

Hayden White and Innovation in Late 20th Century Historiography

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1. Introduction

Some of the most important contributions to historical thinking in the last twenty years have come from Hayden V. White (*1928), professor of history of consciousness at the University of California since 1978. Although his name does not yet resound with a larger audience, his influence has been great enough to force almost every author of an overview over recent historiographical trends written since the late 1970s to include it.¹

While White is also recognized as an authority in the field of intellectual history (he has specifically worked on Giambattista Vico, the history of liberalism, and various problems of 19th-century thinking; compare the bibliography, p. 10 of this paper), it is the field of historiographical reasoning where his impact will be most lasting. His work in this field takes the shape of essays and articles, so White does not propound a comprehensive theory, but rather expresses ideas which are characterized by originality, his chief contribution namely being to have opened history for a cooperation with literary theory.

He can thus be subsumed under what has been termed the “linguistic turn in historiography”. Since White does, however, largely do without linguistic terminology, it shall suffice to state here that the so-called linguistic turn is the result of developments mainly in the field of linguistics itself, which has on the one hand witnessed a remarkable scientificization since the turn of the century, marked by the achievements of Saussure, Bloomfield, and Chomsky, and on the other hand has, through stressing semantics and semiotics, i.e. the relation of grammar to the *meaning* of texts or discourse, come to intrude more and more into the fields of social sciences and philosophy, mainly by the achievements of the French structuralists and the U.S. post-structuralists.

One result of this development has been the opening of the social sciences to linguistic concerns, first and foremost in the form of the realization that the objects of science as well as the products of scientific inquiry are before us in the form of language, after all.² Generally

¹ S. e.g. Burke, Peter (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Cambridge: Blackwell 1991. White also serves as one of the chief figures Keith Windschuttle identifies as the murderers in his *The Killing of History* (Paddington: Macleay 1996). Unexpectedly, White, despite of being an American, appears in Georg G. Iggers' *New Directions in European Historiography*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 1975, as well, and his ideas have even come to be acknowledged (if still rejected) by such outspoken conservatives in method as John Clive (cp. *Not by Fact Alone. Essays on the Writing and Reading of History*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1989, pp. ix and 302). Recently, his name alone seems to have come to stand summarily for a whole direction of historiography: Compare Kozicki, Henry (ed.), *Developments in Modern Historiography*, London: MacMillan 1993, in which White's name appears in seven of the ten articles, although only one actually deals with his ideas, albeit shortly.

² This is a very brief summary of Struever, Nancy S., *Historiography and Linguistics*, in: Iggers, Georg G./Parker,

speaking, history as an academic science has been rather late in acknowledging this and detailing out the consequences of this for historical inquiry, one of the early exceptions having been Hayden White which is why I would like to sketch his intellectual development until today in the following.

2. “The Burden of History”

In 1966 White published the essay “The Burden of History” in the academic journal *History and Theory*.³ As Peter Burke judges, this essay established White as “the *enfant terrible* of his profession”,⁴ but it also gives first hints at what he would later explicate more broadly, so it is of some interest to the present study.

In the article White claims that history has been viewed in a negative light ever since the second half of the 19th century by representatives of all professions except for historians themselves, and especially by artists and writers. Concerning the historians’ presentation of their own field of study, White remarks that they have since its academic establishment in the 19th century employed a strategy of retreat, deliberately giving up the notion of history as a pure science with the usual standards of scientific rigorosity in exchange for being acknowledged as holding a middle position between the arts and the sciences.⁵ Non-historical science today, however, has come to suspect history of trying to avoid having to deal with the advancements of social sciences, philosophy and literature of the 20th century, and therefore resent it.⁶ Current historians had therefore better to be ready to face these challenges: “They must be prepared to entertain the notion that history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation, and that, with the passing of misunderstandings that produced that situation, history itself may lose its status as an autonomous and self-authenticating mode of thought.”⁷

This hostility on the side of scientific thinking, however, is matched by one directed

Harold T. (ed.), *International Handbook of Historical Studies: Contemporary Research and Theory*, Westport: Greenwood 1979, pp. 127-150. For details I refer to this article.

