

Giving National Form to the Content of the Past. A Study of the Narrative Construction of Historical Events

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In this paper we aim to examine the *poietic* role of narratives in the construction of historical events, focusing on the inherent relationship between aesthetical and moral dimensions in giving accounts of the past. Thus we will consider narratives as meaning making cultural artefacts through which past, present and future events can be discursively constructed and linked by means of a plot. From this standpoint, we will see how, in the case of national histories, this narrative link is of great importance not only to historically justify the existence of nations, but also to create a certain direction for action based on the narrative construction of these nations' past and present and possible future scenarios. Finally, in taking this matter into account, we will put forward some ideas about the teaching of history, stressing the importance of creating citizens capable of reflecting critically on the official versions of the past.

The importance of narratives in the study of experience and human action has been brought to the fore by a significant number of scholars coming from different areas of Psychology over the last thirty years (Brockmeier & Harré, 2001; Bruner, 1986; Edwards & Potter, 1992). According to this theoretical perspective, narratives are regarded as tools “by means of which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions” and, consequently, as cultural “framework[s] for understanding the past events of one’s life and for planning [the] future” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.11).

In this sense, narratives would have a central role in what Bruner (1991) calls *the narrative construction of reality*; a reality which can be whether that of the self—giving rise to autobiographical accounts (Barclay, 1996) or psychoanalytic dialogues (Schafer, 1981)—or that referred to other entities such as nations (Billig, 1995), historical figures (Schwartz, 1990), groups (Feldman, 2001), families (Middleton & Edwards, 1990) and so on. Of particular interest to us here is the role of narratives in the construction of historical events, in particular, those included in national histories. In this respect, what we intent to show throughout these pages is that historical events are far from being ready-made entities to be placed *sine ira et studio* within a narrative frame one after another. Rather, as we aim to show, the very narrative form is what gives shape and continuity to past and present events, drawing from this a future scenario for the nation and, consequently, for those individuals identified with it.

In facing this matter, we will take the theoretical viewpoint of the so-called Cultural Psychology (Cole, 1996); a psychological field which aims to study the

mediational effect of cultural artefacts upon the way we interpret the world and act in it. Thus, according to this perspective, narratives will be regarded as meaning-making cultural artefacts through which we give sense to reality, mediating human action.

Here *mediation* is therefore a key concept, since our relationship to the world, far from being direct, is mediated through different tools (either technical or symbolic) which consequently become the forms by which experience takes shape. As Wertsch states, “to be human is to use the cultural tools, or mediational means, that are provided by a particular socio-cultural setting (2006, p.11). The use of these tools is fundamentally aimed at both mastering the environment people live in and orientating our actions within it. In this sense, narratives are important mediators through which we make sense of events and happenings by offering plausible explanations of them in order to orientate our actions towards future goals. Thus, we coincide with Gergen and Gergen (1984) when they remark that “perhaps the most essential aspect of narrative is the capability to generate directionality” (p.174).

Narratives permit us to create and experience a wide range of possible worlds, including fiction novels and stories¹ of both possible pasts and imagined futures, whether referring to individuals or collectives. So viewed, “narrative cognition is *poetic*” (Freeman, 2001, p.297), since it is characterized by *poiesis*, that is, by the creation of meaning. This meaning making role of narratives is apparent both in autobiographical and historical accounts. In both cases we can see how past, present and future events acquire meaning through establishing a narrative link between them. This link allows us to understand the present situation by looking at the past, and also to give new and different meanings to the past in the light of new present occurrences. As a result, new narratives substitute the old ones and, with them, alternative ways of rationalizing the past come up. Hence, both historical and autobiographical narratives suffer from a never-ending transformation and recreation process aimed at linking the past with a changeable present in order to “delimit the uncertainty of the immediate future” (Valsiner, 2003, p.12).

Finally, it is worth taking into account the cultural dimension of narratives we use, since as Bartlett (1932) showed, the rationalization of past events takes shape through different conventional forms. According to Bakhtin (1986), “genres (of literature and speech) throughout the centuries of their life accumulate forms of seeing and interpreting particular aspects of the world” (p.5). Thus, the access to the past, or rather, its narrative (re)construction is culturally mediated by a range of canonical forms or *schematic narrative templates* (Wertsch, 2007) inherited by a certain community which represent in this way the symbolic tools people have at hand to give sense to past events. One important consequence of this has to do with the degree of verisimilitude ascribed to certain narrative accounts in a given community, for it will be to some extent attached to such conventional forms.

