldier's-eye attention to detail prevalent in *Stalingrad*.¹⁵ And the *Observer* criticized *War*'s meandering prose and denounced Beevor's writing as "detached" and "clumsy".¹⁶ Lowe sums up the criticism as a consequence of the epic scope of *The Second World War*, which necessitated the removal of the personal, emotional touches that made *Stalingrad* so engaging: "The subject matter is simply too vast for such an approach: Beevor has had to sacrifice many of the elements that made his work stand out, just to get all the information in."¹⁷

I concur with Lowe. When writing of the general past in a personal style there is just too much relevant information to put in the text so that to simultaneously include elements of narrative

¹⁴ Lowe, "Antony Beevor", ¶1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., ¶4.

history, like the focus on the common individual, would throw the whole book out of balance. It would bog the reader down. I can imagine becoming increasingly frustrated, wondering why the historian is devoting precious space to the exploits of a random Romanian commander whilst there are still six-hundred pages of Pacific theatre material to slog through. And if the author eliminates the personal journeys to save ink, the history would lose its most captivating element. A narrative book on World War II would certainly include a few pages on Stalingrad, but I have no doubt that illuminating vignettes like *Barbarossa* and the heroism of Lascar would be lost in the transition from a specific event to a general one. It would not even be narrative history in the best sense.

Turning dry history particular is equally problematic. How would a dry historian treat a particular instance like *Barbarossa*? It would firstly be incredibly condensed. Literary statements like the full significance of the invasion becoming suddenly apparent to Berezkhov, or how the Reichminister's office was laid out, would be dropped. They are not relevant to the intent of dry history. So the reader would be ultimately confronted with an impersonal few sentences that when taken together might claim something along the lines of "Ribbentrop handed the text of Hitler's war declaration to the Soviet ambassadors, who were shocked and betrayed." So again, as with the first, it appears that this second objection is feasible, even if the history is now a bit bland.

Still, supposing that the objector does not mind boring prose, I am not certain what, exactly, could be gained in doing dry history on particular events. Dry history not usually focusing on the particular as opposed to the general is a major epistemic advantage the method has over narrative history. Non-particular propositions that x number of Germans assaulted Stalingrad under the command of Y are vague but at least well-sourced by contemporary documentation. It is hard to attack them on epistemic grounds without going the Cartesian route and doubting whether there existed a commander named Y or even a battle of Stalingrad at all. In terms of better-justified

information, dry history as it stands is a safer approach. But when the method is turned particular, this advantage is lost and all the epistemic problems I have outlined in regards to history come creeping back to the fore. The whole point of my paper is that narrative history's centering upon the personal and particular is an epistemically untenable position. I admit that dry history could be altered to spotlight on particular events, but all this does for the objector is open a Pandora's box of more pressing problems. I am not skeptical of a dry historian's claim that x number of Germans attacked Stalingrad because it is so general. But when a particular event like *Barbarossa* is being discussed, it is so specific that I start to doubt. Neither this objection nor the preceding one proves much of an obstacle for my definitions of dry and narrative history.

Regardless of these objections, the narrative historian crafts her compelling account primarily through interviews with witnesses, memoirs, and histories by other authors, which she then weaves together to form a cohesive dramatic structure. Different kinds of historical artefact, like photos, audio and visual recordings, and statistics, seem less emphasized but are still used in service of the narrative.¹⁸ Impersonal, more statistical statements are often coupled with personal ones. In *Stalingrad*, Beevor writes of the four million Axis soldiers encamped near the German-Russian border on the eve of the invasion, and what their ultimate objectives were. But immediately thereafter he spends several paragraphs detailing how individual German soldiers dealt with the pre-invasion anxiety by singing and playing accordion music.¹⁹ He even notes how

¹⁸ Most of the sources for *Stalingrad* are witness testimony and other histories. Beevor does include a bundle of photographs in the center of the book, but they seem more ancillary information than a vital source. It is also possible that the description of Ribbentrop's office in *Barbarossa* comes from photographs – but Beevor does not state this in the appendices.

¹⁹ Beevor, *Stalingrad*, 12-13,

a group of German officers toasted their inevitable triumph over the Bolshevik menace with confiscated French champagne.²⁰

The main role of a historian of narrative history is that of storyteller. She does not employ the first-person subjective “I” to place herself within the past or openly give an opinion on it, like “Then *I* asked Berezhkov *xyz*” or “*I* think the invasion was a mistake” because this breaks the reader’s immersion. That is not to say that she has no opinion, only that her judgement is suppressed, illustrated instead through the historical characters. *Barbarossa* is a good example. The reader does not need Beevor to explicitly state that the invasion of the Soviet Union was a marked strategic error; the idea is clearly communicated through the nervous mannerisms of an emotionally distraught Ribbentrop.

I believe that there is risk to this approach. There is first an ethical problem in the narrative historian pressing her view upon the reader without the latter being cognizant of it. If she does not clearly distinguish between what her view of an event is and what actually happened, the reader might be unwittingly manipulated into viewing the past as the historian sees it. This is not as much of an issue in *Barbarossa*. Beevor’s point with the behavior of the characters in the passage is that the invasion of Russia was a potential disaster, but no contemporary historian or reader is likely to dispute that assertion given what is known now about how the war in the east progressed. A narrative history on a more controversial subject would be more indicative of the problem. A book on the American Civil War written by a proponent of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy movement – the belief that the war was not caused by disparate beliefs on slavery – might skirt that matter entirely and paint the conflict as a noble one against Union aggression. If the reader is uninformed

²⁰ Ibid.

about the war prior to reading, it is possible that their views on the subject will be negatively shaped by such revisionist text.