³ I will refer to the version printed in White, Hayden V., *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1978, pp. 27-50.

⁴ Burke, Peter, Rethinking the Historian’s Craft, in: *The Times Literary Supplement*, Nov. 6-12, 1987, p. 1218.

⁵ Cf. White, *Tropics*, p. 27.

⁶ Cf. White, *Tropics*, p. 28.

⁷ White, *Tropics*, p. 29.

towards history by modern art, especially modern literature. A long section of the essay is committed to proving this proposition by citing numerous examples, ranging from André Gide at the end of the 19th century up to Luigi Pirandello after World War II.⁸ The pattern which many of these artists followed was, according to White, first set by Nietzsche who, both in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) as well as in *The Use and Abuse of History* (1874), described history as the strongest antipode to art and as being directly opposed to life.⁹ Essentially, two different patterns can be discerned in modern writers' treatment of history: One is the employment of historians as characters in plays or novels who are usually depicted as being engulfed in the past and unable to live in the present.¹⁰ The second one is the general tendency to discard history as an anti-life movement concerned with the dead past only.¹¹

After having shown rather convincingly the dislike of history prevalent both in scientific as well as in artistic communities, White goes on to argue that history cannot ignore this criticism, but has to find a way to reestablish "the dignity of historical studies"¹² in order to avoid catering to the common man only, usually not considered to be a criterion of quality for any undertaking. The solution to which White points lies in the historians' acknowledging the gap between the outmoded methods of historiography still prevalent and the actual situation of living in the post-World War II 20th century with all "its strangeness and mystery."¹³ According to him, while the world around them and scientists in other fields as well as artists changed, historians from the middle of the 19th century on kept clinging to history as "a combination of *romantic* art on the one hand and of *positivistic* science on the other."¹⁴ The latter is visible in the way historians treat facts as being objectively given without recognizing their subjective construction by themselves.¹⁵

What is really new, however, in White's critique is what he has to say about what should be done in order to overcome the sole dominance of "romantic art" or, to be more precise, what is faulty in the *narrative* a historian usually employs to relate his findings in a meaningful framework. Here the keyword *style* comes into the discussion, as White demands historians to use styles adequate to their topics: "There have been no significant attempts at surrealistic, expressionistic, or existentialist historiography in this century [...] It is almost as if

⁸ Cf. White, *Tropics*, pp. 31-39.

⁹ Cf. White, *Tropics*, p. 32

¹⁰ Cf. White, *Tropics*, pp. 32-35.

¹¹ Cf. White, *Tropics*, pp. 35-39.

¹² White, *Tropics*, p. 40.

¹³ White, *Tropics*, p. 41.

¹⁴ White, *Tropics*, p. 42.

the historians believed that the sole possible form of historical narration was that used in the English novel as it had developed by the late nineteenth century.”¹⁶ Just as modern artists gave up the claim to be able to present their object in only one way (that supposedly rendered the object correctly and completely) and instead chose to be radically relativistic in their style, historians, too, should learn that it is impossible to attain the one and only truth that the sources they are dealing with allegedly express, and rather be aware of the relativity of their approaches, which on the other hand also allows them a greater freedom in their approach.¹⁷

This is not just a suggestion; it is a demand put forth by our times:

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, history has become increasingly the refuge of all of those ‘sane’ men who excel at finding the simple in the complex and the familiar in the strange. This was all very well for an earlier age, but if the present generation needs anything at all it is a willingness to confront heroically the dynamic and disruptive forces in contemporary life. The historian serves no one well by constructing a specious continuity between the present world and that which preceded it. On the contrary, we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot.¹⁸

3. “Introduction” to *Tropics of Discourse*

While the preceding chapter described White’s general attitude toward historiography in general terms, I will now turn toward the actual methodological implications that arise from this. The most accessible summary of White’s approach, employed by him in his opus maximum, the 450-page monograph *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1973), can be found in the “Introduction” to the essay collection *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*.