¹ The differentiation between *history* and *story* that exists in English does not appear either in Latin languages or in German, where the words *Geschichte*, the same as *historia*, *storia* and *histoire* gather together both meanings, somehow conflating the idea of fiction with that of representation of the past.

To sum up, narratives here are understood as meaning-making meditational tools for the construction and interpretation of reality. As pointed out, this *poietic* role becomes crucial when it comes to give sense and continuity to past and present events as well as to provide a certain directionality and orientation towards possible future scenarios. Lastly, they have an inherent cultural dimension, since people tend to organize narratives by adopting the prevalent templates and meanings available to them in their community.

GIVING SENSE TO HISTORICAL EVENTS

But what happens when it comes to historical discourses and, specifically, to national histories? In dealing with this matter we will see how in order to establish the events of the past and their causes, a narrative form is required; a narrative form whose coherence and global sense depend both on the selection of a central theme, and the presence of a main character (the nation) who develops the plot by enacting the story. From this standpoint we will focus on national narratives, observing how their form permits both past and present events to be interpreted and appraised, offering as a result different guides to future oriented actions. Finally we will make some remarks about the teaching of history, drawing our attention to the potential risks derived from the consumption of closed and naturalized historical narratives which aim to create loyal nationalists instead of critical citizens.

Some Perspectives

Historical narratives are made up of events. But where do events come from? Are they ready-made entities that exist out there, charged with their own meaning, waiting to be translated into a narrative form? Do they become apparent in the form of ready-made stories whose plot and meaning has to be discovered by the vigilant historian? Or are they rather narrative mediated products whose meaning stems from their function in the development of a certain narrative plot?

These three questions point to three different ways of understanding events and, consequently, to three different conceptions of how historians give accounts of the past. According to Brockmeier and Harré (2001), the first one would correspond to what they term the *representation fallacy*, which stems from “the mistake of supposing that there is one and only one human reality to which all narratives must in the end conform” (p. 48). We can see, for instance, this viewpoint underpinning Lemon’s (2001) notion of an *occurrence*, which he defines as an “irreducible datum” (p. 119), and the way he attributes meaning to it: “An individual occurrence is articulated through an individual verb, and [...] its intelligibility derives from the meaning or definition of that verb” (p. 120).

Together with the representation fallacy, Brockmeier and Harré (2001) use the term *ontological fallacy* to characterize the standpoint according to which “there is really a story ‘out there’, waiting to be uncovered, prior to the narrative process and absent from its analytical re-construction” (p. 48). Close to this position, we find historians as David Carr (2001), who reckons that “narrative has not merely an epistemological but also an ontological significance” (p. 198). Thus, “the

tendency to reify the metalinguistic category of narrative” (Brockmeier & Harré, 2001, p. 49) leads other authors to consider that “the task of historians (as of reporters) is to ‘find the story’, implying that it exists before the historian (or reporter) is in a position to tell it” (Dray, 2001, p. 177).

The Interpretation of Historical Events: A Controversial Issue

According to both perspectives, there would be a ready-made reality which would come into view in the form of either fixed events or well-structured stories whose meaning could be identified by the historian or by anyone capable of, so to speak, *reading* the facts properly. For this to be achieved, individuals would need to have an objective outlook on facts, an antique dealer attitude towards the past, completely devoid of any interest, except that of recollecting historical events for the sake of expanding knowledge about the past. From this standpoint, both the ideological and the temporal viewpoint of the historian are left to one side, thus neglecting not only the socio-political background influences on their understanding of events, but also the fact that historical events far from being something fixed are always in the process of being reinterpreted with the passing of time in the light of the consequences derived from them. In this regard, as Hayden White (1986a) points out, it seems difficult to sustain that reality as it appears itself either in the form of ready-made stories—with a clearly-distinct beginning, climax and ending—or in the form of literary genres, since not only can the same historical facts be interpreted in the light of different forms depending on the perspective adopted, but also it could very well be the case that the same facts, initially regarded as forming part of a comedy, end up by being reinterpreted and rewritten in tragic terms.

