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Número especial **A História de Hayden White**
Special issue **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

*

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

José Neves

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).

Herman Paul

No historian worthy of the name is only an historian

This essay discusses an almost forgotten text by Hayden White: a 1959 book review published in the journal *Speculum*. The brief text offers an interesting glimpse on the medieval historian that was White in 1959 – though one who clearly was on his way of becoming a historical theorist. At the same time, the review raises a number of questions with which historians still find themselves struggling. What are the moral interventions that historians make through their books and articles? And is it true, as White memorably put it, that “no historian worthy of the name is only an historian”?

Keywords: Hayden White; Louis Lekai; Christopher Dawson; history and ethics.

Nenhum historiador digno desse nome é apenas um historiador

Este ensaio debruça-se sobre um texto quase esquecido de Hayden White: uma recensão publicada em 1959 na revista *Speculum*. Este breve texto oferece um interessante vislumbre do medievalista que White ainda era em 1959, embora já a caminho de se tornar um especialista em teoria da história. Simultaneamente, a recensão levanta um conjunto de questões com que os historiadores ainda se deparam hoje em dia. Que intervenções morais faz o historiador através dos seus livros e artigos? E será verdade que, nas palavras de White, “nenhum historiador digno desse nome é apenas um historiador”?

Palavras-chave: Hayden White; Louis Lekai; Christopher Dawson; história e ética.

No historian worthy of the name is only an historian

Herman Paul*

Slightly over a week ago, I received the saddening news that Hayden White has passed away. Since then, my thoughts have been wandering back almost daily to the Stanford campus where I first met White, back in 2002. I reread some of our email exchanges, most notably on *The Practical Past*, and kept responding to messages from colleagues across the world, all of whom felt urged to devote a few lines (two pages even, in one case) to a death that seems to mark the end of an era in the history and theory of history.

Just a few days ago, when I was sharing memories of White with a colleague in Cambridge, I found myself commenting on that famous 1966 essay that David Harlan once described as the polestar guiding virtually everything that White has written since: “The Burden of History.”¹ Among all of White’s essays, this is, I think, the one I like best and the one I most frequently assign to students, mainly because it so eloquently gives voice to White’s existential concern about the moral act that is historical writing.

Still, when I browse through my ring binders with photocopies of White’s articles – a large collection that starts with a virtually unknown piece on “The Printing Industry from Renaissance to Reformation and from Guild to Capitalism” (1957) – my eyes end up resting on a 1959 book review. It’s a four-page text on Louis J. Lekai’s *Les*

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¹ David Harlan, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 106.

moines blancs (The White Monks), a French translation of an originally English-language book on the history of the Cistercian Order.² I see that I have underlined several passages and, near the end, even encircled a Whitean one-liner: “No historian worthy of the name is only an historian.”

* * *

What makes this book review worthy of singling out for discussion? I think the piece shows us a young White, recently appointed at the University of Rochester, still working as a medievalist, but increasingly being fascinated by what he called “questions *about* history”: How to write historically about a monastic order that is still around? What is “past” about an institution that endures into the “present”? How does this work out a book written by Father Lekai, a Cistercian monk himself, who already in the second sentence of his book boldly asserts that “the truth of Revelation is timeless”?³ How do such theological beliefs affect Lekai’s historical writing? And how appropriate is it, more generally, to write history from such a markedly religious perspective?

Striking about White’s book review is the ambiguity it displays vis-à-vis Catholic interpretations of history such as developed in the 1950s by Christopher Dawson, the British Catholic historian whose then widely influential views White believed to see shimmering through Lekai’s prose. On the one hand, White saw them as incompatible with good historical writing: “[I]n so far as this seemingly *a priori* schema intrudes itself into the organization of the material, it must be recognized as a non-historical element in the work.” Yet, on the other, he did *not* deny the validity or fruitfulness of religiously inspired historiography. White’s only wish was “that the assumptions of the study be made ex-

² Hayden V. White, review of *Les moines blancs: histoire de l'ordre cistercien* by Louis J. Lekai. *Speculum* 34 (1959), 304-08.

³ Quoted from the original, English-language edition: Louis J. Lekai, *The White Monks: A History of the Cistercian Order* (Okauchee, WI: Cistercian Fathers, 1953), 3.

plicit” – a phrase that in retrospect seems to anticipate *Metahistory*’s analysis of “presuppositions about the nature of the historical field.”⁴ In this 1959 book review, then, the medieval historian that was White at the time and the historical theorist that he was soon to become met each other.

Interestingly, this challenges part of the story, no doubt familiar to most readers of this journal, according to which White underwent something like a “conversion” to philosophy of history after reading Benedetto Croce and Carlo Antoni during his two-year research stay in Rome (1953-1955). Thanks to these Italians, or so the story goes, White came to know the historicist tradition, began to reflect on the “science” and “art” of history, and was led into the adventures (modernist writing, French existentialism) that eventually produced “The Burden of History.”

Although this story is broadly convincing – the 1959 book review also testifies to Italian influence in using the typically Crocean phrase, “what is living and what is dead” (*ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto*) – it underestimates the importance of White’s original field of study, medieval church history, for his later work in historical theory. More specifically, the story tends to overlook, in the first place, that White continued to work on medieval history long after his appointment at Rochester. Based on his PhD thesis (1956), he wrote learned articles on Pontius of Cluny and Bernard of Clairvaux. Also, he reviewed a pile of books by fellow-medievalists such as Norman F. Cantor, Adriaan H. Bredero, and M. David Knowles. Notably, as late as 1964, White spoke frankly about “we medievalists.”⁵

Secondly, during his years in Rome, White not only read Giambattista Vico and Giovanni Gentile, in addition to Antoni and Croce, but also Arnold J. Toynbee and Christopher Dawson. In Mario Praz’s journal, *English Miscellany*, he wrote at length about these British

4 Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 13.

5 Hayden V. White, review of *Perspectives in Medieval History*, ed. Katherine Fischer Drew and Floyd Seyward Lear, *The American Historical Review* 70 (1964), 109-10, at 110.

authors – specifically about Dawson’s views on Christian Europe in the Middle Ages and Toynbee’s attempts to come to terms with the challenge of a “post-Christian era” in the latter volumes of *A Study of History*. Interestingly, it was in these essays that White first engaged in “metahistorical” analysis of historiographical texts.⁶

Thirdly, in the field of medieval church history, “ideological implications” were never far away. Commenting on Lekai’s *Les moines blancs*, White observed that the book was not only “an historical study of Cistercianism” but also, at the same time, “a product of the contemporary Cistercian revival,” to which Lekai sought to contribute by identifying “what is living and what is dead” in the Cistercian tradition. So, when White concluded that “no historian worthy of the name is only an historian,” this was not just a programmatic statement, but also, if you want, a sociological observation. Medieval church history such as written by Dawson or Lekai was saturated with theological meaning of a kind that clearly fascinated the young, non-Catholic White.

Strange, then, as it may sound to readers who associate White more with Croce and Vico, or with Kenneth Burke and Northrop Frye, than with Catholic church historians, the 1959 review in *Speculum* shows that White’s original field of study was conducive to theoretical reflection – not because of sources (chronicles) of the sort that “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” (1980) would later discuss, but rather because of a tempting “tendency to abandon history for the techniques of legend, metaphysics, or theology,” even among mid-twentieth-century scholars like Lekai.

* * *

As I close my ring binder, the phrase keeps resonating in my mind: “No historian worthy of the name is only an historian.” Admittedly, I selected White’s review of Lekai for discussion in this issue, not merely

⁶ Herman Paul, “A Weberian Medievalist: Hayden White in the 1950s,” *Rethinking History* 12 (2008): 75-102.

to make an historical argument about White's intellectual trajectory, but also because this aphorism has something deeply intriguing about it. Obviously, it means that historical writing is always laden with moral, political, and/or religious meaning. Also, in good Whitean fashion, it suggests that historians "worthy of the name" do not quarantine themselves within a single discipline. Most interestingly, however, the phrase conveys that White regarded historical writing as a means of intervening in the present. "It is not, as Lekai rightly emphasizes, the function of the historian to foretell the future; but every historical work is, in some sense, a judgment of the present."

Like the White of 1959, I am inclined to think that the value of such judgments – critical mirrors that the past as constructed or reconstructed by historians holds up to present-day readers – is disproportionate to the amount of presentism found in them. Superimposing current value systems on the past is harmful, not only from a "professional" historian's point of view, but also with an eye to what readers can actually learn from historical studies. They can expand their universe and enrich their imagination only by encountering a past that is foreign, different from the world they inhabit, perhaps even offending in its otherness.

Does this imply that historians serve the project of moral self-questioning best by focusing on what they are traditionally good at: representing the past in all its peculiarities? Although this is not how White would have put it, my answer would tend towards the affirmative. It is a moral responsibility of historians to confront the present with a past that calls current-day wisdom into question. Historians, then, are moralists, engaged in "judgment of the present," not by presenting a past that fits or confirms their own moral views, but by confronting present-day readers with ideas and practices they would never have encountered except in historical writing.⁷

"No historian worthy of the name is only an historian": it is a phrase that makes me think about the moral purposes of writing on

⁷ Herman Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 123-38.

nineteenth-century historians, epistemic virtues, and secularization narratives. What kind of interventions in the present am I making by devoting articles and books to these themes? What current-day conventions does my work uncritically endorse and what fashions, if any, does it challenge by holding up alternatives? To what (no doubt small) extent do my publications actually contribute to a spirit of moral self-questioning?

Appropriately, then, White's death calls for a moment of reflection on the historian's vocation. As long as we believe that a well-developed historical imagination is capable of enriching our moral imagination, we will remember White's example, return to his work, and admire the virtues that he so brilliantly embodied.

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Fábio Franzini

A burden that is still heavy

It may be no exaggeration to say that Hayden White's best-known writing after *Metahistory* is the essay "The Burden of History," first published in 1966 in the journal *History and Theory*. According to Robert Doran, this article became "a kind of clarion call for a revolution in historical studies" – a revolution that never arrived but did not lose its meaning. The purpose of this brief article is to present Hayden White's critique of historiography in this text and to make some considerations about its meaning and scope.

Keywords: Hayden White, "The Burden of History", Historiographical critique.

Um fardo ainda pesado

Depois de *Meta-história*, talvez não seja exagero dizer que o texto mais conhecido de Hayden White seja o ensaio "O fardo da história", publicado pela primeira vez em 1966 na revista *History and Theory*. De acordo com Robert Doran, esse artigo tornou-se "uma espécie de clarim a chamar por uma revolução nos estudos históricos" – uma revolução que não veio, mas nem por isso perdeu o sentido. O propósito deste breve artigo é apresentar a crítica à historiografia feita por Hayden White nesse texto e tecer algumas considerações acerca de seu significado e alcance.

Palavras-chave: Hayden White, "O fardo da História", Crítica historiográfica.

A burden that is still heavy

Fábio Franzini*

Boy, you're gonna carry that weight

Carry that weight for a long time

(Lennon & McCartney, 1969)

Originally published in 1966 in the *History and Theory* journal, and later reedited in 1978's *Tropics of Discourse*,¹ the essay “The Burden of History” is based on the open, explicit, and, above all, radical questioning of the meaning and legitimacy of the knowledge produced by historians since the mid-nineteenth century. For Hayden White, if the period between 1800 and 1850 was the “history’s golden age”, a time when intellectuals were able to combine science and art to bring understanding to the *present* time, what followed was the crystallizing of the discipline into a comfortable “epistemologically neutral middle ground that supposedly exists between art and science”.² As made clear by the way the twentieth-century progressed, however, this stance was not only based on a mistake – the assumption that such a ground *exists* – but it also shed light on how outdated historians had become, clinging

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1 Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory* 5, no. 2 (1966): 111-34; Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays on Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 27-50. To elaborate this article, I used the Brazilian edition, cross-checking the translation with the original text: Hayden White, *Trópicos do Discurso. Ensaios sobre a Crítica da Cultura*, trad. Alípio Correia de Franca Neto (São Paulo: Edusp, 1994), 39-63.

2 Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” 132; *idem*, 111, *passim*.

to “a combination of *romantic* art on the one hand and of *positivistic* science on the other”.³ By extension, the history written by historians was also outdated, limited, and unsatisfactory to those who were most sensitive and attentive to changes in the world.