The second risk relates to one part of the editing convention of narrative history as described above: the persistent absence of in-text citations. *Stalingrad* only has a handful of footnotes; the *Barbarossa* extract has none at all. Beevor employs single quotation marks (‘ ’) to indicate a direct quotation from a foreign source, but I had to skip all the way to the appendices of the book to realize this. Even then, *Barbarossa* runs for about a page and there are only six instances of single quotation marks. Many descriptive passages are unsourced, leaving me to wonder where the author got the information, or if it is just literary invention

Narrative history has an assortment of similar epistemic issues. The method is rife with personal stories of particular events, and that focus gives rise to further complications not found within dry history. Personal journeys make for gripping reading, but the very fact that they are so personal makes them more susceptible to skepticism. For instance, only three people were involved in *Barbarossa*, each of whom might have cause to be dishonest in his retelling of the event, or could have misremembered it. With that in mind, I now arrive at the problems of testimony part of this paper.

3.

Testimony is either the written or spoken act of providing an account of an event that a reader or hearer was not physically present to witness. Ideally, the account is true and they can be said to have knowledge of an event they were previously ignorant of. In history, the primary use of testimony is when a historian interviews a witness, reads their memoirs or personal letters and subsequently incorporates that testimony into a historical text. Again, the intent here is to provide contemporary readers with understanding of the past. Humans encounter testimony in some form

daily. However, rarely do we recognize it for its full epistemic significance. This is a problem, for if we don't regard testimony as any different from the standard talking and listening humans engage in, then we are unlikely to assess it with the scrutiny that I argue it deserves. Take the following example, an instance of how testimony may play a part for the worse in everyday life.

S and *R* are best friends. *S* is rich and travels abroad constantly. She has recently returned from a lengthy vacation to Japan and the first thing she does when she arrives back in her home country is to tell *R* all about the trip. *S* discloses every last intricate detail to *R*: which cities she visited, how the local cuisine tasted, what the nightlife was like, etc. One further assertion is made as well: *S* loved Japan, but she found the locals quite hostile, towards both herself and other foreign tourists. Consider this last claim. *S* makes this assertion to *R* through the act of speech-testimony. *R* can either accept it as truth or denounce it as false, but given that *S* is generally reliable and that their status as best friends implies a certain level of trust between them, it is most likely that *R* will regard the statement as fact. So now *R* begins to believe that Japan is not a friendly place for outsiders. This belief shapes her understanding and opinion of an entire culture. It permeates within her and when the topic of Japan arises in conversation *R* is quick to point out she recommends people not visit the country because the populace is so hostile. She does not have any first-hand empirical evidence to corroborate this belief, but nevertheless she thinks that she knows it. And herein lies the problem with testimony. Since *R* has never travelled to Japan and knows little of the native culture outside of what *S* tells her, it seems unjustified to say that she *knows* that the Japanese are hostile towards foreigners, on the basis of *S*'s testimony alone. Perhaps *S* was acting like a rowdy tourist and drew a bit of understandable ire her way, or maybe she misinterpreted simple wariness of strangers as outright hostility. It is also possible that she just encountered

particularly nativist locals. There are a number of reasons that help to explain the supposed unfriendliness of the Japanese.

S's general reliability and the friendship trust between her and *R* makes the latter believe what she says more readily. I believe that *R* is still epistemically blameworthy in taking *S*'s word as fact. By itself, testimony is an incredibly weak basis from which to claim knowledge. Beliefs are most epistemically sound when justified, warranted by additional premises or evidence. *R* can believe *S*'s statement that the Japanese are in fact hostile if, for instance, she watches a documentary on the very subject, and she can believe *that* documentary is accurate if the director is himself Japanese, and so would have the best understanding of his own culture. And *R* can believe that the information the director puts onscreen is true if she researches his past films and notes that critics routinely praise them for their unflinching and honest look at contemporary Japan. The chain of justifications can go on and on. Testimony on its own is insufficient for knowledge, since it can quite easily be false. Picture in the mind a glass jar that holds marbles. The jar in this metaphor is an assertion, and the marbles represent bits of evidence towards that assertion being true. The more marbles in the jar, the more probable it is that the assertion is accurate. Testimony certainly counts as justification towards the truth of an assertion, but by itself it is just a single marble in an otherwise empty jar. Much more is needed for a claim to be truly conducive to knowledge.

I bring up the Japan example because narrative history runs into the same problem. The personal vignettes characteristic of the method are primarily derived via testimony. The relationship between *R* and *S* mirrors that of the reader and the historian. Much like *S*, the narrative historian is generally reliable. And just like *R*, the reader trusts that that historian would not willfully lie in her recounting of the past, despite often having no further evidence for that belief

than the trust in the historian. And what of the original primary witness testimony that the historian utilizes in her text? Should the reader continue to trust in that testimony as well? The purpose of this section of my essay is to argue that they should not – at least if the ultimate goal of reading history is knowledge. There are all manner of reasons that testimony could be false. I shall discuss three: lies, bias, and faulty memory. I plan to examine these three reasons both in regards to testimony of primary witnesses and the historian herself, because her book is also a form of testimony and ought to undergo the same investigation.

