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Editorial - The History of Hayden White

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Editorial – The History of Hayden White

This special issue of the journal *Práticas da História – Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past* was organised upon hearing news of Hayden White’s death – born in 1928, in the U.S.A., White would live there for most of his life and there he died, on March 2018. Over a period of more than half a century, his interventions were pivotal to ongoing debates on the limits and benefits of History as a discipline, to the extent that it is difficult to tell whether White placed himself in the eye of the storm or his interventions were the storm itself. The way he formulated the question of the literary dimension of history writing, in his monumental 1973 *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, was exemplarily provocative. It came a few years after his essay “The burden of history” had tried to persuade historians of the ineluctable moral implications of their practice, regardless of how much of a semblance of neutrality the embrace of scientific methods seemed to afford them.¹

The 1960s were the most decisive period in White’s historiographical trajectory. Prior to that, he had devoted most of his efforts to research on the medieval and early modern ages. From that point onwards, though, he became increasingly known as a historical theorist – arguably the most acclaimed and emblematic of all. In his preface to *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007*, an anthology of his own essays published in 2010, he summed up the intellectual significance of this shift in the following terms: «I entered the field of historical studies because I thought that historical knowledge, being

¹ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory* 5, no 2 (1966): 111-34.

knowledge about what is (or was) the case, was an antidote to ideology. Originally, I thought that this was because history was, if not more scientific, then at least more “realistic” than ideology. I have since come to believe that scientific historiography – in its empiricist as well as in its “grand theoretical” modes – is itself an ideology that, in excluding ethical concerns from its operations, produces apathy, or what my friend Sande Cohen calls “passive nihilism”, rather than a will to action.»²

The question of the will and willingness to act («a will to action», as he phrases it) – a matter he would turn to over and over again in his extended career – gained greater momentum in the context of White’s first major critique of the state of History as a discipline, in the aforementioned «The burden of History». In that essay – originally published in the journal *History and Theory* in 1966 – whose breadth and ambition is addressed in the present issue by Fábio Franzini, White mobilizes the nihilism of Albert Camus as a way not to endorse the apathy and passivity of those who leave their destiny in the hands of fate but, on the contrary, to encourage the expression and affirmation of the will of each and every individual: «History today has an opportunity to avail itself of the new perspectives on the world which a dynamic science and an equally dynamic art offer. Both science and art have transcended the older, stable conceptions of the world which required that they render a literal copy of a presumably static reality. And both have discovered the essentially provisional character of the metaphorical constructions which they use to comprehend a dynamic universe. Thus, they affirm implicitly the truth arrived at by Camus when he wrote: ‘It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear, on the contrary, that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning.’ We might amend the statement to read: it will be lived all the better if it has no single meaning but many different ones.»³ In White’s hands, Camus’s nihilism was to become colourful and vibrant rather than grey.

² Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative (Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957-2007)*, ed. Robert Doran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), xi.

³ Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” 133.

In the decades that followed the publication of «The burden of history», Hayden White was not impervious to new perspectives springing from post-positivist scientific practices. But it was mostly in a particular literary vein that he found the greatest source of inspiration for his efforts of persuasion directed at fellow historians. Seeing the historian's role as that of enhancing the singular expression of human will – a will that asserts itself in spite or against the grip of necessity or context – it was in the plots weaved by certain literary works of fiction that White most often found examples of this capacity. The product of a literature that turned its back on the nineteenth-century novel, such works – essentially, operating within a modernist frame – took a path hitherto virtually unexplored by nurturing the autopoietic dimension of art. This awakened White to a likewise autopoietic understanding of the notions of history and humanity itself. To cite once again from his preface to the 2010 anthology of his essays: «Fortunately, the modern novel, ever since it broke with the romance genre, has kept alive an interest in “history” understood not so much as “the past” as, rather, the spectacle of human self-making (*autopoiesis*, in Niklas Luhmann's terminology).»⁴

While literature gave him grounds to call out for new practices within the discipline of History, White never ceased to urge historians to reclaim the discipline's past from the condescension of posterity. Historians tended to disregard the discipline's past as a minor era, a time when the discipline was still waiting to mature and grow into its age of reason, by the grace of science, in the twentieth century. Against this teleological outlook, White made a point of recalling – not without a tinge of *nostalgia* – the time when the discipline was essentially a branch of Rhetoric, which, in turn, was but a part of the so-called Moral Philosophy. Let me quote once more from his 2010 text: «Very few of the great classics of historiography were undertaken out of disinterested motives, and most of them have been undertaken as a search, not so much for the truth of the past as, rather, a search for what the truth *means* for living people. Although the mode of history's presentation of the past