Committed to the search for the “truth” about what one day happened and the “objective” narrative of such event, the historian moved away from an understanding of his own time while imposing on contemporary society the result of his diligent work. The result was none other than the description of a “perfect” past, well resolved in itself and endowed with a “sense” that the present should assume and carry on. Thus revealed, history had a weight: the overpowering, overwhelming weight of the “awareness of the past,” from which, at least apparently, there was no escape. Following the path opened by modern science and, especially, by modern art, Hayden White denounces the paralyzing character of this *burden* and strives to show that yes, it is possible to free oneself, as long as historians renounce their own weight and (re) establish “the value of the study of the past, not as ‘an end in itself’, but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time”.⁴

What the essay expresses, in short, is a profound discomfort with the conservatism of academic historiography and its inability to attribute meaning to the experiences of modern individuals and the modern world. And, although his readers would certainly be appalled by such sentences as “history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident”, or “the conventional historian’s conceptions of history are at once a symptom and a cause of a potentially fatal cultural illness”, they merely translated something the author had long thought. As Herman Paul points out, similar questions had been posed by White in the

³ *Idem*, 126.

⁴ *Idem*, 125. According to Herman Paul, “the title of White’s essay appears ambiguous. On the one hand, there is the ‘substantive burden imposed upon the present by the past in the form of outmoded institutions, ideas, and values’ – an echo of White’s imperative that the moral order ought to adapt itself to the technical order – ‘but also *the way of looking at the world* which gives to these outmoded forms their specious authority’. On the other, there is the burden, or responsibility, of historians to help their audiences overcome that dictate of a historical world-view”. Herman Paul, *Hayden White* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), chap. 2, Kindle.

first half of the 1960s in two reviews of books suggestively devoted to the writing of history, which led *History and Theory* to invite him to produce a critique of greater breadth.⁵ Richard T. Vann, in turn, notes that White's interest in the philosophy of history, intellectual history, and the history of historiography had been present since the beginning of his career, with some of his texts of the 1950s already presenting acute and unusual formulations about academic historiographical production.⁶

We can, thus, say that, far from being the free reflection of "an obscure professor of medieval history at the University of Rochester",⁷ "The Burden of History" embodied Hayden White's continuing commitment to thinking about the plurality of forms of representation of the past, always with a view to the possibilities of, once again, liberating the present from the burden of history. It was, in its own way, a piece of *combat pour l'histoire*, a combat now carried out from the American trench and in a significant "transitional moment in twentieth-century intellectual history", on the eve of what was to become the "poststructuralist explosion," as Robert Doran says.⁸ Doran also notes, incidentally, that White's text appears in the same year that Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses* is published;⁹ certainly a coincidence, but a very expressive coincidence of the change of perspective in certain academic circles.

As is often the case with combative writings, the essay has a generalizing tone that does not fail to incur some injustice. Turning his

5 Paul, *Hayden White*, chap. 2. The books reviewed by White were, in the case of the first review, *Approaches to History*, edited by H. P. R. Finberg, and *History: Written and Lived*, by Paul Weiss, published in the *Journal of Modern History* 35 (1963); in the second case, *History*, by John Higham (in collaboration with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert), published in the *AHA Newsletter* 3, no. 5 (1965).

6 Richard T. Vann, "Hayden White, Historian," in *Re-figuring Hayden White*, ed. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domańska, and Hans Kellner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 305-6.

7 Robert Doran, "Choosing the Past: Hayden White and the Philosophy of History," in *Philosophy of History After Hayden White*, ed. Robert Doran (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Editor's Introduction, Kindle.

8 "One has to keep in mind that White wrote 'The Burden of History' during a transitional moment in twentieth-century intellectual history: a few years after Thomas Kuhn's seminal text [*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962] appeared but a few years before the poststructuralist explosion with White, rightly or wrongly, would come to be identified". *Idem, ibidem*.

9 *Idem, ibidem*.

batteries on “the historians,” White seems to ignore the fact that at that time not every historian was “conventional” – or, in other words, not every history was *thought of* in the same way. In 1961, for example, Edward Hallet Carr, in his famous book *What Is History*, made a definite critique of the “almost mystical belief” that the profession was harbored by “objectivity and supremacy of historical facts,” among other considerations that generated discomfort at the time.¹⁰ Decades earlier, in 1929, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, in the *Annales*’ first editorial, claimed to be “invested in producing a divorce with the traditional,” by means of approximations between the past and the present and rejection of the “fearful schemes” of the study of history.¹¹ Even further back in time, James Harvey Robinson, in 1912, was certain of the dawning of a “new history,” which, “escaping from the limitations formerly imposed upon the study of the past,” would soon “consciously [...] meet our daily needs,” including the use of “all of those discoveries that are being made about mankind by anthropologists, economists, psychologists, and sociologists.” For Robinson, even if the “intelligent public” continued “to accept somewhat archaic ideas of the scope and character of history,” the discipline would inevitably be involved in the revolution that occurred at the time in the field of knowledge.¹²

Certainly, these are sparse examples and of very different origin and purpose with respect to the proposal of “The Burden of History”. Yet they can, to a certain extent, thicken the chorus of White’s “revolt against history in modern writing” from literature, making us realize that *also* among historians this revolt was not exactly new. And,

10 David Harlan, “‘The Burden of History’ Forty Years Later,” in *Re-figuring Hayden White*, ed. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domańska, and Hans Kellner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 171. Harlan also discusses, in the sequence of his text, Michael Oakeshott’s furious reaction to Carr’s book and the counterpoint offered by White with “The Burden of History”. *Idem*, 173-77.

11 Les Directeurs, “A Nos Lecteurs,” *Annales d’Histoire Économique et Sociale*, no. 1 (15 January 1929): 1-2. As is known Febvre is also the author of *Combats pour l’Histoire* (1953). About Bloch, Claudio Fogu traces the intriguing relations between the classic *Apologie pour l’Histoire* and the critique presented in “The Burden of History”. Claudio Fogu, “Figurando Hayden White na modernidade,” in *Do Passado Histórico ao Passado Prático: 40 Anos de Meta-história*, ed. Julio Bentivoglio e Verónica Tozzi (Serra: Milfontes, 2017), 87-95.

12 James Harvey Robinson, *The New History* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 24-25.

contrary to what may seem, this does not diminish the power of his critique, but rather empowers it: a not only “modern” but above all *modernist* historiography was much more urgent than it seemed. A historiography which, considering the metaphor as “*the heuristic rule which self-consciously eliminates certain kind of data from consideration as evidence,*” would have in the historian an agent who, “like the modern artist and scientist, seeks to explore a certain perspective on the world that does not pretend to exhaust description or analysis of all of the data in the phenomenal field but rather offers itself as *one way among many* of disclosing certain aspects of the field”.¹³

We must recall that all this was written in 1966, and we all know how historiography, in its hegemonic form of production, remains distant from such stylistic perspectivism. So, instead of dwelling on that point, however relevant it may be,¹⁴ and commenting on what we should do about it, it may be worthwhile to call into question *who we are*, based on the portrait painted by White himself:

“After all, historians have conventionally maintained that neither a specific methodology nor a special intellectual equipment is required for the study of history. What is usually called the ‘training’ of the historian consists for the most part of study in a few languages, journeyman work in archives, and the performance of a few set exercises to acquaint him with standard reference works and journals in his field. For the rest, a general experience of human affairs, reading in peripheral fields, self-discipline, and *Sitzfleisch* are all that are necessary. Anyone can master the requirements fairly easily. How can it be said then that the

13 White, “The Burden of History,” 130. According to Claudio Fogu, “The Burden of History” is the starting point of the *modern historiography theory* developed by White, which would permeate throughout all of his work. Fogu, “Figurando Hayden White na modernidade”, 73-81.

14 With this respect, see Harlan’s analyses, “‘The Burden of History’ Forty Years Later,” and Richard T. Vann, “Hayden White and Non-Non-Histories,” in *Philosophy of History After Hayden White*, chap. 9, Kindle.

professional historian is peculiarly qualified to define the questions which one may ask of the historical record and is alone able to determine when adequate answers to the questions thus posed have been given?"¹⁵

More than half a century later, it is, or should be, rather embarrassing to recognize that these words remain valid. We must also acknowledge that, today, they have a very sensitive implication: with technology favoring and facilitating, at one end, access to the "past" and, at the other, the dissemination of *anything* that is elaborated about it, the professional historian seems to become, increasingly, a dispensable intermediary in the production of historical knowledge – at least when considering the knowledge which draws attention to social life in its preoccupations with the "practical" past.¹⁶ Now, in fact, "anyone" can "be a historian," and this is not necessarily good: as White emphasized, and never failed to point out, the task of freeing the present from the burden of history can only be fully achieved if it is carried out with ethical and moral responsibility; otherwise, the (false) sense of freedom will only place us in other cages. This responsibility is what qualifies us, as historians, to ask and answer about the past. More than ever, affirming this is our challenge.

¹⁵ White, "The Burden of History," 124.

¹⁶ Cf. Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

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Maria-Benedita Basto

White reading Giambattista Vico: the false in the true and the ironic conditions of historiographic liberty

This article deals with Hayden White's chapter on Giambattista Vico's tropological model of historical transformation, which is part of his seminal collection of essays *Tropics of Discourse*. Focussing on White's understanding of how Vico could inspire a critical history of historiographic consciousness, it is demonstrated how his reading of Vico's poetics of irony opens up a creative tension between discourse and the world, which can serve as a theoretical framework for liberty and critique in historiography.

Keywords: Hayden White; Giambattista Vico; tropes; consciousness.

White leitor de Giambattista Vico: o verdadeiro no falso e as irónicas condições da liberdade historiográfica

Este artigo analisa o capítulo que Hayden White dedicou ao modelo tropológico de transformação histórica de Giambattista Vico na sua seminal coleção de ensaios *Tropics of Discourse*. Focando a interpretação de White sobre o modo como Vico poderia inspirar uma história crítica da consciência historiográfica, demonstra-se que a sua leitura das poéticas da ironia de Vico abre espaço para uma tensão criativa entre o discurso e o mundo, que pode servir como enquadramento teórico para a liberdade e a crítica na historiografia.

Palavras-chave: Hayden White; Giambattista Vico; tropos; consciência.

White reading Giambattista Vico: the false in the true and the ironic conditions of historiographic liberty

Maria-Benedita Basto*

The work of Giambattista Vico, in particular his *New Science*, has played a foundational role in Hayden White's "history of conscience".¹ Following the precept that any historical work is both a narrative and an empirical enterprise, White used Vico's poetic analytical framework in his first book *Metahistory*,² published in 1973. In the course of chapters dedicated to the writings of the great historians and philosophers of the 19th century – Hegel, Michelet, Ranke, Burckhardt, Tocqueville, Marx, Nietzsche, Croce – White showed that their texts produce the effects of truth through the use of emplotment mechanisms related to four rhetorical tropes inspired by Vico: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. The ideal of historical objectivity finds itself thus confronted with the observation that, rather than simply *illustrating* historical facts, tropes *constitute* them as real events. In 1976, White further expanded his reflections on Vico's tropological history in his article "The Tropics of History: The Deep Structure of the *New Science*", which was republished in 1978 in the collection of essays *Tropics of Discourse*.³

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1 From 1978 onwards, this focus led White to work at the *History of Consciousness* department of the University of California at Santa Cruz.

2 Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). Having previously acted as co-editor for the proceedings of the big symposium organized in 1968 to commemorate Vico's 300th birthday, White already possessed in-depth knowledge of the author's work. See Hayden White and Giorgio Tagliacozzo, eds., *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969).

3 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 197-216.

Through a reading of this later article, I would like to focus on White's understanding of how Vico could inspire a critical history of historiographical consciousness. Let us start with a brief overview of the article's structure. White begins by providing us with an understanding of the significance of *New Science* for the social and cultural sciences, relating Vico's ideas to 19th century foundational figures like Hegel and Marx. He deals in particular with Vico's cyclical model of gentile history and its tension with the linear perspective of Christian European civilization. Coming to terms with this tension provides the background for an extended discussion of the epistemic role of speech and tropes in the transformations of gentile consciousness. White concludes by drawing out the implications of what he conceives as a theory of linguistic transformation applied to consciousness and its objects for a non-dualistic perspective.