I shall begin with lies. What is this problem? Imagine that you are a juror in a high-profile murder case. At the defense table sits a woman accused of murdering her husband. The prosecution has little physical evidence to link the wife to the killing, though she was later found at the scene of the crime near her husband's dead body. What the prosecutors do have is a star eyewitness who can provide a full account of the murder, pinning it directly on the wife. To that end, the prosecution calls the witness to the stand, where he proceeds to spin a convincing tale of the night of the killing, describing in no uncertain terms how he saw the wife stab, multiple times, the poor husband. The testimonial is well-ornated and many in the courtroom are convinced. Still, besides the testimony, no other evidence exists. This jar is not even close to being full.

The murder case is a good example of how lies can influence belief. Social worry over falsified testimony is a major reason why most criminal justice systems require physical evidence in order to make a conviction. Unfortunately, this concern is not usually considered when reading narrative history, where the reader does not always have the luxury of ancillary evidence to further verify the claims that the author and primary witnesses make. Though photographs likely do prove that Ribbentrop's office was laid out exactly as Beevor said it was in *Barbarossa*, there were no video cameras or tape recorders that likewise attest that the subsequent confrontation between

those office walls occurred as the participants said that it did. I have to rely solely upon the word of both Beevor and the original witnesses.

When a human being lies in a face-to-face conversation there are often noticeable tics that betray the falsehood: a stutter here, an eye-twitch there. Eye-aversion is a big indicator that a speaker is being less than truthful. But in narrative history there are no such tics. The nature of the written medium prevents obvious tics from becoming apparent. In *Barbarossa*, what would force me to wonder whether Beevor was lying? If the claim was utterly implausible, like the diplomatic summit being punctuated with a lethal shootout between Ribbentrop on the one side and Dekanozov and Berezhev on the other, perhaps I would start to question. For the most part a serious narrative historian would never include such overt fabrications. I suppose I could flip to the author blurb at the end of the book for a better understanding of Beevor. I would not gain much from this brief search other than a listing the works he has published, but it could spur me into researching the author more in-depth online. Even then, the best that could come of it would be the knowledge that Beevor is *generally* reliable and well-sourced, which does not tell anything about the particular claims in *Barbarossa*.

In fact, let's examine the lies problem in *Barbarossa* more closely. Most of Beevor's single quote marked sources for what happened inside the Reichminister's office, including the more colorful, descriptive passages such as "like a caged animal" and "[Ribbentrop's] face was scarlet" come from two books: Paul Schmidt's *Hitler's Interpreter, the Secret History of German Diplomacy 1935 – 1945* and Berezhev's own written memoirs.²¹ I cannot do much analysis on the former, since I've never had the opportunity to read it, though I should note the danger in

²¹ Beevor, *Stalingrad*, 443, 477, 482.

historians citing the work of other historians, because no reader (or historian) has the time or inclination to see what rests at the very bottom of the rabbit-hole. If that base claim is ultimately false, then any later book that uses it as a source is rendered epistemically questionable.

The memoirs are more easily attacked. What reason might Berezkhov have to lie? It is possible that he made himself and Dekanozov out to be more steadfast and heroic, and Ribbentrop more spineless and anxious, than any of them were in reality, perhaps in order to appease Stalin, who was well-known for punishing any perceived cowardice or disloyalty with summary execution. The Reichminister's parting plea to the ambassadors is almost too poetically perfect to be true. Still, while these questions cast doubt upon Berezkhov's testimony, they do not prove that he lied. The beliefs I form from *Barbarossa* are at this juncture neither demonstrably true nor demonstrably false.

A better instance of lies in history – and the inaccurate beliefs that may arise from them – would be in Nazi field marshal Erich von Manstein, a prime participant in the events at Stalingrad and veteran of many battles in the east. After the war ended, Manstein managed to escape the noose at Nuremberg and published his memoirs, entitled *Lost Victories*, in 1955. The book aimed to be a politically neutral, purely tactical account of Manstein's combat experience during the war.²² Yet the title itself gives an indication of the ideological bent of the author, because if those missed victories were reversed than the war would have swung a different way and much more innocent life lost. *Lost Victories* does not mention any war crimes or ethnic cleansing by the command of Manstein or the Wehrmacht.²³ In fact, it is claimed that the regular army was totally

²² Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941-1944* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), xii-xiv.

https://books.google.com/books?id=yEI6lpIV7OgC&pg=PA1&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false.

²³ Ibid.

devoid of responsibility for the genocide in the east.²⁴ The opposite was true, with Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann noting in their book *War of Extermination* that Manstein's memoirs were "totally unreliable, and if we had in 1945 known about [Manstein] and many of his comrades what we know today, there may well have been more executions for war crimes [at Nuremberg]."²⁵ Manstein's lie is one of omission.

Regrettably, we did not know then, and Heer and Naumann continue to state that the whitewashing of Wehrmacht complicity in the Holocaust and related crimes was pervasive to many of the post-war memoirs of high-ranking Nazi officers.²⁶ Interestingly, Heer and Naumann argue that the purpose of this lie was to make it easier for Germans to become a stout bulwark against the Eastern Bloc if the culpability for the Holocaust was pinned on Hitler and not on Germany as a whole.²⁷ The result was to instill in society, at least initially, a myth of a "clean" Wehrmacht, the false belief that the army and ordinary Germans were corrupted by a select few sociopaths who wrested administrative control away from a benevolent populace and waged a war of aggression without their consent.²⁸ This was the dominant historical view until it started to be challenged in the late 1950s, when new documentation came to light.²⁹

The problem with *Lost Victories* is not simply that it was written by an unreliable narrator, but that within its pages are lies mixed with truths. Manstein focuses on the battles, skirting the crimes for which is he partly responsible, but that does not mean that what is said about those battles is false. How are we, the reader, to sort the lies from the truths? It is a challenge especially

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., xiv.