⁴ Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative*, xi.

is dramatic – laying out a spectacle of the great events and conflicts of times past – it has always sought to contribute to the question that Kant defined as the soul of ethics: “what should I (we) do?”»⁵

One should highlight the centrality of this ethical imperative in White’s conception of historiographical labour since he is still perceived, at times, as being prone to a moral relativism, the trademark of a certain postmodern condition. In fact, White’s relativization of the truth that History claims to have reached as a scientific discipline does not necessarily lead to a position of ethical indifference. On the contrary, to problematize the certainties produced by a scientific discipline not only does not imply undermining the moral convictions on which these truths are grounded but can in fact push in the opposite direction. The relativization of the truth produced by science can be used as an antidote to moral relativism: by freeing History from obedience to a principle of necessity whose laws the historian would simply dig out, each and every individual stands a much greater chance to have a say in their future, shaping it in line with their will. We might argue, then, that the key civic role of the ‘Whitean’ historian (to coin an adjective) lies not so much in determining the direction History is taking, but rather in freeing it from any teleological trajectory, thus clearing the path for a plurality and confrontation of wills.

The significance and political resonance of such a conception of the discipline of History have been addressed by a variety of authors. In the book *Hayden White: the historical imagination*, published in 2011 as part of Polity Press’s collection “Key Contemporary Thinkers”, the historian Herman Paul, who signs the first essay of the present issue, named White’s framework «liberation historiography», naturally an echo of Liberation Theology.⁶ In his contribution to this issue, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, com-

5 *Idem*.

6 Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 35. See also an article previously published on our journal by Paul: Herman Paul, “Metahistory: Notes Towards a Genealogy,” *Práticas da História, Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past* 1, no 1 (2015): 17-31. His contribution to the current issue of this journal also allows us to trace back to the 1950’s some of the ideas defended by White in “The Burden of History”. Along the same lines, see that the first essay selected by Robert Doran while editing *The Fiction of Narrative (Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957-2007)* goes back to 1957.

menting on one of White's last writings ("The practical past"), suggests an approximation between the categorical imperative that Immanuel Kant placed at the heart of ethics («what should I (we) do?») and another imperative formula that occupied a central place in twentieth century politics: «White sought to underline the fundamentally moral and ethical nature of historical knowledge as it pertained to human life, here borrowing from Kant who, as White said, called "practical" contemporary "efforts to answer central questions of moral and social concerns", that is "what should I (we) do," or as Lenin might have said, "what is to be done?".»⁷

Other scholars, in turn, have underlined some of the political limitations of a Whitean conception of History. In "Subaltern Studies as Political Thought", Dipesh Chakrabarty praises the discontinuous conception of historical time he finds in White's work, but nonetheless suggests that White remains hostage to an individualist and/or collectivist ontology of the historical subject.⁸ And in her contribution to this issue, Ewa Domanska recovers a relatively unknown text by White, "Posthumanism and the liberation of humankind" (2000), to inquire as to what extent the task of liberating individuals from «the burden of history» implies taking on the task of liberating individuals from the burden of the very notion of humanity.⁹

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The homage the present issue embodies is far from an original gesture, or even one that would have to wait for Hayden White's death. Since the 1990s, White and his academic trajectory have been the object of

7 Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Hayden White's Return to the Past as a Source of Human Practice", this same issue, p. X

8 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "História subalterna como pensamento político," in *A Política dos Muitos: Povo, Classes e Multidão*, ed. Bruno Dias and José Neves (Lisboa: Tinta-da-China, 2010), 281–307. Reprinted as "Subaltern Studies as Political Thought," in *Colonialism and Its Legacies*, ed. Jacob Levy and Iris Marion Young (New York: Lexington Books, 2011), 205–18.

9 Hayden White, "Posthumanism and the Liberation of Humankind," *Design Book Review* 41/42 (Winter/Spring 2000): 10-13.

a number of tributes.¹⁰ On this occasion, we challenged a group of colleagues from different countries to engage with one of the many essays penned by White throughout his career. We asked them to comment that specific essay as they saw fit, namely by exploring the way White questions their own field or line of research (as Paul-Arthur Tortosa does, within the frame of the History of Medicine) or exploring the relations between White and other authors – in some cases, classical authors (such as Vico, by Maria-Benedita Basto, and Freud, by Nancy Partner), in others, contemporary with White (such as Paul Ricoeur, brought to this issue by João Luís Lisboa, and Frederic Jameson, by Luís Trindade, or Dominick LaCapra, by Rui Bebianio).