As White demonstrates, we owe to Vico a conceptual framework for the analysis of social and cultural phenomena which prefigures the rise of the human and social sciences of the 19th century. In Vico's thought, the explanation of their core features relies on the "convertibility" of the 'true' and the 'fabricated', or the principle of *verum ipsum factum*.⁴ The idea is that humans can only know what they have made or what in principle they would be able to make. As they are incapable of creating the physical world conceived by God, their knowledge of this world can only be incomplete. The specificity of this science of society and culture is located in the role given to consciousness and speech:

[m]en's relationship with their worlds, social and natural, was mediated by consciousness in a crucial way, and especially by speech, which was not for Vico merely a verbal representation of the world of praxis, a reproduction in a consciousness of the world of things and the actual relations between them, but a reproductive and creative, active and inventive power.⁵

4 White, "The Tropics," 197.

5 White, "The Tropics," 199.

Here Vico anticipates Georg Lukacs's critique of the Marxist concept of false consciousness, according to which the capacity of the mind to create false representations regarding the relations between men and the world is not an obstacle to knowledge. On the contrary, it opens up the possibility of changing, revising and reforming the actual world. As we shall see, error is not opposed to truth, but viewed as part of it.

According to White, the gradual process of creating knowledge through consciousness and speech reflects Hegel's idealistic view of world history. Particular societies are submitted to cycles of growth and decline while culture in general is seen as essentially progressive throughout its cyclical recurrences. With Vico, this adopts the form of a superposition of two major types of civilization: the gentile one, which is subject to the cyclical law of *corso* and *ricorso*, and Hebrew and Christian civilization, which, having taken advantage of divine revelation, is exempt of this process. Because of this direct relationship to divine knowledge, Hebrews and Christians do not have the indirect relationship to creation which characterizes the gentile worldview and, as a result, the problem of the interpretation of the world does not concern them. Based on this insight, Vico seeks to understand how gentile civilizations, such as the Greeks and the Romans, could have reached their high level of sophistication. What is the relation between their cyclical histories and the progressive ones of the Hebrews and Romans?

Similar to Edward Said's reading of Vico in his book *Beginnings. Intention and Method*,⁶ White focuses on the interpretative processes which define relations to the gentile world and make Vico the first to conceive a "hermeneutical principle".⁷ Here, speech both allows us to understand cultural phenomena and to develop the categories required to grasp the evolution of a culture. Vico distinguishes poetical expression from representations in prose: while the former is of hermeneutical

6 Edward Said, *Beginnings. Intention and Method* (London: Granta Books, 1997 [1975]).

7 White, "The Tropics," 203.

nature and constitutes an active and creative force, the latter is a passive reflection of the way things are. For White,

[t]he effect of these two aspects of speech on consciousness set up a tension, within consciousness itself, that generates a tendency of thought to transcend itself and to create out of the sensed inadequacy of language to its object the conditions for the exercise of its essential freedom.⁸

White therefore starts an enquiry into the nature of the creative force of language and, in order to respond, he refers to the second book of *New Science*, in which Vico outlines his theory of metaphor. At stake is a “poetic logic” designating the forms through which things as they are apprehended by primitive man are signified.⁹ “Poetic logic” refers to the working of primitive consciousness, allowing for the interpretation of its creations. In this respect, two fields interact: metaphysics, concerning things in the forms of their being, and logic, pertaining to the forms through which the former can be expressed. In the “poetic logic” of primitive men, thought moves in a certain direction, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and from the concrete to the abstract. This implies that “the forms through which things are signified” should be interpreted as a projection on the unfamiliar of attributes held to be characteristic of the familiar. Thus, “(...) poetic logic has, by virtue of the original metaphorical nature of its contents, its own inner dynamic or, as we might say, dialectic, so that the relationship between language and the world of things is not simply reflexive”.¹⁰ In this respect, the speech figures or tropes make up the “sensory topics of primitive man”,¹¹ which are divided into the four tropical modalities mentioned

8 *Idem*.

9 Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Finch (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1968), § 400.

10 White, “The Tropics,” 204.

11 Vico, *The New Science*, § 495.

in the beginning: metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and irony.¹² Each of them designates steps in a transformative process extending in an arc where one end is occupied by metaphor and the other one by irony. While metaphor is intimately linked to the act of naming the things of the world, irony designates the opposite: the entrance into a language of prose. Metaphor is understood as a generic trope that relates to synecdoche and metonymy as its refinements. For White, this transformative model is about “(…) the tension between things and the words used to characterize them which makes further specification of the nature of things necessary and the further refinement of language possible by tropological variation”.¹³ Let us add that, here, White’s earlier idealist reading of Vico through Hegel is qualified, as he notes that the most primitive metaphorical types of identification are related to corporal and emotional experiences.¹⁴

Contrary to the modern poet, who is able to distinguish between figurative and literal language, in Vico’s account primitive man understands figures and allegories as literal representations of the exterior world. Irony marks the exit of this consciousness towards a state in which “(…) language itself has become an object of reflection, and the sensed inadequacy of language to the full representation of its objects has become perceived as a problem”.¹⁵ If irony presupposes an awareness of the distinction between true and false, it also offers the possibility of presenting a lie as truth and, therefore, for White irony is foundational for all sciences that seek both to produce true statements about the world and to denounce the inadequacy of figurative descriptions.

White notes that Vico’s cyclical evolutionary model is not unique in the history of ideas. His originality rather resides in the “...construction of a model by which both the stages in the evolution of consciousness can be defined and the transitions from one to the other of

¹² Vico, *The New Science*, § 404-09.

¹³ White, “The Tropics,” 206.

¹⁴ For an analysis of this corporal dimension in the work of Vico, see Maria-Benedita Basto, “Corps poétique et critique démocratique. Vico et l’humanisme engagé chez Edward Said,” *Tumultes* 2, no. 35 (2010): 103-17.

¹⁵ White, “The Tropics,” 207.

them can be accounted for in terms of ‘the modifications of the human mind’”.¹⁶ This strict analogy between tropological transformations in language and changes in consciousness and society open up the way for a particular kind of dialectic. Rather than being based on an interplay between thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis, it is “(...) the dialectic of the exchange between language and the reality it seeks to contain”.¹⁷

The author reminds us of the difference in Vico’s thought between gentile civilizations, in which the ironic trope ultimately leads to hyper-scepticism and the loss of virtue, and the Europeans’ Christian civilization, where the truths of religion save them from such an outcome. However, White stresses that it is also the point of view of Christian truth which allows Vico to adopt an ironical and self-conscious position with respect to gentile history. This detachment provides Vico with the possibility of considering their histories as “(...) purely autonomous processes of development, governed by Providence only insofar as it provided, in the constitution of human nature itself as body, mind, and speech, the three variables whose interactions the pagan histories represent”.¹⁸

To conclude, let us return to the question of the relationship between consciousness and language, which Hayden White sought to apprehend by using Vico’s model of a tropological history. In the introduction of *Tropics of Discourse*, White observes:

“Our discourse always tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them; or, what amounts to the same thing, the data always resist the coherency of the image which we are trying to fashion of them”.¹⁹

16 White, “The Tropics,” 209.

17 *Idem*.

18 White, “The Tropics,” 215.

19 Hayden White, “Introduction: Tropology, Discourse, and the Modes of Human Consciousness,” in *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 1-25, 1.

In *Metahistory*, White seeks to show, through plotmaking, that Western discourse on the history of consciousness basically used four tropes. They were used to bring out differences among founders of the discipline. However, according to Stephen Bann,²⁰ the way such a “poetic logic” worked lay diachronically outside of its scope. Bann reminds us that, in contrast, *Tropics of Discourse* focuses on the analogy between metaphorical transformation and the transformation of consciousness in history. In this process, irony plays a particular role, because, as we have seen, it produces a situation in which language itself becomes an object of reflection, opening up a critical space within scientific discourse. According to White, Vico reverses “the relationship between the components of ironic consciousness so that the false is seen not to oppose the true, but to be contained within it as the necessary stage in the attainment of the whole truth”.²¹ Here, the inadequacy of discourse in relation to its object creates the conditions for the exercise of liberty in historiography. When Vico overcame the dualisms of his age with a “third alternative”,²² this also involved the mutual containment of other terms, such as life and death, savagery and civilization, humanity and bestiality. In this respect, White’s reading of Vico may also provide a blueprint for a critical analysis of colonial and postcolonial representations.

20 Stephen Bann, “History: Myth and Narrative: A Coda for Roland Barthes and Hayden White,” in *Re-Figuring Hayden White*, ed. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domańska, and Hans Kellner (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 144-64, 154.

21 White, “The Tropics,” 216.

22 White, “The Tropics,” 217.

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Rui Bebiano

**Hayden White e
o problema da narrativa**

No ensaio “The question of narrative in contemporary historical theory”, publicado em 1984 por White, aborda-se o lugar central do processo narrativo na construção do conhecimento histórico, para demonstrar de que modo é impossível ao historiador pensar que detém um acesso privilegiado ao passado, sem que o reconhecimento deste facto o diminua como profissional. Enfatiza ainda o modo como o entendimento da história enquanto “ato poético”, e a aceitação da interação necessária entre real e imaginário que o envolve, lhe garante uma dimensão de responsabilidade e de criatividade que torna mais completo o seu papel.

Palavras-chave: Narrativa; poética; verdade; imaginação.

Hayden White and the problem of narrative

In the essay “The question of narrative in contemporary historical theory”, published in 1984, Hayden White addresses the centrality of narrative in the process of constructing historical knowledge, arguing for the impossibility of a privileged access to the past, which, however, does not in any way diminish the historian’s professional credibility. The understanding of historiography as a “poetic act”, and the acknowledgment of an imperative articulation between the real and the imaginary, ensures a dimension of both creativity as well as responsibility, and thus a more comprehensive role for the historian.

Keywords: Narrative; poetics; truth; imagination.

Hayden White e o problema da narrativa

Rui Bebiano*

“The question of narrative in contemporary historical theory” foi publicado por Hayden White em fevereiro de 1984 na revista *History and Theory*, ressurgindo dois anos depois na compilação *The Content of the Form*. Na primeira página, como consigna adaptada aos debates que então corriam sobre metodologia e epistemologia da história, a conhecida afirmação de Barthes em “Le discours de l’histoire”, um artigo de 1967, à qual tem por vezes erradamente sido atribuído um sentido redutor do valor do facto: “Le fait n’a jamais qu’une existence linguistique.” Ela reforça o objetivo central do ensaio aqui examinado: certificar as razões que fazem com que, para White, a narrativa deva ser sempre observada como componente incluível do trabalho do historiador.

Reparte-se por sete partes. Na primeira, distingue a história enquanto saber e narrativa escrita; na segunda, refuta a objeção de que a narratividade dramatiza e “romantiza” o objeto, retirando-lhe rigor; na terceira parte, separa história e ficção, reportando o trabalho da teoria estruturalista e pós-estruturalista; na quarta, destaca a importância da narrativa para separar a história da vertigem da dimensão empírica; na quinta, discute e enfatiza o valor do mito e da alegoria na construção da narrativa histórica; na sexta, trata a dimensão figurativa do conceito de “verdade”; na sétima parte, fecha a reflexão recusando a assunção dos conceitos de “real” e de “imaginário” como sendo de natureza antitética, aproximando-os na forma de entender o que é e como se constrói a história.

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Logo em 1966, com o ensaio “The Burden of History”, mas particularmente a partir da edição de *Metahistory*, de 1973, o trabalho teórico de White foi olhado como inovador, tendo alguns dos seus conceitos – como os de “meta-história”, “tropo” ou *emplotment* (“colocar em trama”) – sido incorporados pelo universo da história, da filosofia da história ou dos estudos literários. O seu contributo viria a ganhar tal impacto que em alguns ambientes passou mesmo a falar-se de uma “historiografia após Hayden White”. Ao mesmo tempo, as suas propostas foram olhadas como perturbantes em alguns meios da história profissional. A explicação não é difícil: White considerava que muitos historiadores não procuravam formas mais completas de compreensão do mundo porque permaneciam vinculados a fontes, métodos e processos convencionais, excessivamente observadores de uma conceção estática e ensimesmada do *métier* e do seu discurso. Ancorado em contributos de autores tão diversos como Hegel, Nietzsche e Croce sobre o sentido politicamente dinâmico do conhecimento histórico e também sobre a possibilidade de este ser reconhecido como uma arte, propôs então um diagnóstico e uma terapêutica que reequacionaram os conceitos de realidade e de verdade em história.