²⁶ Ibid., xiv-xv.

²⁷ Ibid., xiv.

²⁸ Ibid., xii-xv.

²⁹ Ibid., xiv-xv.

difficult for the narrative historian. Beevor cites *Victories* in the appendices and bibliography of *Stalingrad*. I am certain that Beevor understood that Manstein was not the most reliable of testifiers, and I can imagine him carefully leafing through *Victories* trying to distinguish what is factual from what is myth. Earlier in §3 I noted the lack of physical evidence in narrative history requires a reader to trust in the primary witness and historian's testimony. With the lies problem an additional measure of trust is present: Do we trust in Beevor's *judgment* on what in *Lost Victories* is truth and what is not? Is he using Manstein's lie-prone memoir in a responsible manner? None of these questions can be easily answered, so the problem of lies in narrative history remains unresolved.

The second issue with testimony in narrative history involves possible instances of bias. Bias can affect either the historian or the testifier. The problem is more apparent the further one delves into the past and the truth of what actually happened becomes murkier. In Ancient Rome, for example, the only sort of people writing or reading history would be the educated, literate upper-class, which is a very specific set of citizens with a very specific outlook upon life and the world. Further, older history is often literally written by the victor, and the perspective that present society has of destroyed past cultures is often primarily from the very civilizations that subjugated them in the first place. After all, what do we really know about the barbarian tribes that plagued Rome, apart from what the Romans themselves tell us?

In a way, bias is more of a pronounced problem in history than lies. Lies are often overt, or at least retrospectively overt, as in the case of *Lost Victories*. But when considering the possibility of bias in historical text it is hard to differentiate a negative judgement on an event from a biased one. The Roman historian Tacitus famously said of his countrymen's conquest of Britain:

“They [made] a solitude and [called] it peace”³⁰, one of many viciously anti-Roman polemic argumentation employed in his *Agricola*.³¹ But it is difficult to determine whether this denunciation is bias against Rome or merely a bluntly honest critique of Roman society at the time.

With that in mind, I propose the following definition of biased testimony in history. It is either:

- a. Using one’s own personal opinions and beliefs to judge the actions of someone or some culture, or/and
- b. Using those personal opinions and beliefs to build up a false past which is in contrast to the actual historical evidence

Of the two, b will be more of an issue, given the plethora of epistemic problems that manifest when the past is misconstrued from what it truly was. An interesting addendum to b is that bias is often institutionalized. A reader of history should always keep in mind the culture and society in which that history was written, since the less-rigorous standards of older works might result in an inclination to bias – especially towards the ruling and literate class – than a contemporary work like *Stalingrad*.

Consider a more modern cut-and-dry example than Tacitus: the works of Shakespeare, especially his histories *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, set during the years of the Wars of the Roses, a series of dynastic civil wars between the royal House of Lancaster and the rival House of York for the throne of England. A brief summation: The Yorkists succeeded in toppling and exterminating the House of Lancaster – for a time, before they themselves were in turn deposed by the House of Tudor. Though no historian³², Shakespeare’s plays were popular and helped to shape public perception of the English past. He was also predominantly writing during the reign of Elizabeth I Tudor. The Tudor family descended from the Lancastrians. Not surprisingly then, Shakespeare’s

³⁰ Tacitus, *Life of Cnaeus Julius Agricola*, c. 98 C.E. Translated by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribby. §30. <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/tacitus-agricola.asp>.

³¹ *Ibid.*, §1-3.

³² Though his histories were narrative in the most literal sense

histories are riddled with pro-Lancastrian and anti-York bias. The Lancastrian king Henry VI is depicted as pious and unassuming in the play that bears his name, when in reality he was prone to bouts of insanity.³³ Richard III of York by contrast in *Richard III* is cast as a hunchbacked villain who murdered his own nephews in order to ascend to the throne. The England of his reign is shown in Shakespeare to be a lawless, chaos-fueled hellscape that only managed to be saved through Richard's death at the battle of Bosworth by the hand of Henry Tudor, thereafter known as Henry VII. Though in hindsight this seems obviously biased, it was believed at the time and the Tudors took great care to maintain this image as saviors of the land. It gave their rule legitimacy, even if it was not, in fact, an objective representation of England's past. How much of what we think we know of history is the result of similar bias?

The final reason that testimony may not be universally conducive to knowledge concerns the accuracy of memory. Since narrative history tends to be personal, the memory-testimony of primary witnesses is integral to a historian presenting a comprehensive account of a particular event. But memory is oftentimes difficult to recall with complete accuracy even in the short-term. In history, given the generally great elapsed time between the occurrence of a past event and its later recollection, it seems most improbable that long-term memories are always recalled with precision. Faulty memory is a bit complicated – at least when compared with the lies problem – because humans usually believe in the reliability of our own remembrances. Yet memory is employed in narrative history because witness recollection is often the only way a particular past event can be understood. But once more, like lies and bias, faulty memory can be responsible for the spreading of inaccurate belief. That constitutes an epistemic problem. My argument in regards

³³ Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Henry VI", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ¶4.
<http://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-VI-king-of-England>.

to memory-testimony is that it is too frequently unreliable to be used to ascertain certain knowledge. Beliefs on the past that derive from memory are not epistemically justified.