In it, he explains the theory of *tropes*, which is one of the central foundations of his work. The word trope derives from the Greek word *τρόπος*, meaning “turn”, “way”, or “manner”, but White uses it to mean “figure of speech” or “style”, based on conventions as opposed to discourse based on logic rationality, a style that is perceived to be an idiosyncrasy of the author and a deviation of normality by the author employing it.¹⁹ The usage of such tropes, or “tropical behavior”, is a fundamental characteristic not only of literary writing, but of all discourse, that is to say, instead of focusing on the subject proper, discourses about

¹⁵ Cf. White, *Tropics*, p. 43.

¹⁶ White, *Tropics*, pp. 43f.

¹⁷ Cf. White, *Tropics*, pp. 46f.

¹⁸ White, *Tropics*, p. 50.

¹⁹ White, *Tropics*, p. 2.

human affairs “tend to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them”²⁰ in a fundamentally irrational way. This is, however, not something that should be avoided as unscientific behavior; rather, tropical behavior also constitute the objects of inquiry in the first place.²¹

In line with this general exposition, White concentrates on finding irrational elements in discourse, be it realistic or imaginative, and emphasizes the textual level of scientific undertaking. The reason for this is that even the most sober text involves troping, at least some degree of “failure of intention”, some presentation which seems distorted to some readers; even the archetype of logical reasoning, the classical Aristotelian syllogism, involves troping insofar as the choice of the minor premise is completely arbitrary.²² What makes the acknowledgment of the tropical nature of all discourse so important is that it also affects the way in which we interpret texts. The usual way to assess a text is by relating it to the facts it is concerned with; the problem is that the discourse itself only constitutes what shall count as a fact in the first place.²³

Obviously, at the core of White’s arguing lies a (implicit) deep distrust in the nature and objectivity of reality itself. This becomes most clear when he states that discourse is a mediative enterprise that moves between different ways of representing in textual form what an author *perceives as* reality.²⁴

Perhaps more fruitful than his general speculations are White’s more concrete arguments about the nature of textual discourse. First, he identifies three levels of analysis of a text: 1) the mimetical, 2) the diegetical, and 3) the diatactical. What he means by these terms is 1) the level of the description of the data themselves. In addition to that there can surely be discerned 2) a level of arguments or narrative, which attempts to make sense of these data. There is, however, also 3) a level of meta-discourse, which combines the first two levels. This is the level on which not only the possible objects of discourse are determined, but which also discourses about the discourse itself, throws itself into doubt, and to which White therefore also refers to as “metadiscursive reflexiveness”.²⁵

Regarding discourse as a model of the process of understanding, White moves on to the center of his argument: Understanding being the process of rendering the unfamiliar

²⁰ White, *Tropics*, p. 1.

²¹ Cf. White, *Tropics*, p. 2.

²² Cf. White, *Tropics*, p. 3.

²³ Cf. White, *Tropics*, p. 3.

²⁴ Cf. White, *Tropics*, p. 4.

familiar, he argues that this acquisition of the unfamiliar can only be performed by drawing analogies to already familiar knowledge. And it is here that troping comes back into the argument again, because the way this assimilation of the unfamiliar is performed can, according to White, only be tropical in nature, meaning here that it takes the form of a figurative approach. Accordingly, he identifies four phases of this tropical assimilation clothed in the terminology of rhetorical figures of speech.²⁶

These are 1) metaphor, 2) metonymy, 3) synecdoche, and 4) irony, and, following White, all discourse about human consciousness in the Western cultural tradition is marked by this pattern.²⁷ The literary terms refer to 1) a comparison without identification of the compared (e.g. “my love, a rose”); 2) a representation in which the represented is replaced as a whole by the representing (e.g. “fifty sail” for “fifty ships”); 3) a representation in which the representing shares a quality with the represented (e.g. “he is all hearts”); 4) a metaphor that plays upon misrepresentation (e.g. “he is all hearts” used in a situation in which evidently the opposite is the case).²⁸

White explains the meanings of these terms in historiography taking the example of E. P. Thompson’s description of the development of the English working-class consciousness.²⁹ In the metaphorical stage, members of the working-class possessed only an awakening vague consciousness of themselves being different from other groups of people, but are not able to distinguish self and other yet. In the metonymical stage a common consciousness was formed by outward pressure, but this consciousness led neither to the formulation of a class theory nor to actions based on class distinctions. This happened only in the synecdochical stage, in which laborers actually came to perceive themselves as members of one class with a coherent background and history. In the fourth phase, then, the class consciousness is transformed into a *self*-consciousness, accompanied by a critique and finally the destruction of a coherent working-class.

