This issue of *Humanities Research* responds to a well-known challenge thrown down many years ago by the American historian Hayden White and the cultural theorist Dominick La Capra: both criticized modern historical practice for failing to break out of explanatory models and methodologies based on the nineteenth-century realist novel. By clinging unreflectingly or defensively to an illusion of a single knowable past evoked through realistic mimesis and by ignoring the metaphoric nature of historical language, historians were depriving themselves of a rich body of modernist and postmodernist literary experimentation. Of course there was a degree of exaggeration in these claims: even the sober nineteenth century produced the reflexive, polemical and many-voiced historical genius of Thomas Carlyle. Still, our critics were right that such subjective and imaginative styles of history writing were becoming increasingly rare in the 1960s: my own teacher, Manning Clark, was seen as eccentric by many of his contemporaries for continuing to teach Carlyle’s prophetic ‘pseudo-history’. Now, on the edge of the new millennium, we can point to some notable experimental histories. Simon Schama’s part fictive *Dead Certainties*, Natalie Davis’s filmic *Martin Guerre*, and, closer to home, Greg Dening’s brilliantly poetic and theatrical Pacific writings, Donna Merwick’s fascinating recent biography written in the present tense, and Paul Carter’s influential postmodernist history *Road to Botany Bay*: all these come to mind.

The four essays in this issue argue, however, that there is room for more thoroughgoing exchanges with contemporary literary and cultural criticism. Ann Curthoys and John Docker, in an elegant duet, uncover deep-seated connections between history and literary allegory, suggesting and showing how we can open up our stories to alternative generic models such as Walter Benjamin’s rococo and apocalyptic mourning plays, where expressionist excess prevails over classical restraint.

Stephen Muecke makes kindred points from different angles of vision, arguing for a return to the sacred and primitive in history writing—defined as ritualized moments of deep communal unity expressed in stark, simple terms. History’s magical ability to recast the present, has, he argues, been richly demonstrated by the huge-selling and morally compelling writing of frontier historian Henry Reynolds. Perhaps, as Thomas Carlyle and Manning Clark both declaimed, it is time for the historian to regain the mantle of prophet.
But if this is to happen one of the most intractable bastions of unreflective scientism that must still be stormed is that of professional economics: David Blaazer strikes a clever blow with a fascinating deconstruction of British banknotes, showing how the most taken-for-granted medium of paper currency has evolved in complex visual and iconic relationships to changing constructions of national identity.

And finally we turn to a historical prophet long neglected in his own country, or at least his country of adoption, the sociologist Norbert Elias. Miriam Glucksmann gives us a moving personal testimony of her familial and intellectual relationship with this Jewish refugee and Leicester University academic whose brilliant first book Civilizing Process, carried three great handicaps: it was published in Switzerland, in 1939, and in German. Lack of English translations undoubtedly hampered subsequent knowledge of Elias's writings over the next fifty years, though his fame has soared in Continental Europe where he is now recognized as a thinker of the stature of Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, and Habermas. His 'figurational sociology' uses detailed historical case-studies to explore the large, shifting patterns of social interdependency through which humans are woven together in complex power balances, making him as important a source of historical theory and praxis as Marx or Weber. Moreover, Elias speaks particularly to our time in his transcendence of conventional political polarities and in his ability to link the private history of emotions with the public history of state formations. For those historians who have yet to read him, a prophet awaits you. 

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