One objection to my argument is the psychological phenomenon of flashbulb memory, which is a vivid, detailed remembrance of a past event, “right down to the dialogue, the weather and even what people were wearing when they [experienced it].”³⁴ The event itself is usually one that was traumatic, shocking or emotionally affecting.³⁵ Thus far, flashbulb memory appears an effective counter to my assertion that the expanse in time between an event occurrence and its remembrance prevents the event from being recalled accurately. The personal vignettes common in narrative history may not be worthy of their own Wikipedia entry but are still extremely significant for the people who experienced them. *Barbarossa*, for instance, is not an account of Berezhev’s Sunday picnic on the Spree but is instead a recollection of when he was first confronted with the momentous news of the Nazi invasion of his country. I regard *Barbarossa* with a great deal of doubt, but flashbulb memory states that it would be possible for Berezhev to explicitly recall it. Knowledge of the past could be attainable via flashbulb memory.

Yet the very existence of flashbulb memory is still contested within psychology. Bridget Law, writing in the *Monitor on Psychology*, notes the growing consensus amongst psychologists that with flashbulb memory humans still “forget or falsely remember much more than we realize; we get facts wrong . . . or misremember our emotional reactions.”³⁶ Law brings up the example of the September 11 terrorist attacks, a most traumatic moment. Many Americans believe that they have perfect recollections of what they were doing or where they were when the news first broke.

³⁴ Bridget Law, “Seared in our memories,” *Monitor on Psychology* 42 (2011): 60, accessed April 9, 2016, URL: <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/09/memories.aspx>. ¶1.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., ¶6.

Law cites a study done at Duke University on this very phenomenon. 54 students were surveyed the day after 9/11 on what they remembered of it.³⁷ They were also instructed to try and recall a different, regular memory.³⁸ The students were then sequestered into three groups: the first group was made to answer the identical pair of survey questions a week later, the second group made to answer after six weeks, and the last group had to respond thirty-two weeks later.³⁹ The conductors of the study found that the consistency and accuracy of both the flashbulb memory and regular memory declined in proportion to the amount of time elapsed since 9/11.⁴⁰ Curiously, however, each group believed that the flashbulb memory of the attacks was stronger and more truthful than the regular memory.⁴¹ Even more interestingly, the students began to change their accounts of how they first heard the news of September 11 only a few days after the event itself: “Because at that point you've told 35 people how you heard about it, and it's been solidified in your memory the way you're telling it, not necessarily how it really happened,” said one researcher.⁴² It is not a deliberate attempt by the testifiers to misled, but rather a retroactively applied false memory that supplants the true one.

The Duke University study is full of remarkable insights into flashbulb memory. Details on the color of clothes the students were wearing changed frequently.⁴³ They started to say that they were with different people than those they had initially said that they were with.⁴⁴ An even bigger but similar inquiry, surveying 3,000 people after a week, eleven months and nearly three years on how they remembered 9/11 determined that many were forgetting even the most basic

³⁷ Ibid., ¶15.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., ¶16.

⁴¹ Ibid., ¶17-18.

⁴² Ibid., ¶18.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

details, like how many planes were involved and which airlines.⁴⁵ Forty percent of people misremembered some part of their September 11 experience.⁴⁶ The researchers concluded that there is no difference in quality between flashbulb and standard memory.⁴⁷ The only distinction is that the former feels more vivid than the latter, and this vividness deceives people into the notion that flashbulb memory is more accurate.⁴⁸

There is a lot to unpack from the article. The main inferences I draw from it is that the idea that flashbulb memory is both possible and more accurate than standard memory is untrue. This revives the problem of memory-testimony. The reader still has no foolproof evidence to accept that the personal memories of particular events in narrative history are factual. Let's return to *Barbarossa*. The *Monitor* article was published in 2011, ten years after 9/11, but Berezhkov's memoirs on the summit with Ribbentrop were released in 1967, twenty-six years later.⁴⁹ If the reliability and existence of flashbulb memory is still in doubt, how much of Berezhkov's recollection can the reader trust? One further conclusion of the researchers of the 3,000 person study was that memory becomes skewed when we project out retrospective feelings of a past event onto how we actually felt at the time.⁵⁰ It is possible that Berezhkov⁵¹ and other testifiers in narrative history are doing the same. I believe that is difficult to prove that they are not, and for this reason I cannot consider memory-testimony as a reliable means to knowledge of the past.

⁴⁵ Ibid., ¶19-22.

⁴⁶ Ibid., ¶22.

⁴⁷ Ibid., ¶24.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Beevor, *Stalingrad*, 477.

⁵⁰ Law, "in our memories", ¶23.

⁵¹ It is possible that Berezhkov's memoirs were only *published* in 1967 and he was in fact taking detailed notes all throughout his life. I can imagine this being an objection to my analysis of memory-testimony, but it not as effective as it seems. Even if Berezhkov at once after the conclusion of the *Barbarossa* meeting started to write about what occurred, this does not entail that that remembrance would be accurate. The Duke study noted that people immediately started to change their stories on what they remembered of 9/11. It is conceivable that Berezhkov would do the same.