White claims to be able to apply these four phases of consciousness also to the stages of child development as laid out by Jean Piaget, to the phases of the dreamwork as described by Freud, to Foucault’s characterization of language consciousness in different eras, to

²⁵ Cf. White, *Tropics*, p. 4f.

²⁶ It might be noted that White had, of course, predecessors; the theory of the four “master tropes” was developed for the field of literary studies by Harold Bloom (and may have seen its earliest forerunner in Vico), as White himself acknowledges (*Tropics*, p. 5).

²⁷ Cf. White, *Tropics*, p. 13.

²⁸ Examples and further explications can be found in: White, *Metahistory*, pp. 31-38.

²⁹ Cf. White, *Tropics*, pp. 15-19.

Darwin's evolution theory, and, especially important, as "modes of emplotment" to a series of 19th century thinkers, as exercised in *Metahistory*.

What this theory amounts to, however, is more than just a methodology for applying a certain terminology to certain phenomena, as exercised by White in *Metahistory*. Instead, it also affects our ability to verify historical writing. White removes the emphasis from the relationship of the narrative to events of processes towards a literary evaluation of the stylistic means a historian employs in writing. As Paul A. Roth summarizes White's position: "There is no truth-value, for example, to the statement that such and such a happening is tragic; there is only a telling which so presents it. Insofar as events and processes are artifacts of different strategies of emplotment, the narrative is neither true nor false in any sense congruent with the correspondence theory."³⁰

4. Critique and Judgment by Other Historians

A majority of people involved in theorizing about history today seems to agree with White on basic grounds but generally rejects his further-reaching conclusions in order to rescue a ground on which to maintain criteria for truth in history.

Georg G. Iggers, e.g., argued in 1993 that White did have a point in saying that every historical text is also a literary text, but that he also went too far in identifying the two completely, thus ending with a criterion for judging historical works that no longer judges about any truth of the historical narrative referring to a subject of study but that is based on literary criticism only. He also criticized that White "adopts [a] jargonized language".³¹ Already in 1975, Iggers had acknowledged White's then new ideas but rejected the identification of poetry with history for the sake of maintaining "history as a reality-oriented study into human affairs which may permit a variety of scientific strategies."³²

Another example of this kind of attitude towards White is Peter Burke, who admits that White is "among the few historians currently prepared to rethink the assumptions underlying the craft."³³ He also agrees with White that historians have to be more aware of

³⁰ Roth, Narrative Explanations, in: *History and Theory* 27, no. 1 (1988), p. 12.

³¹ **Iggers, Georg G.**, Rationality and History, in: Kozicki, Henry (ed.), *Developments in Modern Historiography*, London: MacMillan 1993, p. 28.

³² Iggers, New Directions, p. 175.

³³ Burke, Rethinking, p. 1218.

the fact “that their work does not reproduce ‘what actually happened’ so much as represent it from a particular point of view.”³⁴ Yet, Burke is not willing to follow the peculiar path White proposes, but argues there is as little need for contemporary historians to engage in experiments in 20th century literature as there was for earlier historians to employ the instrument of classical speech for presentation of their results.³⁵

Judging from the virtual nonexistence of historical works actually written in the way suggested by White, the response of mainstream practicing historians appears to have been rather cool, sometimes arriving at hostility, as is the case with the Australian historian Keith Windschuttle who outrightly accuses White of trying to topple the discipline of history. In the chapter “The Poetics of History” of his book *The Killing of History* he describes White’s position extensively³⁶ and makes out the danger to orthodox historiography inherent in it, its being able to change “both the scope and nature of the discipline itself.”³⁷ He also goes at some length to disprove the validity of White’s theory of tropes, concluding that “White has mistaken the surface for the substance, the decoration for the edifice”³⁸, reducing the function of the tropes to mere literary devices inside a historian’s narrative.