Entendia ali que o modelo de historiografia dominante era particularmente restritivo, incorporando um conjunto de interditos, aplicados ao pensamento, à imaginação e à escrita. Exemplo desta limitação era o facto de minimizar ou excluir o uso de *insights*, de operações cognitivas, originárias da arte e da literatura, enfatizando ao invés o corte entre acontecimento e ficção. Opondo-se aos “ficcionalistas”, os historiadores neopositivistas e similares não atendiam à configuração literária nos seus trabalhos, preferindo acreditar, ao estabelecerem diretrizes mais ou menos rígidas para a disciplina e ao servirem-se de uma linguagem árida e vocabularmente muito depurada, que dessa forma conseguiam “superar” a dimensão subjetiva e irregular da ficção. Quanto muito, utilizavam elementos retirados de fontes literárias, mas mediando-os sempre com recurso a trabalhos académicos de crítica e de exegese literária.

Nas primeiras páginas do artigo a que este texto se dedica, White examina o carácter incompleto e a seu ver erróneo desse processo de

exclusão: “This implies that the form in which historical events present themselves to a prospective narrator is *found* rather than *constructed*”.¹ Todo o texto se destina, ao invés, a sublinhar o valor primordial da construção do sentido. Aquilo que White vinha propondo era que, para além das temáticas, especialidades e focos, o que deve diferenciar os historiadores é a forma como cada um deles vê, ou lê, os documentos, e como transforma aquilo que apreendeu numa narrativa textual ou visual com características próprias.

Isto é, a dimensão interpretativa encontra-se sempre no centro do argumento. Uma década após *Metahistory*, enfatiza de novo o lugar da narrativa e os problemas que esta continuava a levantar na teoria da história, assinalando a existência de um “intenso debate” sobre aquilo que, do seu ponto de vista, talvez até nem justificasse tanta aspereza, pois, como refere, não existe outro modo de conceber a comunicação que não através da narrativa. O problema, pois, não está no uso da narrativa, mas na forma de conceber os modos que toma. Por isso White distingue dois *tempos* no processo de materialização do discurso histórico: o primeiro assumindo uma *interpretação* do fragmento do passado que pode ser conhecido, enquanto o segundo define uma *representação*, em termos de linguagem, dessa interpretação.²

Sob esta perspetiva, a representação do passado integrará sempre uma forma de *imaginário poético*, materializado na linguagem da qual o historiador se apropria no processo narrativo. Daí insistir no valor dos tropos de linguagem: a metáfora, a metonímia, a sinédoque e a ironia. Apetrechado com estas quatro ferramentas, o profissional da história tem a capacidade de conferir um sentido mais rico a um conjunto de asserções, fazendo-o de formas muito diferentes: pode subordiná-las às leis causais que as condicionaram, mas pode também codificá-las no sentido de formular um passado plausível. A criação historiográfica será, assim, sempre “uma operação literária”, o que significa “produtora de ficção”. Escrevera-o já em 1974, em *Tropics of Discourse*, e retoma-o

1 Hayden White, “The question of narrative in contemporary historical theory,” *History and Theory* 23, no. 1 (February 1984): 1-33, 2.

2 White, “The Question,” 3.

no ensaio aqui analisado, enfatizando, a dado passo, o facto de “in both poetic and rhetorical speech, the communication of a message about some extrinsic referent may be involved, but the functions of «expression» on the one side and of «connotation» of the other may be given a higher order of importance”.³ No estudo que produziu sobre a “imaginação histórica” em White, Herman Paul testemunha a forma como para este, tanto a um nível profundo de consciência, quanto no processo de escolha das estratégias de explicação ou de representação, o historiador executa “an essentially *poetic act*”.⁴

Pode estabelecer-se aqui uma comparação do trabalho de White com o de Dominick LaCapra. Ao lado de White, LaCapra condena a tendência da história que permanece fiel a paradigmas literários e científicos datados do século XIX, partilhando também da opinião depreciativa de uma história concebida como lugar dos “homens sensatos” que sobressaem por encontrar o simples no complexo e o familiar no estranho, servindo-se dela também como refúgio, ou antídoto, para os “vícios do presente”.⁵ Aceita ainda a dimensão ficcional da experiência e a estrutura literária da escrita histórica, tal como valoriza a história intelectual, ou das ideias, por esta há muito ter reconhecido as estruturas do pensamento e o papel do elemento simbólico como parte integrante da comunicação humana e da perceção do passado, ficando assim em melhor posição para valorizar o papel do pensamento abstrato e dos fatores subjetivos na construção da história. LaCapra destaca, aliás, a dívida que mantém para com o seu colega: “No one writing in this country at the present time has done more to wake historians from their dogmatic slumber than has Hayden White.”⁶

Todavia, diverge deste sobre diversos aspetos. Separando-se em parte da ideia da escrita da história como resultado de uma série de escolhas que dependem da criatividade e da destreza, considera que as

3 White, “The Question,” 16.

4 Herman Paul, *Hayden White. The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 70.

5 Lynn Hunt e Lloyd Kramer, *Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra* (Berkeley: Book Chapter, 1989), 100-01.

6 Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Languages* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), 72.

noções de ordem e causalidade não podem ser rejeitadas pela historiografia. Atribui também uma importância maior ao vínculo, da parte de quem constrói a história, estabelecido com os textos que a documentam, dada, para além da sua natureza informativa, a capacidade que fornecem de influenciar a linguagem de quem pretende reconstituir parte do passado, aproximando o real vivido de uma maneira a seu ver mais perfeita e polimórfica. Textos e contextos possuem, para LaCapra, uma relação de complementaridade, embora não devendo ser confundidos.

Além disso, também não partilha inteiramente da figura ideal do “historiador-poético” desenhada por White, embora entenda que os profissionais da história devam aprender a escrevê-la de renovadas maneiras, precisando para isso de se dispor a seguir os romancistas até aos domínios da linguagem dentro dos quais se torna possível uma figuração de multiplicidades que são formas de conhecimento. Sublinha mesmo a relação com o discurso histórico de autores como Dostoiévski, Stendhal, Flaubert, Thomas Mann ou Virginia Woolf.⁷ Considera, porém, que deve ser procurado um método de escrita da história que transmita a complexidade das categorias presentes no real descrito sem colocar de parte as distinções conceptuais e analíticas e a materialidade dos meios de prova, e, portanto, sem cair numa criatividade formal que pode produzir um discurso obscuro ou incompreensível, sendo esta, de facto, uma importante objecção que pode ser levantada às teses de White.

Todavia, para este as narrativas históricas não imaginam “as coisas que indicam”, antes trazem à mente, de forma mais rigorosa, “imagens das coisas que indicam”, tal como o faz a metáfora. Conferindo sentidos aos acontecimentos passados, aquém e além de qualquer percepção que estes forneçam, “historical narratives are not only models of past events and processes, but also metaphorical statements which suggest a relation of similitude between such events and processes and the story types that we conventionally use to endow the events of our lives with

⁷ Dominick LaCapra, *History, Politics and the Novel* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 1-14.

culturally sanctioned meanings”.⁸ Qualquer área do saber que, contrariamente a ciências como a física e a química, não se “disciplinou”, ao ponto de esboçar um sistema terminológico-formal limitado para descrever os seus objetos, tem nos discursos figurativos os processos para enunciar os dados que se destinam à análise, não se vendo razão para que a história não se encontre precisamente na mesma situação.

Problema inevitável associado a este modo de entender a construção da história é o da veracidade dos documentos, na sua articulação com o fator de prova e com a reconstituição credível do passado. Hoje poucos serão os historiadores suficientemente ingênuos para acreditarem poder chegar, a partir dos documentos disponíveis, a uma verdade definitiva e incontestável. É um lugar-comum renegar a história positivista e reconhecer-se o carácter relativo dos saberes, ao mesmo tempo que, a partir da intervenção pioneira de Thomas Kuhn, a própria ciência se tornou reconhecidamente incerta. Segundo White, a dificuldade está em retirar desta situação todas as possíveis consequências e fazê-la corresponder a uma prática coerente, coisa que apenas poderá acontecer depois de redimensionado o próprio valor do documento como prova.

Em “The Question of Narrative”, o problema da verdade é particularmente abordado, em particular num diálogo mantido com Paul Ricoeur. Após considerar que este toma o argumento (*plot*) como “crucial to the historic representation of events”, e que Ricoeur “has assigned historical narrative to the category of symbolic discourse”, recorre às suas posições para asseverar que é de certa forma impossível representar ou atribuir um sentido aos acontecimentos históricos sem recurso a uma estrutura narrativa que inevitavelmente os reconfigura: “The only way to represent them is by narrative itself.”⁹ Neste sentido, a “verdade” é assumidamente mediada pela estrutura narrativa, e de modo algum associada apenas a uma representação empírica, supostamente absoluta e inequívoca, dos factos, como ingenuamente creem os defensores do conhecimento objetivo aplicado à história.

8 Cf. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 103.

9 White, “The Question,” 27-28.

Ao mesmo tempo, o historiador, se desenvolve o trabalho de escrita baseado em evidências que encontra no decurso do exame das fontes legadas pelas gerações que o precederam, procede à análise documental a partir de problemas e conjecturas situadas no presente, procedendo a uma inevitável recriação. As “evidências” nada mais são assim do que a leitura do especialista quando este examina e interpreta o documento. E o acontecimento, o evento em história, desaparece como dado transparente que se oferece por inteiro, ou na sua essência, representando antes algo que se insere numa intriga, numa trama feita e refeita pelo historiador. A narrativa do passado não é, no presente, senão a construção que o historiador concebe no momento em que se propõe representá-lo.

Já em *Tropics of Discourse*, White afirmara que os documentos históricos não são menos opacos do que os textos estudados pelo crítico literário. Tão-pouco é mais acessível o mundo representado nesses documentos. A opacidade do mundo neles configurado é até ampliada pela produção das narrativas históricas, e cada nova obra neste domínio produzida apenas é somada ao número de textos possíveis que têm de ser conhecidos se, num processo eventualmente infinito, se pretender traçar o “retrato” possível e razoavelmente completo de determinado ambiente histórico.¹⁰ Neste artigo, esta dimensão volta a ser enfatizada: “Narrative is beyond a mode of explanation, more than a code, and much more than a vehicle for conveying information (...); it is a means of symbolizing events without which their «historicality» cannot be indicated.”¹¹

No final do ensaio, White regressa ao valor da articulação entre real e imaginário que subsume, sob o seu ponto de vista, todo o processo de historicização do passado: “The notion of what constitutes a «real» event turns, not on the distinction between «true» and «false» (which is a distinction that belongs to the order of discourses, not to the order of events), but rather on the distinction between «real» and

10 White, *Tropics*, 106.

11 White, “The Question,” 27-28.

«imaginary» (which belongs both to the order of events and to the order of discourses.”¹² Esta diferenciação representa para ele uma condição inquestionável.

Escreve Paul que um dos paradoxos da obra de Hayden White como historiador e teórico da história consiste em que a maior parte do seu esforço foi dedicado a explicar porque de modo algum podem os historiadores pensar que detêm um acesso privilegiado ao passado. O grande valor do artigo aqui observado está em deixar claro que isso de modo algum os diminui. Antes lhes assegura uma dimensão de responsabilidade e de criatividade, no reconhecimento da história “como saber próprio, mas híbrido, que combina dados e imaginação e o faz com rigor e com arte”,¹³ tornando mais completo e empolgante o seu papel e abrindo-o no processo público de comunicação.

12 White, “The Question,” 33.

13 Rui Bebiano, “Sobre a história como poética,” in *As Oficinas da História*, coord. José d’Encarnação (Lisboa: Colibri, 2002), 47-70, 70.

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Edoardo Tortarolo

An empirical Hayden White? On “Literary theory and historical writing” (1989)

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 *fin-gere-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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Paul-Arthur Tortosa

Post-modern storytelling and fragmented narrations in the history of medicine

In this article, I try to combine Hayden White's work on historical narration with sociological and artistic perspectives in order to propose possible avenues for a new kind of storytelling in the history of medicine. Drawing on White's focus on emplotment and the Actor-Network Theory, I try to think about new actors and plot-types for the history of epidemics. I also share White's belief that fictional and historical narration share a lot, which leads me to study some artistic storytelling. This makes me speak in favour of fragmented and contradicting narrations aimed at spotting lies instead of conjuring an objective and unique "Truth".