History wars (Linenthal & Engelhardt, 1996) would constitute, in this sense, a paradigmatic topic, since the perspective of each side usually determines the way in which both the beginning, the evolution and, especially the outcome of the conflict is appraised and narratively constructed. Thus, while the victorious side normally appraises the military episode as a heroic deed, emplotting facts upon an epic form, the other side tends to regard it as a tragedy. However, it could also be the case that certain currents of opinion, detached from both perspectives, look upon the whole episode from an ironic point of view, considering the moral principles put forward at the beginning of the conflict as a mere rhetoric farce, the human sacrifice as totally meaningless and the end result as completely insignificant. So, in taking these examples into account, we can conclude that a narrative “representation of a given sequence of events as a tragedy, comedy, farce, and so forth, belongs to the category of judgments of value rather than of fact” (White, 1986a, p. 486).

As can be seen, all these questions make the interpretation of historical events a rather controversial issue. Past events are always being (re)interpreted from a constantly changing present to which they are linked by means of narratives, thus establishing a discursive continuity which creates in turn “a dramatic tension towards an imagined future” (Rosa, 1994, p. 226). “Narration therefore is the process of making sense of the experience of time”, inasmuch as “it makes the experience of the past become relevant for present life and influences the shaping

of the future” (Rüsen, 1987, pp. 88-89). Consequently, historical accounts are far from being motivated by a mere antiquarian conception of the past. As Nietzsche states, “the knowledge of the past is desired only for the service of the future and the present” (1873-76/1957, p. 22). This implies that historical narratives are produced by multiple social agents who, in interpreting the past, also provide different symbolic tool-kits for both understanding the present and projecting future scenarios for action.

Therefore, contrary to the theoretical viewpoints discussed above, we consider that “people do not experience events and situations passively. They actively frame, contemplate, and remember details according to their goals, knowledge, and experience” (Mosborg, 2002, p. 348). In fact, it is precisely this active and goal oriented role of individuals when (re)constructing the past which makes the interpretation of historical events such a controversial issue; a controversy that does not stem so much from an academic disagreement over the accuracy in identifying an external past ‘reality’, but rather from the ideological goals at stake, thus resulting in a political dispute where multiple voices stand up for their own versions of the past (Luczynski, 1997). Consequently, in these “social contexts of controversy” (Billig, 1991, p. 43), different and even converse interpretations of past events come up insofar as “multiple narrative frames lead us to multiple meanings, within multiple narrative perspectives from which an event can be viewed” (Feldman, 2001, p. 133). This leads to one of the key points of our essay: the inherent relationship between aesthetics and ideological aspects in the narrative construction of historical events.

Historical Events under Description

In contrast to the first standpoint examined—which could be termed as *realist*—there are other theoretical positions which do not conceive events as pre-existent entities waiting to be translated and represented by narratives. On the contrary, they understand them as narrative mediated products whose meaning stem from their “contribution to the development of a plot” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 167); the plot being “the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story” (p. 167). From this standpoint, authors such as Mink consider that “events [...] are not the raw material out of which narratives are constructed; rather, an event is an abstraction from a narrative” (2001, p. 220). Likewise, Mink (2001) also calls into question the standpoint sustained by the so called *plot-reifiers*:

“...if we accept that the description of events is a function of particular narrative structures, we cannot at the same time suppose that the actuality of the past is an untold story. There can in fact be no untold stories at all [...]. There can be only past facts not yet described in a context of narrative form” (p. 220).

From these premises he concludes “that we cannot refer to events as such, but only to events *under a description*; so there can be more than one description of the same event” (Mink, 2001, p. 219, emphasis in original). This observation is a crucial one since it poses the question on the reference of events; a question that Mink himself, following his own argument, considers: “But what can we possibly mean by ‘same event’? Under what description do we refer to the event that is

supposed to sustain different descriptions?" (p. 219). In dealing with these questions, some authors (Norman, 2001) criticise what they consider an *anti-referentialist* position, where the importance given to the pragmatic use of historical narratives would neglect the study of the actual facts of the events. Likewise, they also target their critics for what they call an *impositionist* standpoint, according to which historical narratives would result in an "imposition of a certain formal coherence on a virtual chaos of events" (White, 1981, p. 795). In this regard Norman (2001) shows in his objections that "in history, the parts are no more unproblematically 'given' than is the whole" (p. 185).