Problems of lies, bias and memory in testimony are all elements of what is known in psychology as the “Roshomon Effect.” The term has its origins in Kurosawa’s 1950 classic film *Rashomon*.⁵² The plot of *Rashomon* revolves around the aftermath of the murder of a samurai and the sexual assault of his wife.⁵³ Four witnesses – the bandit accused of the crimes, the wife, the ghost of the samurai himself, and a common woodworker – each give a different account of the same event.⁵⁴ Each testimony is tainted by the speaker’s previously-held prejudices and opinions. The film ends with the crime unresolved.⁵⁵

Testimony in narrative history is much the same. Individual experience is subjective. People lie to make themselves appear better or deflect blame. Manstein lamented the war in Russia as nothing but a series of missed opportunities, but to the Soviet populace the German occupation was marked by a brutality rarely equaled in recorded history. Further, bias characterizes the way we view the world and the past, giving rise to myth. The Tudor bias prevalent in Shakespearean history was a mischaracterization of the pre-Henry VII English past as something chaotic that Henry righted, regardless of whether or not this was true. Finally, we may unintentionally remember, as in the case of 9/11. Narrative history remains an epistemic problem because in the case of conflicting or false testimony it is difficult to determine what is correct and what is not. The point of §3 is to present a reader with justification to doubt what is told in history through testimony, and I believe I have accomplished that here. Testimony is just too unreliable to act as a universal means to knowledge of past events.

⁵² Stephen Prince, “The *Rashomon* Effect”, *Criterion* (2012), ¶5. <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/195-the-rashomon-effect>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, ¶3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, ¶3-5.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, ¶10.

Before I proceed to §4, one possible objection must be addressed. I have noted at various points in my paper about the trust we place in historians and primary witnesses to tell the truth. A solid objection to my arguments in §3 would be: Is there a way in which a reader can assess a historian and primary witness for trustworthiness? If there were, then the reader would immediately be able to apprehend untrue claims in history, removing the risk of false inferences and beliefs, and thus circumventing all the skeptical doubts on testimony I have laid out in thus far.

My counterargument to this objection is as follows: Since history, in part, purports to provide certain knowledge of the past, the means of assessing historians and witnesses for trustworthiness must be universally reliable. That is, the means must be always capable of determining someone's trustworthiness. I don't believe this is an achievable goal. Even if it were, I am not certain what use it would be in narrative history. Suppose that, through some universal method, the reader is able to determine that Beevor is trustworthy, that when presenting the past he neither lies nor is biased. The challenge is that history is not solely about presentation of the past, but interpretation of others' presentation of the past. I mentioned this briefly earlier. Consider *Lost Victories*. Beevor could be a shining white knight of trustworthiness, but that does not entail that he could not accidentally misinterpret a statement in that lie-filled text as factual when it is not. Trust in the truth-value of Beevor's history is one matter; trust in his subjective judgement of the factuality of primary witness testimonies in composing that history is a more difficult problem, one I do not think even a universal method of establishing trustworthiness would solve.

4.

The epistemic worries I have with narrative history are not limited to the unreliability of testimony. A different concern is the "narrative" element. One way that narrative history is dissimilar from

dry history is that in its retelling of the past it adopts many literary techniques that are common in fiction: protagonists, antagonists; quick-witted dialogue, foreshadowing, suspense, what might be found in *War and Peace* by not necessarily in an academic textbook; and dramatic structure. The last technique typically consists of exposition, followed by rising tension, then climax of action and fallout. These are very basic plot mechanics adhered to by many novels and ripped right out of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Narrative history follows that structure as well: Beevor's *Stalingrad* very slowly builds up to the battle, with the eventual encirclement of the German army within the city functioning as a climax and the subsequent slow disintegration of the trapped Wehrmacht the fallout.

The other literary techniques are present in *Stalingrad* as well. In the *Barbarossa* passage, the way the event is set up clearly identifies the protagonists of the scene with the Soviet ambassadors and the antagonist with Ribbentrop and, by extension, Nazi Germany. The highlight of the excerpt is the dialogue at the end between Dekanozov on the one side and Ribbentrop on the other. There are elements of foreshadowing: the Reichminister's visibly nervous behavior at the start of the meeting implies to the reader that the Soviets are about to be presented with something catastrophic and unexpected. *Barbarossa* as a whole is quite suspenseful and written so that the reader is at the edge of their seat throughout.

What I aim to discuss in this section are the standards by which this type of literary language should be evaluated when seen in narrative history, because it does not appear to be universally representative of any true event in the past. When Beevor writes that Ribbentrop barely managed to stumble through the war declaration, I expect him to have actually stumbled through it. When the text states that Ribbentrop hurried after the ambassadors, I think that he *did* hurry after them. The way narrative history is done makes it unclear if the style of the prose is actually

reflective of the past. It would be well within the purview of Beevor to embellish a few minor details here and there or, when reading Berezhev's later memoirs, to boil down many thoughts on the shock the ambassador might have felt at the war declaration to the simple "It suddenly became clear..." to help the reader better grasp what was occurring. Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen in "After Narrativism: Why We Need to Move from Truth-Functionality to Performativity in Historiography", calls this literary language "colligatory", complex historical events synthesized into something more readable.⁵⁶

Before I delve more deeply into Kuukkanen, one thing must be addressed. It could be argued that the "events" being synthesized and embellished here are only small, insignificant details. For instance, Beevor's dense depiction of the arrangement and décor of the Reichminister's office is certainly colligatory, but ultimately irrelevant to the point of *Barbarossa*. It is just harmless filler. Or it might be said that a reader of *Stalingrad* will not take as truth colligatory language because its lack of accompanying single quotation marks implies that it is creative invention. However, I think both these arguments fail. Firstly, the subjects of colligatory statements are not irrelevant. The bronze statuary noted by Beevor as adorning the walls of the office puts an idea in the mind of wealth and extravagance. This is how the reader views Ribbentrop throughout the rest of the text.