Keywords: Storytelling; narration; emplotment; history of medicine.

A narratividade pós-moderna e as relações fragmentadas na história da medicina

Neste artigo procuro combinar o trabalho de Hayden White em torno da narrativa histórica com perspectivas sociológicas e artísticas, com o objetivo de propor novas possibilidades de narrar a história da medicina. Baseando-me nas propostas de White sobre o conceito de "*emplotment*" e na "Actor-Network Theory", procuro pensar sobre novos atores e enredos para a história das epidemias. Partilhando da noção de White de que as narrativas ficcionais e históricas se assemelham, procuro ainda estudar algumas formas de narratividade artística, argumentando em favor de uma narração fragmentada e contraditória que pretende identificar mentiras e não estabelecer uma "Verdade" objetiva e única.

Palavras-chave: Narratividade; narração; *emplotment*; história da medicina.

Post-modern storytelling and fragmented narrations in the history of medicine

Paul-Arthur Tortosa*

*À la longue,
Angelo fut étonné de n'apercevoir
d'autre vie que celle de la lumière¹*

In an article originally published in 1996, Hayden White addresses the following issue: is a historical narration possible?² Or is every narrative necessarily an ideological one? This debate derives from the call for a “return to narrative” made by some historians arguing that storytelling could be given only a rhetorical function and might be used “as means of reviving an interest in history” among people that were bored with structuralism and dry scientific historiography. The implicit idea behind such a view is that narration is a neutral discursive form. However, this thesis by no means enjoys a consensus among intellectuals: several researchers have claimed that storytelling is “in some ways ideological in its very nature”.³ First, Fernand Braudel argues that “in its own covert way, narrative history consists of an interpretation, an authentic philosophy of history”, emphasizing dramatic accidents and exceptional

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1 Jean Giono, *Le hussard sur le toit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 14.

2 Hayden White, “Storytelling. Historical and Ideological,” in *The Fiction of Narrative. Essays on History, Literature and Theory, 1957-2007* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2010), 273-93.

3 *Ibid.*, 273.

beings.⁴ None less than Roland Barthes shares this indictment of narration as an ideological elaboration aimed at transforming history into a spectacle.⁵ Moreover, Lukàcs claims that “the choice of narrative mode for representation of reality indicated [...] the impulse to engage reality in ideological rather than in non-ideological terms”.⁶ After reviewing these work , Hayden White shifts the debate into another sphere: he explains that “there is no such thing as narration-in-general” but only different story-types, such as epic, tragedy or face, which leads him to study the “techniques of *emplotment*”.⁷ Unlike David Carr, who, while acknowledging that historians do “emplot”, argues that historiographical narratives “should not be considered as «allegorizations» of the events of which they speak but rather [...] as literal accounts thereof”, White considers that historical narratives are abstractions, just like fictional storytelling.⁸ Drawing on Hjelmself’s concepts, he distinguishes between the “Expression” level and the “Content” level of a discourse. He then further distinguishes between the “Form” and the “Substance” of both, concluding that “the «story» told [...] unfolds at the level of the «Form of Content» of the discourse whereas [...] emplotment can be seen to operate at the level of its «substance of expression»”.⁹ Finally, White writes that the degree of historicity arises from the Substance of Content: a historical concept can be “endowed with different specific contents at different times and places in history”.¹⁰

Drawing on my own research, I would like to extend Hayden White’s reflection on historical narration. I think that combining White’s work on emplotment developed in this piece, as well as in other articles, with ideas coming from sociology and art could enable us

4 Fernand Braudel, “Position de l’histoire en 1950,” in *Écrits sur l’histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969), 22-23.

5 Roland Barthes, “Le discours de l’histoire“, in *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 174.

6 Hayden White, “Storytelling ...”, 277.

7 *Ibid.*, 280. White underlines.

8 David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

9 Hayden White, “Storytelling ...”, 288.

10 *Ibid.*, 291.

to think about genuinely post-modern narrations. In my field – history of science – an example of narration as ornamental device is Carlo Cipolla’s tale of Italian cities fighting against an “invisible enemy”.¹¹ Cipolla used narration as a way to present his scientific results in a more entertaining manner. Despite its flamboyant style, Cipolla’s book is very classical from a methodological point of view. For instance, it is deeply flawed by its focus on individuals mastering their own fate and its epic emplotment. Nevertheless, I think that historical narration of epidemics could be renewed in a threefold manner.

Firstly, drawing on Science Studies and on Actor-Network Theory, we need to grant non-human actors a greater role in history. On the one hand, humans are not the only living form to make history: technical objects, microbes, germs and other living forms do it as well.¹² One could argue that most historians have understood the crucial part played by objects, animals and germs and have taken a “material turn”. Although this is true to some extent, non-humans are mostly depicted as bystanders whereas humans are the actors of the narration. Microbes and objects must be given a non-human agency. They are neither objects nor subjects but “actants”, to use Latourian terminology. The Black Plague pandemic killed between a third and half of the European population. A yellow fever outbreak helped people from Haiti repel the French troops in the 1800’s. In most wars in history, “disease killed far more men than the enemy”.¹³ Therefore, historians of medicine need to reintroduce bacteria, viruses and their animal carriers, such as rats or mosquitoes, into the historical narrative. Likewise, the environment has to be taken into greater consideration. Environmental history is a relatively new field, but the environment has long played a key role in literature: one could remember the role played by the light in *The Outsider*, where the blinding light leads the narrator to commit a murder

11 Carlo Maria Cipolla, *Contro un nemico invisibile: Epidemie e strutture sanitarie nell’Italia del Rinascimento* (Milano: Il Mulino, 1979).

12 Bruno Latour, *The pasteurization of France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

13 Erica Charters, *Disease, War, and the Imperial State. The Welfare of the British Armed Forces during the Seven Year’s War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 11.

he will be sentenced to death for.¹⁴ In this book, the sun is not a remote part of the scenery, it is a crucial actor. Closer to my field is the first chapter of *The Horseman on the Roof*, which depicts the beginning of a fictional cholera outbreak. Again, the author underlines the role played by the light in history and makes it a living agent equal to humans, as shown by Giono's quotation as an epigraph to this text.

Secondly, we can renew historical narration not only by introducing new protagonists, but also by diversifying our sample of plot-types, since Hayden White considers emplotment to be the key of every narration. One could think, for instance, of writing the account of a technical failure in the form of a love story: the doomed romance of an inventor and his invention. This is what Bruno Latour does in *Aramis*, and we can apply to this book Hayden White's analysis of Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.¹⁵ Hayden White explains that choosing a plot-type over another was a matter of interpretation, not of description. This means that events are not ontologically dramatic, comic or epic: they are given a meaning by the researcher.¹⁶ Marx's book depicts the events of 1848-1851 in France as a farce, not because they were inherently ridiculous, but because Marx's idea is that things went the way they did because no one understood what was going on. Therefore, Marx's choice of the farce as emplotment refers to a twofold irony: pathetic characters and ignorant actors. As far as *Aramis* is concerned, the emplotment of the story as a romance is also both figuratively and literally true: the romance can be seen as a metaphor for the inventor/invention relationship, but Latour's main argument is that the invention failed because its inventor did not love it enough to convince other people of its quality.

Thirdly, historical narration could benefit from being fragmented into various small contradictory stories. Historically, narration has been linked to truth: one tells a story in order to reveal the hidden order of

14 Albert Camus, *The Outsider* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1946 [1942]).

15 Bruno Latour, *Aramis, or the love of technology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

16 Hayden White, "Historical Pluralism," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 3 (1986): 480-93.

things, or, in the case of historical narration, to unveil “the historical significance” of events.¹⁷ In most cases, White talks about “narration” as the singular form, but he considers that there is no such thing as “objective facts” that could be a consensual ground for analysis.¹⁸ However, he does not directly state that “truth” does not exist; he thinks that some stories are more “plausible” than others.¹⁹ I would argue that telling several conflicting stories is better than looking to establish the more “plausible” one. Indeed, taking Hayden White’s post-modern perspective to its logical conclusion leads to “truth” funerals. Therefore, historical narration could be thought as a device aimed at uncovering lies instead of discovering truth. Art has already explored territories that are unmapped by historians in this area. In this regard, Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashômon* is particularly interesting.²⁰ At the core of this movie is a trial: a samurai traveling with his wife has been murdered by a brigand, who is being judged for his crime. The brigand is the first to speak, confessing the murder with great detail. Then, the victim’s spouse testifies, telling a totally different story. After that, the dead samurai’s spirit is summoned by a witch and gives a third account of the events – different from the two others. After the trial, a witness that did not testify in court tells his friend that he saw the murder and gives a fourth unique narration of the mysterious assassination. The movie ends without any narrative being explicitly ruled out, but it is obvious for the spectator that every character lied to some extent. More importantly, one can understand why people have lied the way they did, which reveals their values and interests: the brigand wants to hide his cowardice, the wife her guilt, the samurai his defeat in a fight, the witness his greed. How could this be applied to historical research? I am studying a yellow fever epidemic that stroke the Tuscan port of

17 Hayden White, “The Problem of Style in Realism Representation: Marx and Flaubert,” in *The Concept of Style*, dir. Berel Lang (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 279-99.

18 See, for instance Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

19 Hayden White, “Storytelling ...”, 288-89.

20 The movie is inspired by Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s short story entitled “In a Grove”, which was first published in the January 1922 edition of the Japanese journal *Shinchô*.

Livorno in 1804. This story can be written with various plot-types: the epic struggle of sanitary institutions against a deadly disease, the tragic fate of a city originated from an individual professional misconduct, the scientific analysis of the spread of a virus in a population, the “small” and “regional” narrative of a city facing a collective threat. None of these narratives is “wrong”, for they are all based on empirical evidence and account for what happened. Moreover, in my opinion, there is no such thing as a more “plausible” narrative since they all elude some aspects of reality: the scientific narrative omits the political origins of the epidemic, the epic story downplays the messiness of the situation, etc.

Hayden White’s remarks on narration are still relevant today, particularly his focus on emplotment techniques. Combined with ideas coming from other fields, such as sociology and art, I think that White’s insights on narration could lead to new historical narrative practices. The thesis developed in this article is that post-modern storytelling could be built around fragmented and contradictory partial narrations, whose confrontation aims at spotting lies instead of conjuring an unique and objective “Truth”.

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Luís Trindade

Hayden White's Modernist Events

Hayden White's definition of modernist events constitutes a challenge to historical representation, and in particular to twentieth-century historiography. In this short essay, we will try to follow White's analysis, identify its shortcomings and propose a way forward, a set of directions through which this potentially decisive concept can be deployed by modern historiography.

Keywords: Twentieth century; figuration; historical narrative; modernism.

Os eventos modernistas de Hayden White

A forma como Hayden White define os eventos modernistas representa um desafio para as representações históricas e, em particular, para a historiografia do século XX. Neste curto ensaio, tentaremos seguir a análise feita por White, identificar os seus limites e propor um caminho, um conjunto de direções através das quais este conceito potencialmente decisivo poderá ser utilizado pela historiografia contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Século XX; figuração; narrativa histórica; modernismo.

Hayden White's Modernist Events

Luís Trindade*

Modernist event is an ambiguous expression, offering itself to multiple interpretations and appropriations. The ambiguity lies, of course, in the displacement of a literary concept – that of modernism – to history, the realm of events about which historians write their narratives. This seems to allow at least some degree of speculation about the impact of something like a *modernist event* on these narratives' historical status: if events can be defined according to the literary technique that responded to its context – as in modernism's response to its period –, one may wonder whether it is possible to establish an intrinsic relation between specific pasts and their historical narratives. Such an intrinsic, or necessary, link between historical periods and their forms of narration is a step Hayden White himself does not seem willing to take, but it could be argued that the ambiguity of a formulation like *modernist event* allows us to explore, even if tentatively, that forbidden frontier between history and narrative – at least in the case of a period like the twentieth-century, when events seemed to be, according to White, *modernist*.