The Narrative Construction of Historical Events

Our viewpoint in relation to this matter is that anything that happens can become the reference point for an event. However this requires a narrative structure to be added, since for a happening to become an event, one has to focus on a particular observed change, and bring to it some causality and a certain rationalisation. We can see this process working in the accounts of the September 11th terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, where, in spite of the repeated broadcasting of the images of the plane crushing into the building, few people managed to understand what was going on at the time, or to be more precise, what sort of event was taking place then. For this reason, many specialists were requested to provide a narrative that gave sense to the image witnessed all over the world, by hypothesising about the possible historical causes of this act, about the intentions which motivated terrorists to commit it and, more importantly, offering different future scenarios for action.

In considering this example, it is important to notice that the same happening can give rise to different events and therefore to different meanings according to the narrative provided; a narrative which in supplying a plausible link between the past, the present and the future, provides at the same time a theme for the story, a plot, together with its protagonists and antagonists. In addition, the theme provided will depend on the *explanatory intentions* (Danto, 1985) at stake, which makes the discursive construction of events an essentially moral and ideological matter. This is why happenings can either be ignored or privileged depending on their compatibility with the explanatory intention and the narrative theme chosen by the narrator.

It goes without saying that the narrative provided has to supply an account of the observed happenings, endowing them with a meaning, that is to say, turning them into events with a certain function vis-à-vis the development of a given narrative plot. However, it is also worth observing that sometimes for a theme to be fully developed, certain events are required; events which, in that case, lack any referential happening, being inferred by the historian and brought into the story in order to fill out its plot's development and provide it with verisimilitude. Mink (1987) illustrates this practice with the following example: "Thucydides wrote only of contemporary events simply because he was his own source, but felt no difficulty about interpolating events and speeches of his own invention because they were only what one would expect under the circumstances" (p. 98).

As can be noted, the presence of a theme is crucial for events to be narratively constructed. According to Somers (2001), “the primacy of th[e] narrative theme [...] determines how events are processed and what criteria will be used to prioritize events and render meaning to them” (p. 362). So viewed, we could state that the theme provided would act as an interpretative means through which initially meaningless happenings, or rather, happenings with multiple potential meanings would acquire sense, significance and a certain function within a narrative structure, being as they are, so to speak, *narratively domesticated* (White, 1982), or as Rosa and Blanco (2007) put it, *na-rationalised*. Thus, happenings—such as the September 11th terrorist attack mentioned above—would come into view as signs in a given semiotic actuation, as they are perceived as meaningful events in the light of the thematic narrative used.

We can find a similar perspective in Volosinov’s (1973/1930) philosophy of language, namely in the semiotic relationship he suggests between the sign—the word—and the meaning the sign obtains in a given utterance, the theme being “the significance of a whole utterance” (1973/1930, p. 99). To Volosinov “multiplicity of meanings is the constitutive feature of word” (p. 101). From this standpoint, meaning, far from being something fixed and arbitrary attached to a given word—as Saussure school defends—is considered as something potential, only being instantiated within a concrete theme. The same would occur with happenings whose meaning, unlike the above mentioned standpoint held by Lemon (2001), would not stem from the definition of the verb that represents them within a closed and fixed system of signification. Far from that, happenings, as signs, become meaningful and significant only as a result of a *poietic* actuation carried out by means of narratives endowed with a certain subject matter (see Figure 1). Therefore happenings as such simply lack meaning beyond this semiotic process. As Volosinov sustains (1973/1930), “there is nothing in the structure of signification that could be said to transcend th[is] generative process” (p. 106).

