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Hayden White has advocated the emancipatory function of history writing. To do so, he stressed that historical writing is the product of an act of “invention”. The emphasis on invention is not the equivalent of the rejection of empirical reality and of the legitimacy of an unaccountable narrative. On the contrary: Hayden White drew his understanding of invention from his deep knowledge of medieval culture, which entails that making sense of the world experience has to be recreated (i.e. invented) through an accurate use of language, of its implications and impact, of its rhetorical, poetical and symbolical resources.

Keywords: Historical discourse; literature; fiction; invention.

Um Hayden White empírico? Sobre “Literary theory and historical writing” (1989)

Hayden White tem defendido a função emancipatória da escrita da história. Neste sentido, White sustenta que esta é o produto de um ato de “invenção”. A ênfase colocada na invenção não equivale a uma rejeição da realidade empírica ou da legitimidade de uma narrativa não sustentada. Pelo contrário, Hayden White derivou o seu entendimento de invenção do seu profundo conhecimento da cultura medieval, a qual sustenta que para fazer sentido do mundo a experiência tem que ser recriada (ou seja, inventada) através de um uso adequado da linguagem, das suas implicações, do seu impacto e dos seus recursos retóricos, poéticos e simbólicos.

Palavras-chave: Discurso histórico; literatura; ficção; invenção.

An empirical Hayden White?

On “Literary theory and historical writing” (1989)

Edoardo Tortarolo*

Hayden White was a man of ironies and surprises and, possibly, contradictions. He was delighted when he was able to see things from different perspectives. At the end of the day, to him life was not complicated. However, it required intellectual freedom and a bit of insouciance to sort it out. Hayden White had both, abundantly. When he expressed his position defiantly as somebody who was proud of being “a relativist” (because “there can be no such thing as a non-relativistic representation of historical reality”), he was the same person who claimed to be a strict Marxist: in Shanghai, in a seminar for 300 Chinese students (I myself witnessed this somewhat perplexing performance of his). I never really thought of Hayden White as a relativist or as a Marxist or as a highly unlikely combination of the two. However, his intellectual agility was immense, his curiosity remarkable, his openness contagious.

This is probably why he had such an impact on the discussion of historiography from the 1960s until the very end of his life. He was more than ironical and surprising (as indeed he was on many occasions). His writing was based on irony, in the sense that he very often used words with detachment to generate a healthy distance from the current use, and surprise, in the sense that he did not really care for arguments that everybody would agree with: he just skipped conventional wisdom as inappropriate and tedious.

How to define the impact that this quite unusual approach had on the current historiographical discussion is a matter of controver-

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sy. Recently, Philippe Carrard has made the case that Hayden White has been more influential in France than usually suspected and has provided an excellent and well-balanced assessment of his impact.¹ In his contribution, Carrard emphasizes two aspects: that Hayden White did not go unnoticed when he was invited as a visiting professor at the EHESS (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales) in Paris in 1990 and that his vocabulary required a very close reading and, indeed, some reading-between-the-lines. Retrospectively, it is ironic that I first learned to appreciate Hayden White as a brilliant commentator of historical writing after meeting him and having some serious and not so serious chats on different occasions. It was after a personal exchange that his written texts (his essays in *The Content of the Form* and *Figural Realism* more so than *Metahistory*) were indeed worth a second and maybe a third reading, including reading between the lines and fundamentally re-interpreting what these essays were telling me *prima facie*. In a way, I found the texts selected in *The Content of the Form* and *Figural Realism* interesting and thought-provoking after, and maybe because, I found the individual appealing and thought-provoking. The impression he made on me was powerful enough and I decided to select some of his essays and edit them for the Italian public in 2011 (with a translation by Irene Gaddo). The book was published with the title *Forme di storia*, which, honestly, I did not discuss with Hayden. I do not remember if he agreed with it. But he liked (and approved) the Italian translation and praised its linguistic quality in the book presentations. Hayden White's Italian was excellent, vibrant, idiomatic. As the happy owner of an apartment in Rome, in the very multicultural area of Trastevere, he did not lack opportunities to practice his Italian. He learned it in the 1950s when he spent two years at the Vatican Archives researching the Papal schism of 1130 for his PhD dissertation in medieval history. *Forme di storia* suggests variety and difference, obviously: the broadening scope of historical expression(s) seemed to me to be the real goal he was pursuing in his essays and I wanted to

1 Philippe Carrard, "Hayden White and/in France: receptions, translations, questions," *Rethinking History* (2018) DOI: 10.1080/13642529.2018.1464745.

convey a positive message to the reader in the first place. The essay on “Literary theory and historical writing” is quintessentially a Hayden White text: provocative, learned, seemingly geometrical and Cartesian, deeply personal and existentialist.