The essay "The Modernist Event", initially published in 1996, appears less as a *fin de siècle* evaluation of an era (as in Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* or Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*) than as an attempt to come to terms with *the dissolution of the event* in the historical imaginary. Such dissolution, according to White, was manifest in the disappearance of "character and plot" from

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"modern historical research and writing".¹ This, on the other hand, was already the consequence of the dismissal of the idea of "fact", which undermined "a founding presupposition of Western realism: the opposition between fact and fiction." So, the problem already assumes the form of a crisis at the frontier between history and narrative, as rather than a mere literary question, the break of such a golden rule of representation should be seen as the narrative consequence of "the anomalous nature of modernist events" themselves, and particularly "their resistance to inherited categories and conventions for assigning meanings to events".² In other words, it was not only that those traditional forms based on plot, character and event no longer seemed able to represent modern reality; this critique of representation should be complemented by the recognition that something "anomalous" occurred in the structure of historical events, preventing their translation into narratives. Accordingly, the first image we get of modernist events is one of dramatic excess, "holocaustal events" beyond any recognizable human measure:

two world wars, the Great Depression, nuclear weapons and communication technology, the population explosion, the mutilation of the zoosphere, famine, genocide as a policy consciously undertaken by "modernized" regimes, etc.

The problem with these events, what stops them from lending 'themselves to understanding by the commonsensical techniques utilized in conventional historical inquiry', thus seems to be a question of number and extension: 'the number of details identifiable in any singular event is potentially infinite; (...) the context of any singular event is infinitely extensive or at least not objectively determinable.'³ But although White's essay does not focus directly on the tragic legacy of the twentieth century as expressed in contemporary titles such as *Age of Extremes* or *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, such incommensurability produces a similar sense of pessimism. More specifically, the overwhel-

1 Hayden White, *Figural Realism. Studies in the mimesis effect* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 66.

2 White, *Figural Realism*, 70.

3 White, *Figural Realism*, 71.

ming nature of events appears, in White, under such a dramatic presentation that their challenge to representation becomes qualitative, that is, moral and political, and not merely a question of number and extension. This is where the twentieth-century of world wars and nuclear weapons meets modernism, as modernist writers had already conceived the latter as an aesthetic coming to terms with the political and moral problems posed by such events.

Most of the effort of “The Modernist Event” thus focuses on the identification of different modernist literary responses to the challenges posed by the century to representation. In Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*, White follows Fredric Jameson in his analysis of the discrepancy between the eventless nature of modern life and the ‘adventurous’ structure of narratives. As the meaning of events, according to Jameson, ‘is a function of their narrativization’, modernism has to operate a ‘derealization of the event’ (that ‘amounts to a rejection of the historicity of all events’⁴) in order to represent the eventless form of ordinary life. In Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, on the other hand, we can identify an even more daring attempt to represent ‘nonaction’ through a story occurring at intervals, in which the distinction between events and its representation is ‘fused’ or ‘collapsed’. At the limit, as in the heated debates around the representation of the holocaust, the disappearance of the opposition between fact and fiction would just become unbearable, and before the risk of turning such an event ‘into the subject matter of a narrative’, many thought (although not White) preferable not to represent the event at all. ‘This is why’, adds White,

the kinds of antinarrative nonstories produced by literary modernism offer the only prospect for *adequate representations* of the kind of “unnatural” events – including the Holocaust – that mark our era and distinguish it absolutely from all of the history that has come before it.⁵

Before trying to verify how reasonable this dramatization of modernist events really is, let us explore our initial ambiguity – on the

⁴ White, *Figural Realism*, 76.

⁵ White, *Figural Realism*, 81 (my emphasis).

relation between modernism's formal devices and twentieth-century's modernist events – further. What exactly does Hayden White mean when he assigns an 'adequate representation' to specific kinds of event? In different occasions, White seems to come close to the idea that the form of representation, rather than just a narrativization of history, was already somehow contained in it. In "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation", for example, the cultural circumstances in which modernism emerged are shown as a direct consequence of that 'change that permitted the crystallization of the totalitarian form that Western society would assume in the twentieth-century': 'as thus envisaged, cultural modernism has to be seen as both *a reflection of* and a response to this new actuality.'⁶ In "Auerbach's Literary History", White nuances this relation by deploying Eric Auerbach's 'figure-fulfillment model' of literary history as a mediation between events and historical representation: 'historical events can be related to one another in the way that a figure is related to its fulfillment in a narrative or a poem.'⁷ In this sense, Auerbach's 'figuralist model' not only establishes a narrative thread between the classics of the Western canon, it also seems to allow us to expand the model to the 'relation between literature and its historical contexts.'⁸ More than an analogy between historical experience and the history of literature, this enables White to consider experience as a prefiguration of the form such experience will be given by literary representation:

In other words, it is not a matter of an author having an experience of a historical milieu and then representing it, in a figurative way, in his text. On the contrary, the experience is already a figure and, insofar as it will serve as a content or referent of a further representation, it is a prefiguration that is fulfilled only in a literary text.

Prefiguration seems more appropriate than 'reflection', as it keeps the discussion at the level of representation, thus avoiding a fall into

⁶ White, *Figural Realism*, 40 (my emphasis).

⁷ White, *Figural Realism*, 89.

⁸ White, *Figural Realism*, 93.

determinism. Modernist events did not determine modernist forms. The reason they are modernist, however, is in the way they gave themselves to modernist representation. For that same reason, the only thing that is determined is ‘the figurative nature of all descriptions of historical objects and their contexts’, and the way this *figurative nature* ‘stems from the particularity with which they have to be invested in order to qualify as historical.’⁹ It could in this sense be said that the challenge posed by “holocaustal events” stemmed from the incommensurability of their historical experience. What made events modernist was their coincidence with the historical reality fictional modernism tried to deal with – the reason why Auerbach would speak of modernist novels as ‘the realistic novel of the era between the two great wars’¹⁰ – as both part of the same experience that, ‘in order to qualify as historical’, would have to be somehow represented.

As a concept, the modernist event thus seems to be in a good position to benefit from the immense creativity of literary modernism. And yet, Hayden White’s treatment of modernist narratives seems rather to point towards a critique of the illusions of realistic representation and to initiate a ‘process of mourning which alone can relieve the burden of history’.¹¹ The last example of a modernist model offered by White’s essay, Gertrude Stein’s lectures in *Narration*, is there precisely to create an impasse: the ‘collapse [of] the distinction between’ Stein’s ‘form and its semantic content’ precludes any effort of representation. Its role is that of those ‘antinarrative nonstories’ that, rather than enhancing the narrative ability to come to terms with events, seem to declare ‘the unreality of the event’ as such, and thus the impossibility of its representation. Modern events, according to Stein, would be an ‘outside without an inside’ in contrast with the ‘things which have really existed.’¹² The extent to which the impasse affects historical nar-

9 White, *Figural Realism*, 51.

10 Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 546.

11 White, *Figural Realism*, 82.

12 In White, *Figural Realism*, 82.

rative is clear: when events are opposed to the *things which have really existed*, there is nothing left to represent.

The problem is thus twofold. Events proliferate in pure exteriority, occupying all visible space with unreality while simultaneously making 'things, which have really existed', invisible. In the 1930s, Gertrud Stein blamed newspapers for this historical impasse: 'the reality being the inside and the newspapers being the outside and never is the outside inside and never is the inside outside'.¹³ The excessive form of modernist events becomes concrete, but newspapers are here only an example of modern media (whose power would be exponentially intensified by television, for example), which constitute either the reason why it is impossible to represent modernist events or the form of modernist events themselves in their unrepresentability. The world of modernism would thus be not only overwhelming, but indeed chaotic: 'it is a more difficult thing to write history to make it anything than to make anything that is anything be anything because in history you have everything, you have the newspapers and the conversations and letter writing...'. Conversely, modern media as modernist events would become an ultimately *meaningless excess of meaning*.

"The Modernist Event" starts with a reference to Fredric Jameson's "Metacommentary", where White identifies an initial example of the 'commonplace of contemporary criticism that modernist literature (...) dissolves the trinity of event, character, and plot'.¹⁴ It may therefore be worth remembering that the proliferation of the "outside" White associates, via Gertrude Stein, with 'the unreality of the event', looks remarkably close to the way Jameson describes the 'lived experience' that works as history's 'raw material':

The essential characteristic of such raw material or latent content is that it is never initially formless, never (...) initially contingent, but rather is itself already meaningful from the outset, being nothing more

13 In White, *Figural Realism*, 83.

14 White, *Figural Realism*, 66.

nor less than the very components of our concrete social life: words, thoughts, objects, desires, people, places, activities.¹⁵

The world of this history is still quite overwhelming, full as it is with words, thoughts and desires. And yet, it looks much less chaotic than one would be led to believe by the extension, number and violence of White's "holocaustal events". If, to this quantitative definition of modernist events, we add the qualitative contribution suggested by Jameson – that, overwhelming as it may be, the raw material of modernism 'is itself already meaningful from the outset' –, modernist narratives may still be facing a daunting task, but surely not one outside historical representation. In this sense, rather than a burden of which one should be relieved, Jameson's raw history may be seen as a way out of the impasse Gertrude Stein forced Hayden White into.

Like White, Jameson too (following Auerbach) believes the historicity of narrative forms depends on form, rather than content. From realism to modernism, this history of formal procedures in art and literature reveals, according to Jameson, each period's *political unconscious*. Whereas an analysis based on content would situate historical action on individuals producing meaning – in a narrow humanist sense – the political unconscious is both historical and collective, expressing through form the shared metanarratives of broader human groups – in an enhanced, collective form of humanism. The ways an idea like the *political unconscious* may serve as a model to rethink the historical narratives of *modernist events* are thus multiple, but what was just said points in at least two initial, but decisive, directions: in the way modern media can be seen as collective forms of meaning-making; and, consequently, in the way progress, as the ideology of modernity, can be seen not as a law of historical determinism but as a metanarrative, the ultimate form of modernist events, through which modern people made sense of the world collectively.

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Ideologies of Theory* (London: Verso, 2009), 16.

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Nancy Partner

The Deep Content of the Form: Hayden White on “Freud’s Tropology of Dreaming”

Hayden White’s only article entirely on Sigmund Freud’s work is on *The Interpretation of Dreams*, specifically on the dreamwork “operations” by which the mind transforms libidinal impulses into the scenes, sounds, and events the dreamer experiences as the dream. White recognizes in Freud’s interpretive insights a clear analogy with the formal centerpiece of his own work: the major tropes which describe the shape of thought itself. White’s appreciation of how Freud’s revolutionary work on the significance of dreams uncovered the formal linguistic devices exhibited at every level of representation is shared by other major thinkers, two of whom I discuss here: the philosopher Paul Ricoeur and the psychoanalyst Marshall Edelson. They share the comprehension of how psychoanalysis illuminates the deep structure of all cultural artifacts of language as originating from sources deeper than those available to consciousness, and issuing in the formal structures of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony.

Keywords: Hayden White; Paul Ricoeur; Marshall Edelson; dreamwork.

O Conteúdo Profundo da Forma: Hayden White acerca da “Tropologia dos Sonhos de Freud”

O único artigo de Hayden White dedicado inteiramente ao trabalho de Sigmund Freud foca-se na obra *A Interpretação dos Sonhos* e, especificamente, nas “operações” de trabalho onírico através das quais a mente transforma os impulsos libidinosos em cenas, sons e eventos que o sonhador experiencia enquanto sonho. White identifica nas perspectivas interpretativas de Freud uma analogia com a base formal do seu próprio trabalho: os principais tropos que descrevem a forma do próprio pensamento. A apreciação de White sobre como o trabalho revolucionário de Freud em torno do significado dos sonhos revelou os aparatos linguísticos formais compreendidos em todos os níveis da representação é partilhada por outros pensadores, dois dos quais serão discutidos neste artigo: o filósofo Paul Ricoeur e o psicanalista Marshall Edelson. Ambos partilham uma compreensão de como a psicanálise ilumina a forma como a estrutura profunda de todos os artefactos culturais da linguagem tem origem em fontes mais profundas do que as que podem ser acedidas através da consciência, representadas pelas estruturas formais da metáfora, metonímia, sinédoque e ironia.

Palavras-chave: Hayden White; Paul Ricoeur; Marshall Edelson; trabalho onírico.

The Deep Content of the Form: Hayden White on “Freud’s Tropology of Dreaming”

Nancy Partner*

And it was the form of the dream that mattered most to him. This is why he considered the dream-work as the linchpin of his system... ‘At bottom,’ he said, ‘dreams are nothing other than a particular form of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep. It is the dream-work which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming – the explanation of its peculiar nature.’ In other words, the form of the dream is itself a content...