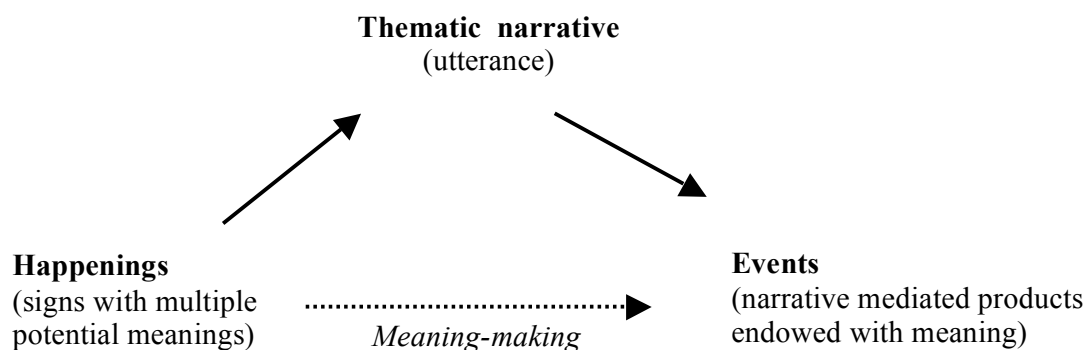


Figure 1. The narrative construction of events

In looking at this semiotic triadic structure, it is worth taking into account that, as mentioned before, the narrative theme stems from a moral and ideological decision according to the explanatory intentions of the author. So viewed, ideology is no longer a drawback within an idyllic objective outlook on events, but something inherent in the very aesthetic and *poietic* act of giving sense to

happenings by means of a certain thematic narrative. Hence the innate controversy which accompanies historical accounts; the polemic which surrounds the interpretation of signs the past has left on the present—such as documents or archaeological remains. That is why Volosinov, from his Marxist point of view, considers that the “sign [i]s an arena of the class struggle” (1973/193, p. 23).

GIVING SENSE TO NATIONAL EVENTS

But what happens when the nationalist ideology constitutes the theme of history? The first consequence is that past events begin to be understood in national terms. History turns then into national history, the nations being the protagonists and the main agents of it. In fact, this is the way in which both the great majority of history text books and people tend to conceive history nowadays, to the extent that ideas such as the past of nations, the national character, not to mention the very existence of nations as real and long-standing entities are taken for granted. This would test the hegemonic position of nationalist ideology in our time; the degree to which this ideology would have been internalized by the entire population, becoming part of their general feeling and common sense. In light of this, it could be said that “common sense [...] marks the moment at which an ideology triumphantly becomes ‘banal’” (Sutherland, 2005, p. 194). In this way, *banal nationalism* would pave the way we constitute both the world and even ourselves as national citizens. As Billig (1995) puts it “the world of nations is the everyday world, the familiar terrain of contemporary times” (p. 6).

In this section we will see how, in the case of national histories, the nation becomes a key element for the narrative construction of events, insofar as the protagonist role it performs within the story endows the plot with a certain sense and continuity, thus causing the development of the narrative. However, not only does the nation give sense and continuity to historical narratives; at the same time, historical narratives—as they do with events—constitute the symbolic means through which nations are discursively represented and endowed with meaning on account of the function they receive from the story. Finally we will highlight the ideological dimension of nationalist discourses. In this regard we will emphasize how the narrative form attached to certain cultural genres is used to give shape to past events with the purpose of creating a rhetoric argument aimed at mobilizing people towards a certain imagined future.

Nations and Historical Narratives

Nations, the same as events, are symbolic constructions, for it is through the use of a wide range of symbolic and rhetorical artefacts that the initial abstract idea of a nation—that kind of community imagined (Anderson, 1983) by an elite at the beginning of the nineteenth century—can be objectified, personalized and therefore easily distributed and assimilated by the entire population. So viewed, the *nationalization of the masses* (Mosse, 1975) can be understood in the light of the social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984). Thus, flags, monuments, maps, uniforms, together with a wide range of other things which, as history, were also nationalized—typical dishes, traditional music, emblematic buildings, not to mention landscapes—would make up a wide range of symbolic devices aimed at

turning “something abstract into something almost concrete” (1984, p. 29). In this sense, they would underpin the *figurative nucleus* (Moscovici, 1984) of nations, making them visible and present in our everyday lives.