The opening paragraph was a slap in the face of self-assured academic historians:

“In a late essay, Jacques Barzun characterized himself as “a student of history... formerly engaged in the strange ritual of teaching it”. By history, of course, Barzun did not mean the actual events of the past but, rather, the accumulated learning of his profession. In this brief aside, however, he reminds us of some truths that modern historical theory has regularly tended to forget: namely, that the history that is the subject of all this learning is accessible only by way of language; our experience of history is indissociable from our discourse about it; this discourse must be written before it can be digested as history; and this experience, therefore, can be as varied as the different kinds of discourse met with it in the history of writing itself.” (*Figural Realism*, p. 1)

Jacques Barzun as the crown witness of historical science? Is history – obviously (!) – the accumulated learning about the past? Do we forget an important aspect of historical theory? History stands or falls on the discourse (!) about it? In these few lines Hayden White objected, in an ostentatiously joyful and relaxed manner, to generations of Italian historians who firmly believed that history as an academic discipline has a privileged access to the truth about the past and were persuaded that their social and political role is hinged on the recognition that their stories about the past are very, very reliable, and very close to the original, raw “events”, whatever this could mean (events become facts when they “are constituted by linguistic description”, according to Hayden White). To many Italian historians, Hayden White was acting as an *agent provo-*

cateur within the united and disciplined forces of truth-seeking academic historians and was dismantling their achievements, siding with Roland Barthes and the post-modern relativists. Hayden White never shied away from (mis)leading readers to put him in this Rive gauche box. He challenged readers to understand what he was really aiming at in a sort of Straussian vein. In “Literary theory and historical writing”, the main point is not that Barzun epitomized good, methodologically sound historical research and writing: it was rather a twofold contention. First, Hayden White stated very clearly that “historical discourse is possible only on the presumption of the existence of the past as something about which it is possible to speak meaningfully” (p. 1). Second, a Copernican revolution has not taken place in the historical writing as it has been the case in physics. Historians must refer to the set of possible narratives that the historiographical tradition has worked out in the form of tropological modes. In other words, historians, just like everybody else (except for natural scientists when writing about science for their peers), make use of written discourses. Since historians have become aware (or should be aware) that they share these discourses with novelists, Hayden White has insisted that “every history is first and foremost a verbal artifact, a product of a special kind of language use” that serves the avowed purpose of “providing insights into some problems traditionally posed by philosophy of history, such as [...] the relation of a historical representation to the descriptive and explanatory aspects of the historian’s discourse” (p. 4). To make a long story short: I was eager to retrieve the realist, empirical and pragmatist Hayden White, and turn his interest in the different suggestions coming from the field of literary theory into tools for historians to better and more efficiently convey the core of their research. In other words, historians needed Hayden White to increase their supply of expressive modes, to be alert to the impact of what they wrote, to shape their texts so that readers might be encouraged to come closer and closer to what the past can offer them. “The history we are discussing is that which takes shape in language, emotion, thought, and the discourse in the attempt to make sense of the kind of experiences that those families have endured” (p. 13).

So, what sort of history writing is Hayden White proposing? Definitely not a free-wheeling, loose and unaccountable narrative with no ties to the sources that have survived the passing of time. To Hayden White, fiction, a crucial and controversial word, refers to its original Latin meaning: *fictio* means molding or shaping and *fictio* (or *figmentum*) is synonymous of *poesis* and *poema*. In medieval philosophy, *poeta* and *fictor* are related to the same operation. A well-known passage in Dante Alighieri's *De vulgari eloquentia* (II IV 2) poetry (*poesia*) is defined as *fictio rhetorica musicaque poita*. To Cicero, Horatius, Quintilian, Boetius as well to Dante there was a connection between *finger-facere-poiein*, which Hayden White, the scholar of 12th century political and cultural history, was perfectly aware of. Neither was he advocating the dry-as-dust, ultimately dull and largely irrelevant academic kind of history writing that only addresses academic peers, as though the Copernican revolution had actually occurred in history writing. Writing history without engaging in the process of fictionalization (in the classical and medieval sense of composing, inventing, creating) was unacceptable. It was unacceptable for moral and epistemological reasons which played a crucial role in his relentlessly reflecting and commenting on current discussions. For both reasons I instinctively feel great sympathy. The epistemological reasons for "inventing", "creating" (in the medieval sense mentioned above) a historical narrative is based on the public responsibility of historians who should feel accountable for what they write to themselves, their peers and the public. The past is not only a foreign land. It is a *terra incognita* that requires to be translated or coded so that the chaotic, unstructured, shapeless, primeval reality of the past is given a sense and an order through language: "for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot" ("The burden of history", 1966). The great historians of the European tradition analyzed in *Metahistory* offer an example how this has been attempted in the past. The emotional reasons concur with the epistemological reasons. If human beings face chaos behind and around themselves, as our daily experience shows, historians have a demanding task to perform. But this task has been largely neglected in the 20th century and it is high

time for it to be resumed. The final passage of “Literary theory and historical writing” sounds like a call to arms for a noble cause that is still vital and necessary, with modern literary theory, theory of history, of historical consciousness, of historical discourse and of historical writing joining hands in an effort to contribute to the emancipation of mankind from passivity, willful ignorance and self-inflicted manipulation (p. 27). This intellectual call of arms of 1989 has been a constant concern of Hayden White’s. In 2003, he provided a final and nonetheless open-ended addendum to “Literary theory and historical writing”:

“[...] Literature – in the modern period – has regarded history not so much as its other as, rather, its complement in the work of identifying and mapping a shared object of interest, a real world which presents itself to reflection under so many different aspects that all of the resources of language – rhetorical, poetical, and symbolic – must be utilized to do it justice. So history’s antipathy to literature is misplaced.”²

² Hayden White, “Historical Discourse and Literary Writing,” in *Tropes for the Past. Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate*, ed. Kuisma Korhonen (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006), 25.

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