Secondly, the assertion that a reader will not consider colligatory propositions as fact vastly underestimates the trustful nature of the common reader towards the historian. Humans disproportionately believe the word of people in positions of authority than we would otherwise. Beevor has that authority; he is considered an expert in the field. Further, different types of history

⁵⁶ Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, "After Narrativism: Why We Need to Move from Truth-Functionality to Performativity in Historiography", *History and Theory* 54 (2015): 234-35.

prime the reader for a different response. An openly argumentative text might put the reader on their toes, making them more inclined to doubt. But many narrative histories, *Stalingrad* included, are more like novels. The reader is not expecting to be misled, so rather than being put off by the absence of single quote marks, it is far more likely that they will just take everything that the author says as truth. This second objection applies to the average reader a natural skepticism that they do not possess.

Back to Kuukkanen. The main point of “After Narrativism” is that colligatory statements are not truth-functional. That is, they are evaluated as truth-reflective, yet are not always indicative of something true. Kuukkanen is a proponent of the correspondence theory of truth, which places the truth-value of a proposition on whether something in the world corresponds to it.⁵⁷ In narrative history, this would mean that a proposition on the past would be true *iff* it is representative of something that actually occurred. The statement “Ribbentrop stumbled through what amounted to a declaration of war” would be true *iff* he did, in fact, stumble through it. Kuukkanen lists a short selection of genuine colligatory historical theses in the preface of his article, one of which states: “the protagonists of 1914 were sleepwalkers . . . blind to the reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world.”⁵⁸ This florid prose is reminiscent of what one might find in Beevor. The “sleepwalkers” thesis is one that can easily be argued for and even be somewhat true in a figurative sense, but to Kuukkanen it should not be considered truth-functional because world leaders in 1914 were not literally sleepwalking.⁵⁹ The ignorant behavior that put Europe on a path to a war it was unprepared for was just *like* sleepwalking.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 235.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 235.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 233-234.

Correspondence is just but one theory of how a statement can be true, but in regards to narrative history I argue it is the best one. A reader of *Stalingrad* expects the particular events presented by Beevor to correspond to something that really happened. Thus, when Kuukkanen notes that the colligatory language often employed in contemporary history is not truth-functional, a great epistemic problem arises because the way that narrative history is evaluated centers on it being a true account of the past. True history is generally considered the best history.

Due to the extensive use of colligation in narrative history, and given the supremacy of that brand of history in contemporary culture, I – and Kuukkanen – raise the following question: Should our standards for evaluation of history change considering that colligatory language is not universally suggestive of something true? Both I and Kuukkanen answer with an emphatic *yes*. Kuukkanen posits that history be viewed as a performative practice. Readers must assemble to determine if a particular colligatory expression like “the protagonists of 1914 were sleepwalkers” is a rational one.⁶⁰ If the consensus is that it is, then the history is good. It is up to the rhetorical performance of the original author on whether or not her use of colligatory language is considered rational.⁶¹ I go a different route from Kuukkanen.

5.

My intent in this paper is not just to give a reader reason to doubt in the epistemic value of narrative history, but to offer hope on how, despite these concerns, the discipline can be salvaged. Kuukkanen proposes a performative standard for evaluation of narrative history. I posit a *practical* standard. Narrative history is useful *iff* it effects present life in a positive manner – that is, it generates life. I am not alone in this belief.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 239-243.

⁶¹ Ibid.

In “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”, from the *Untimely Meditations*, Friedrich Nietzsche suggests that history is a dead science, quoting Goethe: “I despise everything which merely instructs me without increasing or immediately enlivening my activity.”⁶² And the academic source which history is commonly evaluated as certainly does not enliven activity. What Nietzsche wants is for history to have a real-world application. To that end, he envisions three alternate modes of historical evaluation, each of which has a use for life: monumental history, where a person uses the past as a guide from which to forge new greatness in the present⁶³; critical history, where the civilizations of the past have their decisions, beliefs, and customs cross-examined and scrutinized⁶⁴; and antiquarian history, where the past is treated with an almost obsessive reverence, linking present culture together through a shared heritage.⁶⁵ Histories written in each mode can be either positive or negative, but to Nietzsche only when history is done well can it have use for life.

I agree with Nietzsche – to an extent. I concur that monumental and critical history can have a practical application, but I am less certain about antiquarian history. With that in mind, I will presently explain in more detail monumental, critical and antiquarian history, and how each might be done positively and negatively. I will then argue that Nietzsche’s monumental and critical modes are examples of history done practically, but why the same cannot be said for antiquarian history.

I shall begin with monumental history. According to Nietzsche, the proper way to treat the past as monumental is to use it to further one’s own ends in the present, to regard it as inspiration

⁶² Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”, *Untimely Meditations*, 1876. Translated by Ian Johnstone. ¶1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, ¶27.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, ¶42-43.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

for something new.⁶⁶ An aspiring dictator in a poorly-developed country using Napoleon Bonaparte's successful ascent to the throne of France as inspiration for his own seizure of power would be an instance of monumental history. Another example would be an author basing characters in an epic fantasy saga upon actual historical personalities. Both the dictator and the writer create something new out of the old.

Monumental history is done poorly when it is not inspirational, when it is “wrenched into a general shape” and “all its sharp corners and angles broken off for the sake of correspondence!” and past persons made out to be superhuman figures whose like could never be matched in the present day.⁶⁷ It would be when the prospective dictator looks back at Napoleon and becomes despondent, believing that such great historical heights will never again be reached by someone as insignificant as himself. Or it would be when the author neglects to ground his fantasy characters on past figures because he thinks that he lacks the talent to make someone fictional appear as interesting as someone real.