However, the idea of a nation as an imagined entity is not only represented and disseminated through these symbolic resources. Historical narratives are a privileged means of characterizing and objectifying nations as collective actors which in turn tend to appear metonymically embodied in particular actors—as national heroes and institutions—endowed with the leading role within the plot. As Moscovici (1984) remarks on this matter, the objectification process is carried out via “the personification of nations” (p. 43). Consequently, national entities are depicted through the same rhetorical resources employed to portray fictional characters, and end up by taking the same kinds of attributes and psychological functions such as memories, purposes, feelings, states of mind and so on. In this way, people can easily identify themselves with the main character of the plot, thus getting involved with the events narrated. As a result, the nation’s values, purposes, victories and defeats are assumed and felt in first person plural. But so are the nation’s enemies and their threats, since, as Billig (1995) states referring to national discourses: “nationalism is an ideology of the first person plural which necessarily implies a third person. There can be no ‘us’ without a ‘them’” (p. 78)”. In this sense, *identity* always implies an *alterity*.

As has been argued, nations are understood and depicted as collective actors. Nevertheless the legitimacy together with the very existence of such collectives lies in their (supposed) historical past. Nations are historically justified. That is why in many national narratives these imagined communities are projected back in time and considered as the main agents of history from the very beginning. In this respect, not only is the nation a historical character created by narrative means but is also what motivates the very process of writing national histories, just as dynasties motivated the writing of chronicles in the Middle Ages. Therefore, the nation would be both the *raison d’être* and the “hermeneutic key” (Prados, 2005, p. 55) of certain accounts of the past, since the events included would be interpreted in national terms. It would be, according to White (1980) the “legal subject” (p. 16) of historical narratives, that is, some sort of virtual agent whose main goal throughout the narrative would consist of either defending a certain moral system or fighting for the creation of a new one. In these cases, narrative plots usually convey a certain nationalist argument which is justified precisely by the way historical events are narratively selected and constructed.

We can see the hermeneutic role of nations regarding the interpretation of historical events in the case of Al-Andalus (Rasskin & Brescó, 2008). Al-Andalus is the Arabic name referred to those parts of the Iberian Peninsula governed by different Muslim reigns which ranges in time from 711 to 1492. However, in many Spanish history text books this period has been traditionally termed as *Reconquista*—Spanish for “re-conquest.” A term which would take its meaning from both the key role assigned to Spanish nation in such historical accounts and the way traditional nationalist discourses characterise this national actor, namely highlighting its supposed Catholic and Western nature. Hence, the anachronistic way of considering the Spanish nation as the main agent of the story—projecting

its existence back to Al-Andalus period—together with the central role of Catholic religion in defining its identity is what would allow one to speak about the initial loss of identity—caused by the entry of Muslims into the Iberian Peninsula—and, more importantly, about the subsequent *re-conquest* of such an identity after the expulsion of Muslims.

In this respect, as Rosa, Bellelli and Bakhurst (2000) point out, it is worth remarking that the term *identity* probably stems from the combination of two Latin words: *idem*—which means “the same”—and *entitas*—that is, “entity.” So, according to this nationalist view of Al-Andalus, we could say that for the Spanish nation to remain the same entity throughout history, it was necessary to reconquer two defining traits of its essential character lost during the Al-Andalus period: the Catholic religion and the European origin. Thus viewed, Muslims would come to represent the image of “them” set against the idea of “Us” as Spaniards and Catholics; an image which also would constitute a kind of symbolic resource to be used in other scenarios well beyond that of Al-Andalus with the intention of mobilize people and rhetorically justify certain political decisions.

The Ideological Dimension of National Narratives

This leads us to the ideological facet of nationalist discourses and therefore to examining the role of narrative histories which, as cultural mediators, permit us not only to interpret and appraise both past and present events, but more importantly, to justify and give meaning to possible future worlds. In this respect it is worth remembering that this takes place through narrative genres or conventional forms which make the content more plausible and as a result, more persuasive. Consequently, certain well-known narratives structures would act as anchoring tools for the staging of national stories, making the nationalist argument conveyed easier to understand, thus provoking a “dramatic engagement” (Gergen & Gergen, 1984, p. 178) which results in an identification not only with the protagonist’s past, but, more importantly, with their future projects. As Schieder (1978) points out, “historical consciousness is not restricted to retrospective contemplation, but instead draws conclusions from the past and applies them to goals that lie in the future” (p. 1).

The so called *nationalist rhetorical triad* (Levinger & Lytle, 2001) constitutes a good example of this. According to this narrative structure, the prescription of future oriented actions in relation to a certain community would be rhetorically supported by establishing an opposition between a supposed glorious national past and a present degraded state caused by the action of a national enemy. Thus, the form expressed through a classic narrative genre (in this case, a tragedy) would allow the main actor of the story (the nation) to adopt a victim role in the historical drama. In this way, the portrait of a tragic past, preceded by a remote golden age, can be used, not only as criteria to diagnose the present situation, but also as a moral argument for mobilization in order to reach a certain political future goal.