While there is also a certain group of historians agreeing to and following White (such as Louis Mink and his “New Rhetorical Relativism”³⁹), a rare position that criticizes White for not having gone far enough in the radicality of his consequences can also be found. The latter is the voice of Sande Cohen who includes White in his full-front attack on contemporary academic culture which he characterizes as an instrument for securing the control of the capitalist division of labor and thinking.⁴⁰ In his striving to prove the futility and even adverse effect of the historic discipline as a whole, White appears as just one of the defenders of history, even if his defense takes on an innovative form: “I try, in this regard, to show the arguments put forth by narrative theorists such as White (1973) that historical thought is fundamentally characterized by literary narration are defensive protections of the

³⁴ Burke, *New Perspectives*, p. 239.

³⁵ Burke, *New Perspectives*, pp. 237f.

³⁶ Windschuttle, *The Killing*, pp. 232-239.

³⁷ Windschuttle, *The Killing*, p. 239.

³⁸ Windschuttle, *The Killing*, p. 241.

³⁹ Cf. **Mink, Louis O.**, *Philosophy and Theory of History*, in: Iggers, Georg G./Parker, Harold T. (ed.), *International Handbook of Historical Studies: Contemporary Research and Theory*, Westport: Greenwood 1979, pp. 25f. and also **Vann, Richard T.**, *Louis Mink’s Linguistic Turn*, in: *History and Theory* 26, no. 1 (1987), pp. 1-14, especially pp. 6-8 and 14 where Vann describes the relationship between Mink and White.

⁴⁰ Cohen, Sande, *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1986.

historical discipline.”⁴¹ Cohen himself acknowledges that this means “to sever oneself from even the most critical of historiographers, who still grant transcendence to the historical text, sometimes by projecting cultural forms into such texts (White’s position) ...”⁴² Even the little ground for judgment of historical texts that White still leaves is discredited by Cohen when he argues that the “common structures of language” and “ordinary educated speech” that White refers to as bases of the modes of emplotment he describes are “a fiction, a strict metalinguistic classification that is used to displace these tropes onto a transcendental level of language, there misidentified as a common a priori (a virtual model of cultural hypostasis).”⁴³

5. Conclusion

Hayden White’s theoretical outlay is characterized by a distrust in the concept of objective reality, which manifests itself in his fundamental essays. In his actual writing of history, however, there are certainly enough real objects on which White passes judgment in terms of truth; he certainly accepts the writings of 19th century historical thinkers as objects towards which he can direct fruitful understanding. His actual proceeding in drawing up categories of classifying elements of discourse could also be qualified as rather conventional, almost reminiscent of the classification frenzy of the positivistic 19th century.

In order to do White justice, however, it should finally be noted that his most recent thinking has shifted away from actually employed methodology as manifest in his earlier focus on the tropes as modes of emplotment of historical narrative towards the role of the narrative and its value for representing reality in general. I want to close, therefore, by quoting a passage from White’s most recent book which shows the far-reaching consequences, extending beyond the area of mere discourse into the social, that the acceptance of the ontological equivalence of fictional and non-fictional narratives bears, although White here even upholds the existence of real referents of non-fictional discourse,

⁴¹ Cohen, *Historical Culture*, p. 19.

⁴² Cohen, *Historical Culture*, p. 21.

⁴³ Cohen, *Historical Culture*, p. 81.

i.e. an objective reality that discourse can refer to:

Recent theories of discourse [...] dissolve the distinction between realistic and fictional discourses based on the presumption of an ontological difference between their respective referents, real and imaginary, in favor of stressing their common aspect as semiological apparatuses that produce meanings by the systematic substitution of signifieds (conceptual contents) for the extra-discursive entities that serve as their referents. In these semiological theories of discourse, narrative is revealed to be a particularly effective system of discursive meaning production by which individuals can be taught to live a distinctively 'imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence,' that is to say, an unreal but meaningful relation to the social formations in which they are indentured to live out their lives and realize their destinies as social subjects.⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ White, Hayden, *The Content of the Form*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1987, p. x.

⁴⁵ To my knowledge encompassing all publications; not included are articles appearing in one of the essay collections that had originally been published separately.

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