The critical historian “sits in judgement and passes judgement” on the civilizations and persons of the past.⁶⁸ With this mode, the past is something old and decrepit that must be torn down in order to live anew.⁶⁹ The past was horrible and we, in the present, are different and can do better. An example would be the German historian who exposes the lies of Manstein's *Lost Victories* and confronts her people's violent past head-on.

Critical history is done in a negative manner when the historian oversteps herself and begins to believe that her present culture *is* different from the past and that the mistakes of her

⁶⁶ Ibid., ¶26-27.

⁶⁷ Ibid., ¶28.

⁶⁸ Ibid., ¶35.

⁶⁹ Ibid., ¶42-43.

forebears are something that can never happen again.⁷⁰ “It is an attempt to give oneself,” writes Nietzsche, “a past *a posteriori*, out of which we may be descended in opposition to the one from which we are descended.”⁷¹ What happened before can just as easily happen again, and to think that one’s present culture is above it is to build a complacency that does little to enrich life.

The last of Nietzsche’s modes is antiquarian history. The good antiquarian historian honors and treasures the past, hoping to use it to forge communal bonds in the present through a shared cultural legacy.⁷² In doing so, the antiquarian historian is an agent for life. This mode is done incorrectly when the antiquarian historian stops at simple love for the past and does not generate anything new from it.⁷³

One way to consider these three modes in the present case is to imagine what a museum dedicated to each history would contain. The monumental museum might focus on the products of historical inspiration. Guest speakers might note all the references to Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian culture in Tolkein’s *Lord of the Rings*, or what inferences contemporary culture could draw from the horror of the Holocaust. For the critical museum, historians might vilify our ancestors, criticizing each and every decision they made and how we in the present must be better than they were. In the antiquarian museum, there might be a plethora of old relics, details of what they were and what past peoples used them for. Perhaps there might be flowcharts that show how present society is derived from the past.

I agree that monumental and critical history certainly have a practical use. What is interesting about these two modes in particular is that the truth-value of the history is irrelevant.

⁷⁰ Ibid., ¶43.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., ¶35-37.

⁷³ Ibid., ¶39-40.

What the past actually *was* is less important than *what-it-means-to-you*. It is subjective knowledge compared to objective, knowledge of how to live in the present rather than knowledge of the past. This is good; the epistemic concerns I have with how history is usually evaluated do not arise with monumental and critical history.

The same cannot be said for antiquarian history. Nietzsche states that this mode may be done well or poorly. I disagree; I believe that antiquarian history has no positive application at all. Let's consider how Nietzsche says that the antiquarian method can be used to stimulate life: by using the past to forge communal bonds in the present. I have a number of objections towards this supposed use for antiquarian history. Firstly, that the antiquarian historian who uses the past to link together the present is putting the past upon a pedestal in the same manner a monumental historian would. This is, admittedly, not that concrete of an argument. There is additionally the potential that a specific sort of antiquarian might fall into the same epistemic traps that afflict regular narrative history. If one looks at the past and sees *a*, and in the present takes from this to mean that one is *b*, there is a bit of a problem if *a* is an incorrect interpretation because then the deduction *b* may transitively be false. But I can imagine Nietzsche countering this by arguing that it is irrelevant if *a* is inaccurate as long as *b* is something life-generating.

Ultimately, the core challenge I see in antiquarian history is that the very idea of it is antithetical to everything I know about the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. The antiquarian utilizes the past to convey how people of a select culture are not so different from one another, but this community-strengthening exercise is the exact opposite of Nietzsche's idea of the *ubermensch* as expressed in his later books like *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The term is central to Nietzsche's whole philosophy. The *ubermensch* is one who stands out from the crowd to make his own meaning to life. The cultural sameness emphasized by the antiquarian historian is a contrast with

the individuality of the *ubermensch*, so I question why Nietzsche asserts this mode has practical use to life. I can see the *ubermensch* embodied by the monumental and critical historian, using the past to create one's own greatness or attacking it to prove how different one is from older generations. But with antiquarian history it is more using the past to show how one is just like everyone else. How, exactly, is this life-generating?

Nietzsche might answer this last question by stating that life is still generated if the antiquarian historian is one of the crowd, but I would counter that the life produced by acting individually as the *ubermensch* supersedes whatever life is created through communal bonding. At the least, the amount of life generated by the antiquarian mode pales in comparison to that of monumental and critical history. Only the latter two modes can be of enough practical use to sidestep my epistemic worries of history.

6.

In summation, let us return to the epigraph of this paper. How should we treat a piece of narrative history like *Barbarossa*? As a means to knowledge of the past? No. The unreliability of testimony and the use of colligatory language renders it difficult for a reader to get certain knowledge of the past. Nor can we consider it in the way that an antiquarian historian would, because it is more life-stimulating to be apart from the crowd than amongst it.

How we should view narrative history, and how the method can continue to have relevance in modern society, is to treat it via either the monumental or critical mode. Monumentally, we might view *Barbarossa* as an inspiration to create something new in the present life. Perhaps we admire Dekanozov's integrity and seek to emulate him. Critically, we might use the passage as an example of how not to act and how we in the present must be better people than the Nazis were.

These two modes are the correct standard of historical evaluation through which we may write, read, and study the past.

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