“Freud’s Tropology of Dreaming”: Hayden White on The Rhetoric of the Dream-Work

This article, published in 1999 in the collection *Figural Realism*, seems to be the only one Hayden White wrote specifically on Sigmund Freud.¹ White’s consideration of Freud’s defining work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, focuses immediately on the “operations” by which libidinal impulses motivating the dream are transformed into the “symbols, scenes, and events that seem to occur in the dream” – the experience the dreamer can recall.² The mind’s “operations” in the dream-work are the subject of the essay because White recognizes

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1 Hayden White, “Freud’s Tropology of Dreaming,” in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 101-25.

2 White, “Freud’s Tropology,” 101.

in Freud's interpretive insights a clear analogy with the formal centerpiece of his own work: the major tropes which describe the shape of thought itself. The core insight of this article is that the dream-work recapitulates (or perhaps is the source of) the tropology of thought, especially in written form.

The four key "operations" of the dreamwork – condensation, displacement, representation, and secondary revision – are the means universal to all dreamers for transforming impulses of the id into "figurative signifiers" both visual and auditory, the way the mind thinks while dreaming.³ White is particularly struck by Freud's insistence on precisely four distinct operations which function just as the four major tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony do in poetics "to mediate between the literal and figurative levels of meaning..."⁴ Knowledge of the rhetorical tropes was part nineteenth-century general culture, well known to Freud as it was to every educated person and revealed by his frequent description of the dream-work as analogous to poetic discourse. In the course of his essay, White works out more fully and precisely than others have done the analogy between the theory of tropes and Freud's analyses of the processes of dreaming, proving that "what Freud has done [in the dream-work] is to rediscover, or reinvent, the theory of tropes conventionally used by rhetoricians in his culture to characterize figurative language in general and to explicate the relation between literal and figurative meanings in poetic discourse specifically."⁵ White concludes: It was "the *form* of the dream..." that revealed the mind, "the form of the dream is itself a content," and that form was a trope.⁶

The Tropology of Thought: Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, Marshall Edelson

I have always thought, or perhaps felt is the better term, that Hayden White's narrative theory, understood as the container framework for

3 *Idem, ibidem.*

4 *Idem,* 103.

5 *Idem,* 102.

6 *Idem,* 123.

his tropology, was a psychologized theory at heart, a psychoanalytically-informed theory. By psychologized I mean that the large-scale analysis of the linguistic formulations underlying all modes of representation, the analysis conducted in terms of the rhetoric of the major tropes and the strenuous artifice involved in turning reality into narrative emplotment, was never about the manipulation of language alone. And his analytic approach is never limited to a superficial register of literary effects. All of what White would call the “operations” (a word that reminds us of mental activity) conducted in linguistic forms, small and large scale, were the language of the psyche-mind through and through, down to its most primary dealings with libidinal impulse in the forms of dream, fantasy, and wish-formation. White’s narrative theory and its constituent components of trope elements, rest on a depth psychology dealing with expression and symbolization. The dream is one level of the same operations that, under the control of consciousness and rational intention, issue in the complex narratives of fiction and history. The reverberations of a psychoanalytic depth psychology should register on any reasonably sensitive reader of White’s work. It is there in his basic vocabulary and the fundamental premises of all his argument and contributes greatly to the seriousness of his work.

Hayden White’s profound appreciation of Freud’s hermeneutic of the mind’s negotiations between reality and its own unconscious pressures is found everywhere in his work, more often *everywhere* than in specific passages naming and acknowledging Sigmund Freud. Although White’s writings are studded with references to Freud and extended passages of explication and criticism of certain ideas (on the assumption that an intellectual of White’s generation could make that all informed readers would have done some serious reading of Freud), the truest acknowledgements occur where Freud’s name does not. Thus, White’s discussion of Johan Gustav Droysen’s concepts of history usefully invokes Freud to trace the standard of historical plausibility to a deeper place: “What is plausible, we know since Freud, is that which conscience, the distillation of social authority, tells us we should desire

against that which need or instinct tells us we do desire.”⁷ Here the superego makes its presence known in the realm of judgement and Freud’s explicit presence in this bit of argument is apt.

In the *locus classicus* of *Metahistory* where White introduced what would become his signature topic, “The Theory of Tropes,” his definition of the indispensable function of figurative language for history rests on a psychoanalytic map of the mind: the four basic tropes of Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony “are especially useful for understanding the operations by which the contents of experience which resist description in unambiguous prose representations can be prefiguratively grasped and prepared for conscious apprehension.”⁸ The idea that mental “operations” take place before and at a different level from “conscious apprehension” is taken for granted. Perhaps this idea is no longer taken for granted (though I think it is), but it assuredly pervades Hayden White’s thought about thought. In a long footnote to that introductory discussion of the relation of tropes to historical thought, White considers a number of writers on this topic, including Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, specifies various subtle reservations about their ideas and more emphatically aligns himself with Émile Benveniste.

As Émile Benveniste has suggested in his penetrating essay on Freud’s theory of language: “it is style rather than language that we would take as term of comparison with the properties that Freud has disclosed as indicative or oneiric language...The unconscious uses a veritable ‘rhetoric’ which, like style, has its ‘figures’ and the old catalogue of the tropes would supply an inventory...”⁹

7 Hayden White, “Historical Writing as a Bourgeois Science,” in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1987), 94.

8 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1973), 30-31.

9 White, *Metahistory*, 32 n. 13.

“This,” White comments, “is consistent with my contention that the similarities between poetic and discursive representations of reality are as important as the differences.”¹⁰

Until the essay under discussion on Freud’s dream analysis, published for the first time in 1999, there are few such extended acknowledgements in White’s work. That essay which maps the dream work directly onto the major tropes concludes with a profound and encompassing assertion, that: “Freud’s work points to the grounding of the phenomena of style in the structures of unconscious ideation and to the solution of the problem of the logic of practical discourse.”¹¹ Note that poetics is used to address the “logic,” not the fantasy, speculation, or fiction in the pejorative sense, and “practical discourse” – nonfiction, realist representation, history.

White’s sense that the deep structures of dream operations and rational ideation are identical, universal and tropological in form is expressed in the question that drives one of his canonical essays, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” when he asks: “What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story? In the enigma of this wish, this desire, we catch a glimpse of the cultural function of narrativizing discourse in general...”¹² I have always felt that this statement-question revealed the deep if unstated imbrication of psychoanalytic theory with the meaning of topology and narrative throughout White’s thought. The language of wish and desire tells it. Indeed, “desire” appears variously seventeen times in the essay, as in “the conflict between desire and the law,” “the discourse of desire,” the real as “an object of desire.”¹³

This comprehension of how psychoanalysis illuminates the deep structure of all cultural artifacts of language as originating from sour-

¹⁰ *Idem, ibidem.*

¹¹ White, “Freud’s Tropology,” 125.

¹² White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *The Content of the Form*, 4.

¹³ White, “Value,” 12, 20, 21, and 5, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 24.

es deeper than those available to consciousness places White in a varied and distinguished company, only two of whom I wish to bring forward here because they stand so associated in my own mind, a philosopher and a psychoanalyst, both theoreticians of language. The first is of course Paul Ricoeur, arguably the most important modern philosopher of language in its complex formulations, whose career and thought tracked that of Hayden White in mutually illuminating counterpoint. One node of White/Ricoeur intersection is psychoanalysis, both explicit and implicit in their work. White distanced himself from Ricoeur on a number of issues touching politics and historical narrative but White's essay on Freud shows that he had read Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (first published in 1965, and in English in 1970) with appreciation.¹⁴ It is probably not coincidence that both Ricoeur and White (in *Metahistory*, 1973) cite Émile Benveniste on the centrality of language in Freudian interpretation. Ricoeur quotes Benveniste to that effect in his book and, like White, notes that with respect to the language operating in dreams, "it is on the level of rhetoric rather than linguistics that the comparison should be made. Rhetoric, with its metaphors, its metonymies, its synecdochies... is concerned not with phenomena of language but with procedures of subjectivity that are manifested in discourse."¹⁵

Seeing that the linguistic work of subjectivity, of the mind, is most helpfully addressed with the ancient formal language of rhetoric whose domain is linguistic form and meaning was immediately clear and persuasive to White and Ricoeur both and marks a deep connection between them. White's question of "what wish... what desire" drives the "fantasy" that reality should fit narrative form is one that Ricoeur would and did recognize, and both characteristically turn to poetics to formulate answers. In the Preface to *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur points to deep parallels between metaphor (the master trope of tropes in his understanding; see *The Rule of Metaphor*) and narrative form in that

14 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

15 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 396, 400.

both achieve a special kind of reference to reality with language that operates far beyond simple direct description, a “power of metaphorical utterance to redescribe a reality inaccessible to direct description.”¹⁶ The inexplicit not-evident similarities between disparate things revealed by their metaphoric juxtaposition are not merely poetic amusement but a level of reality not otherwise revealed. Ricoeur has no hesitation about the profundity of what tropes can reveal: “I even suggested that ‘seeing-as,’ which sums up the power of metaphor, could be the revealer of a ‘being-as’ on the deepest ontological level.”¹⁷ He could be talking about the dream-work. The condensations, displacements, and modes of representation deployed by the mind to present the unfulfillable wishes of the unconscious in the experience of the dream are all subvarieties of metaphor – the ruling tropology of Ricoeurian narrative theory.

If Paul Ricoeur’s work as a philosopher led him to a psychoanalytic description of the operations of language, the work of a distinguished clinician and theorist of psychoanalysis arrived at strikingly the same place from the other perspective. I am referring to Marshall Edelson, clinical psychoanalyst and theoretician, an important figure at the intersection of analytic practice and theory, too little known among those interested in the deep sources of linguistic hermeneutics in historical and fictional literature. I don’t think Hayden White or Paul Ricoeur, who assuredly read one another, ever read Marshall Edelson’s work and I do not think, although I am not quite as certain on this point, that he ever refers to either of them in his writing. But this essay is about my own immediate and persistent associations with White’s response to *The Interpretation of Dreams* and Edelson’s understanding of psychoanalysis stands foremost here.

Referring to Marshall Edelson in an essay about Hayden White brings forward yet another instance of how many brilliant scholars, even in a boundary-crossing field like historical theory, remain unknown to us, separated as we all are by the near impermeable force

16 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol.1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), xi.

17 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, xi.

fields of specialization. I routinely, though not nearly often enough, “discover” people whose work I find newly illuminating, who are distinguished figures in some near-adjacent academic field but unknown to me. I assume that Marshall Edelson (1928-2005), a man lauded for his work on clinical therapeutics and theory by numerous psychoanalytic institutions, and recognized for his teaching and writing on psychoanalytic theory during his career of over thirty years at Yale University, is not a familiar name to those versed in historical theory. My brief introduction of him here concerns the intellectual place where the work of this distinguished theoretician of the mind meets and supports Hayden White’s long held conviction of the centrality of tropological forms for the highest cultural purposes. Edelson’s important work “places” White’s tropology where it belongs.

Edelson recognized early on what he frankly termed a “crisis” in psychoanalytic theory. In the introduction to his 1988 *Psychoanalysis: A Theory in Crisis* (indispensable for a clear-headed understanding of psychoanalysis), he admits that “Psychoanalysis, as a body of knowledge about human beings or the human mind, has become the object of a dismissive, disillusioned, and frequently derogatory polemic.”¹⁸ He regarded this dismissal as entirely unjustified and to counter it wrote “a book on the conceptual foundations of psychoanalysis.” He believed that a severe clarification and simplification of the discipline was urgently needed: “What is it about and what is it not about?”¹⁹ In addressing the conceptual foundations of the discipline, his starting point was *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the work that compels the attention of every serious reader of Freud, and deserves the attention of every serious reader of anything. A surgically severe defender of his discipline, Edelson did not regard psychoanalysis as a general psychology of every human behavior or relationship, but most specifically “a psychology of mind” whose domain is “the symbolizing activity of the mind, because it is interested in how the capacity for symbolization is manifest-

18 Marshall Edelson, *Psychoanalysis: A Theory in Crisis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), xi.

19 Edelson, *Psychoanalysis*, xvii.

ed in constructing mental representations. Mental representations are symbolic representations.”²⁰ A description of psychoanalysis that takes Occam’s razor to the burgeoning hedge of psychologizing theory, Edelson’s foundation is the hermeneutics of the dreamwork which gives the theory a domain covering “the construction of mental representations, and in the symbolic operations that form and transform such representations...”²¹ The symbolic operations cited by Edelson are “condensation, displacement, translation into imagery, and iconic or metaphoric symbolization.” In fact, he notes, “Psychoanalysis has been called a science of tropes.”²²

The connection I make between White and Edelson is clear enough, I think, from just these brief premises. Edelson’s *Psychoanalysis* is a dense yet lucidly argued book (his style is rather in the manner of Ricoeur), covering a wide range of key topics that define psychoanalysis in relation to its proper domain and to other disciplines, scrupulous, impressive, and fascinating throughout. And too rich in its coverage to summarize here. I only point to Edelson’s foundational concepts which support and validate the role of symbolization that White recognizes in complex representations of reality. Like White, Edelson places great significance on the analogy Freud drew between the dream work and language: “Freud explicitly drew the analogy between the rules of language and the dream work... In more than one place, he suggested that the dream work operated, in part at least, through a linguistic transformation of a verbal representation of the latent dream thought into a verbal representation that is capable of manifestation in imagery.”²³

Why are the processes of symbolization, the tropology that held Hayden White’s interest virtually lifelong, so important? These are the mental operations that proceed from the dreams uncontrolled by consciousness out to the complex artifacts of culture where the reality

²⁰ *Idem*, xxiii.