To make White's essays the topic or motto for the issue's contributions was not an innocent choice. As previously mentioned, he was the author of one of the most influential History books ever published, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, whose 40th anniversary was recently acknowledged in different parts of the world (see, for instance, the book *Metahistoria: 40 años después. Ensayos en homenaje a Hayden White*, edited by Aitor Bolanõs de Miguel, who also happens to participate in this same issue).¹¹ But White's interventions in the field of theory of History were not limited to monographs. In fact, most of his work was first published in journals or as chapters in collective works.¹² As a counterpoint to this dispersion, from time to time he published works such as *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978), *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), *Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (1999) and *The Practical Past* (2015).¹³ *The Fiction of Narrative – Essays on History,*

10 Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domanska and Hans Kellner, ed., *Re-Figuring Hayden White* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Robert Doran, ed., *Philosophy of History after Hayden White* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

11 Aitor Bolaños de Miguel, ed., *Metahistoria: 40 años después. Ensayos en homenaje a Hayden White* (Logroño: Siníndice, 2014).

12 For more bibliographical information on White's writings as well as studies on White, see: http://ewa.home.amu.edu.pl/Hayden_White_Bibliography.htm.

13 *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical*

Literature, and Theory (2010), mentioned earlier, is a collection of White's essays selected by Robert Doran with a biographically-structured anthological purpose.¹⁴ The same anthological principle presides over White's essay collections published in languages other than his native English. Such is the case with *Forme di storia: dalla realtà alla narrazione*, published in Italian in 2006, *Proza historyczna*, published in Polish in 2009, or, more recently, *L'Histoire s'écrit*, published in French.¹⁵ The texts that the organisers of those works sign in the issue of our journal – respectively, Eduardo Tortarolo, Ewa Domanska and Philippe Carrard – bring to light some of these editorial processes and their relation with the historiographical cultures of the countries where these anthologies were published.

There is a well-established genealogy of the essay as a genre – or, we could also say, as an anti-genre – that can be traced back from Lukács to Montaigne, for example.¹⁶ The point here is not to re-trace or extend this particular topic. And the place of the essay as a form in White's work also has been acknowledged, among others, by LaCapra, Richard Vann and Robert Doran. I would just like to add that the choice of White's essays as the starting point for the various contributions we gather in this budding academic journal also springs from our will to insist on the need to problematize what is implied in the modes of production historians nowadays are subjected, or subject themselves, to. Some of the conceptions of the discipline of History and of historical time itself that we have attributed to White in the previous paragraphs seem to fit uneasily with the conventions of writing and

Representation (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); *Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ *The Fiction of Narrative (Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957-2007)*, ed. Robert Doran (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Hayden White, *Forme di storia: dalla realtà alla narrazione*, ed. Edoardo Tortarolo (Roma: Carocci, 2006); Hayden White, *Proza historyczna*, ed. Ewa Domanska (Cracow: Universitas, 2009); Hayden White, *L'Histoire s'écrit*, ed. Philippe Carrard (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2017). In Polish, also see: Hayden White, *Poetyka pisarstwa historycznego*, ed. Ewa Domanska and Marek Wilczyński (Cracow: Universitas, 2000).

¹⁶ See: Cristina Kirklighter, *Traversing the democratic borders of the essay* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

academic publishing that currently prevail within social sciences and humanities. Those conceptions rather bring to our mind a text of T. W. Adorno originally published in German in 1958, in which he exalts the untimely nature of the essay. It is with Adorno's words in «The essay as form» that we conclude: «The usual reproach against the essay, that it is fragmentary and random, itself assumes the givenness of totality and thereby the identity of subject and object, and it suggests that man is in control of totality. But the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal. Its weakness testifies to the non-identity that it has to express, as well as to that excess of intention over its object, and thereby it points to that utopia which is blocked out by the classification of the world into the eternal and the transitory. In the emphatic essay, thought gets rid of the traditional idea of truth.»¹⁷

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17 T. W. Adorno, "The essay as form," *New German Critique* 32 (Spring - Summer 1984): 151-71. This text was written between 1954 and 1958 and first published in *Nota zur Literatur I* (1958).