As can be noticed, this structure—similar to the *fall* and *rebirth* template, traditionally employed in Western literature—not just gives a certain form to the

contents narrated, but it performs a *poietic* function through which events are constituted, appraised and emplotted according to the thematic narrative used. So in considering this, it could be said that narrative forms convey an ideological and moral content; content that Hayden White (1986b) calls *the content of the form*. Specifically, in this example different characteristic concepts related to nationalist ideology are narratively underpinned. Some of these concepts would be, according to Smith (2001), those of *authenticity*—which refers to the historical existence of the nation—, *continuity*—identified in the surviving national identity in spite of the enemy’s occupation—, *dignity*—shown through the nation’s willingness to resist the occupation—and *destiny*—in this case, one of liberation aimed at recovering the lost golden past.

THE TEACHING OF HISTORY: TOWARDS THE CREATION OF REFLEXIVE CITIZENS

Throughout these pages we have shown how the ideological content of the form in giving accounts of the past is inherently attached to the aesthetical dimension of historical narratives, namely to the very *poietic* act of constituting historical events; events whose meaning stems from their function within the development of a particular plot which in turn tends to adopt a conventional template. This has obvious and widespread repercussions throughout the teaching of history, specifically, of national history, since on many occasions the transmission of national narratives involves the use of certain closed and reified plots which are aimed at conveying a moral for the group and, therefore, ensuring an unconditional loyalty to the nation. As shown, the appropriation of such discourses implies the identification with the national entity of the story, assuming its perspective as one’s own which makes individuals become actors of a ready-made script. According to this use of narratives, it could be said that the function of history would consist of “reveal[ing] the scene in which one has to perform a role within an on-going drama” (Blanco & Rosa, 1997, p. 3).

However, this way of teaching history seems to be clearly at odds with the stimulation of a critical and open-minded view which is called to be more and more necessary within an increasingly complex and globalised world scenario. This is why we reckon that, instead of promoting passive appropriations of narratives, the teaching of history should provide the necessary tools so that individuals can master and critically face the wide number of *prêt-a-porter* historical versions that circulate through the *symbolic market* (Bourdieu, 1991). This would imply bringing the aesthetical dimension of history to the fore in order to draw attention to the *poietic* role of narratives, regarding them as cultural frames for history (Levstik, 1995). By doing this we aim at encouraging “historical literacy” (Perfetti, Britt, Rouet, Georgi, & Mason, 1994), showing that “real learning in history entails going beyond simple stories to interpret, construct explanations, and generally to negotiate uncertainty surrounding the events” (1994, p. 257).

Furthermore, we reckon that this attitude towards history should be promoted from the very outset. As it is sustained by certain standpoints, students “do not need to learn the facts first and then start to do the interesting ‘good stuff’. [...] [They] certainly can begin the process of reasoning in history from the beginning”

(Leinhardt, Stainton, Virji, & Odoroff, 1994, p. 156). This approach to history aims to prevent individuals from naturalising certain versions of the past; making them instead reflect on the political and ideological positions from which such narratives would have been constructed. Thus, taking Kieran Egan's (1997) concept of *ironic understanding* when consuming historical narratives, we would agree with Blanco and Rosa (1997) in stating that "perhaps it would not be a bad goal to look for an ironic citizenship, but an irony based upon reflection and informed dialogue, not cynicism" (p. 15). The whole point of this would consist of making actors become reflexive authors endowed with more agency to co-construct their own historical versions in internal debate with themselves and in open dialogue with others.

"In each epoch, there are always authoritative utterances that set the tone [...] works on which one relies, to which one refers, which are cited, imitated, and followed" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89). In this respect the teaching of history should prevent individuals from becoming simply ventriloquists of official versions of the past and, consequently, prisoners of ready-made historical dramas. For this situation to be avoided the necessary symbolic resources should be supplied so that alternative scenarios could be thought of. Because history, the same as poetry, is to a certain extent a form of art aimed at imagining and constructing different possible worlds.

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