²¹ *Idem*, xxiv.

²² *Idem*, xxv. Another of his books directly on the same topic is *Language and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975).

²³ *Idem*, 44.

principle and rational intention exert their strict demands over ultimate formulation. The universal operations of the dream are the same, yet made different, as those which achieve literature and history. As Edelson notes: “To understand a symbolic entity is to comprehend how it is made. To comprehend how it is made is to understand the mind that made it. To discover mind through an analysis of the modes of symbolization and their products – poetry and science, mathematics and history, religion and neurotic symptoms – is the strategy of an important group of scientists and philosophers.”²⁴ Hayden White’s recognition of the presence of classical rhetoric in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* places him among this important group.

²⁴ *Idem*, 45.

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Ewa Domanska

Hayden White's Anthropocentric Posthumanism

This article reflects on Hayden White's essay "Posthumanism and the Liberation of Humankind" (2000) and indicates its relevance for the current critique of anthropocentrism and ongoing discussions about human agency, the non-human condition and posthumanism. It revisits White's interest in antihumanism, existentialism, the work of "unbinding" humans from the burden of history and their humanity and the liberating potential of "deonerate art" (White's term). It problematizes Sartre's well-known statement and asks: "is man really nothing other than what he makes of himself?"

Keywords: Antihumanism; anthropocentrism; existentialism; human agency.

O Pós-Humanismo Antropocêntrico de Hayden White

Este artigo reflete sobre o ensaio de Hayden White "Posthumanism and the Liberation of Humankind" (2000), sugerindo que este é relevante para a crítica atual do antropocentrismo e para os debates correntes em torno da agência humana, a condição não-humana e o pós-humanismo. O texto revisita o interesse de White no anti-humanismo, no existencialismo e na tarefa de desvincular os humanos do fardo da história e da sua humanidade, assim como o potencial libertador de "*deonerate art*" (nas palavras de White). Neste sentido, problematiza a conhecida asserção de Sartre e questiona: "será que o homem não é mesmo nada mais do que aquilo que faz de si mesmo?"

Palavras-chave: Anti-humanismo; antropocentrismo; existencialismo; agência humana.

Hayden White's Anthropocentric Posthumanism

Ewa Domanska*

We posthumanists conceive
ourselves to live 'after metaphysics'

Hayden White¹

In 2000, the journal *Design Book Review* (California College of the Arts) published a theme issue entitled "Humanism and Posthumanism." A short and forgotten article by Hayden White entitled "Posthumanism and the Liberation of Humankind" appears in the table of contents directly after the introduction by the editors (Mitchell Schwarzer and William Littmann). I consider White's article to be important and worth recalling for current discussions on the human and non-human condition, the critique of anthropocentrism, antihumanism, posthumanism and the liberating role of art. I am particularly interested in White's move to associate posthumanism with "the liberation of humankind" and his comments on "unbinding" individuals from the burden of their 'humanity'.²

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¹ Hayden White, "Posthumanism and the Liberation of Humankind," *Design Book Review* 41/42 (Winter/Spring 2000): 12. I might add that living "after metaphysics" means "living in history," which, (as White put it) "quietly slipped into the place formerly occupied by religion and metaphysics." Hayden White, "The Practical Past," in *The Practical Past* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 2014), 20.

² When Hayden White and I discussed the content of the third collection of his essays that I edited in Polish, and I mentioned I wanted to include his essay on "Posthumanism and the Liberation of Humankind," White commented: "I no longer like the piece on posthumanism (...). [It] would have to be added to and brought up to date." I managed to convince White that the piece is important and it appeared in the collection. Email correspondence, 29.07.2013.

For White, humanism, antihumanism and posthumanism, as explained in the article in question, are specific worldviews. In humanism, humans are understood as existences that are different from divine or supernatural beings on the one hand, and from various forms of the material and/or natural on the other. Beings exist in continuity with one another rather than in isolation. What is distinctive about human beings is an essence that “manifests itself only in time and space – in other words *in history*,” and is related to “a specifically human mode or instance of human creativity” (10). White claims that even if manifestations of human creativity expressed in architecture/art and literature are related to a particular time and space, “humanism is more ‘translationist’ than transcendentalist,” since “it is this essence of the human that authorizes faith in the possibility of adequate *translatio* between different times and different cultures” (10). White concludes that such reasoning leads to the claim that in cultural creativity, there is no originality, but rather novelty (translations, new manifestations of previously existed forms).

White calls posthumanism a form of antihumanism that he finds in the legacy of “the unholy trinity of Nietzsche, Freud and Foucault” associated with nihilism, oneirism and antirepressivism (12, 13). It is characterized by the rejection of an essence (and essentialism) that enables a belief in the sameness of human nature. Following Jean-Paul Sartre, White would say that there is in fact nothing like (individual or collective) human nature (the Germans, the Jews, etc.), but only a (historical) human condition. Posthumanism is a deontological worldview, according to White. It aims to deontologize our thinking about aesthetics, metaphysics, morality, tradition, religion, etc. Deontology is understood here as a knowledge of unbinding humans (as White reminds us, the Greek *déon* means “that which is binding”) from any repressive techniques of self-binding, self-subjection and self-servitude. Indeed, for White, “existence precedes essence,” liberation means unbinding, and existentialism is a form of antihumanism (to paraphrase Sartre).

White introduces the concept of onerate and deonerate art (*deonerate* from Latin *onus* – burden) where the latter designates a kind of

art that “de-burdens” individuals. He also uses the term “oneration” as a synonym for repressive structures and procedures of “binding” (13). How (and what kind of) art/architecture, asks White, might “contribute to the project of ‘unbinding’ human beings from the condition of self-servitude”? (12). Could Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and Richard Meier’s Getty Center in Santa Monica serve this purpose?

Hayden White is known as “one of the great humanist minds of our time,”³ but as Herman Paul stresses, he is a liberal humanist, existential humanist,⁴ and decisionist thinker of choices. (Classical) humanism therefore appears in White’s writing in a critical/ironic mode. He reflects on how Western humanism has been deconstructed and writes about “the dreams and illusions of a bankrupt humanism” in Europe and its “good old values” of the community, church, nation and state that have been exposed (and found their fulfillment) in Nazism and concentration/death camps.⁵ So, indeed, White is a (postmodern) antihumanist in the mode of “the unholy trinity” (I would add here Althusser, Sartre and Derrida), but the most accurate identification of this position was proposed by Dominick LaCapra, who called it “anthropocentric posthumanism.”⁶

Despite the current tendency to criticize the human-centered position, it would be pointless to accuse Hayden White of anthropocentrism. Like Sartre’s, White’s humanism is strictly tied to an anthropo-

3 Amy J. Elias, “The Voices of Hayden White,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 22, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-voices-of-hayden-white/#!>

4 Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (London: Polity Press, 2011), 51ff. Willson H. Coates and Hayden V. White, *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism: An Intellectual History of Western Europe*, vol. 1 and 2 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966 and 1970). Cf. Hans Kellner, “Bedrock of Order: Hayden White’s Linguistic Humanism,” *History and Theory* 19 (1980): 1-29.

5 White, *The Practical Past*, 4, 44, 48. Commenting on Foucault’s antihumanism, White writes: “[T]he whole of culture, far from being that exercise of endless sublimation that humanism conceives to be the essence of our humanity, is revealed as nothing but repression. More or less killing, to be sure, but in the end nothing but destructive.” Hayden White, “Foucault’s Discourse: The Historiography of Anti-Humanism,” in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), 134.

6 Dominick LaCapra, “History Beyond the Pleasure Principle?,” in *Re-Figuring Hayden White*, eds. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domańska, and Hans Kellner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 246. It is interesting that the term “anthropocentrism” does not appear in White’s books.

centric perspective as it is understood in Marxist anthropocentrism and existentialist anthropocentrism with their fixations on human agency and freedom and their obsession with existential situations of choice and individual responsibility. As a scholar and teacher, White fought all his life for liberating people (including historians) from “the burden of history” (and any other constraints).⁷ While this position is associated with post-1968 leftist approaches, postmodernism and emancipatory humanities and is therefore considered by some to be *passé* and/or in support of “species chauvinism” on the one hand, and undesirable by those welcoming a “conservative turn” on the other, it should not be dismissed too quickly in our world constantly troubled by conflict, new forms of slavery, terrorism, forced migrations and mass killings.

What is needed at present is in fact a certain “new humanism” that would rethink the role of humanism in the contemporary world and (following antihumanist thinkers) celebrate “radical alterity,” the non-human condition, humans understood not only as *homo humanus* but also as *homo sapiens*, collectives rather than narcissistic individuals, and the co-dependency of human and non-human beings (both material and spiritual). As such, this position would distance itself from anthropocentrism and secularism. Current discussions on the Anthropocene, climate change, ecocides and species extinction as well as postsecularism, new forms of religion and new animism shed new light on the problem of human agency and freedom. I might then ask (paraphrasing Sartre): “is man really nothing other than what he makes of himself?” To arrive at answers relevant for our current condition, as indeed Daniel Chernilo claims, “humanism and anthropocentrism need to be clearly distinguished.”⁸ Contemporary (critical) posthumanists (Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Cary Wolfe, to name only a few)⁹ of-

7 Cf. Ewa Domanska, “Hayden White and Liberation Historiography,” *Rethinking History* 19, no. 4 (2015): 640-50, DOI: 10.1080/13642529.2014.959361.

8 Cf. Daniel Chernilo, “The Humanism Debate Revisited. Sartre, Heidegger, Derrida,” in *Debating Humanity. Towards a Philosophical Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 34ff, DOI: 10.1017/9781316416303.

9 Rosi Braidotti, “Posthuman Critical Theory,” in *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*, eds. Debashish Banerji, Makarand R. Paranjape (New Delhi: Springer, 2016). DOI: 10.1007/978-81-322-3637-5_2.

fer an important contribution for discussing this issue. Posthumanism, with its interest in animal, plant and things studies, non-human agency and multispecies collectives creates a new context for the following questions: how might White's ideas help to build deonerate approaches to the past? How might they support attempts to build alterative scenarios of the future (alternative visions of humanity), and how in this context could artists contribute to the "unbinding' of individuals from the 'burden' of their 'humanity'" (13)?

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João Luís Lisboa

**Hayden White, Ricoeur
e os desafios morais da História**

Tomando *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (2000) de Paul Ricoeur como continuação e chave de *Temps et récit* (1983-85), Hayden White discute os problemas e as responsabilidades do historiador associando-as ao modo como entende a relação entre presente e passado.

Palavras-chave: Paul Ricoeur; Hayden White; memória; passado prático.

**Hayden White, Ricoeur and
the moral challenge of History**

Taking Paul Ricoeur's *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (2000) as a follow-up and as a key to read *Temps et récit* (1983-85), Hayden White discusses the problems and the responsibilities of the historian, linking them with the ways in which he understands the relationship between present and past.

Keywords: Paul Ricoeur; Hayden White; memory; practical past.

Hayden White, Ricoeur e os desafios morais da História

João Luís Lisboa*

“Guilty of History? The *longe durée* of Paul Ricoeur,”
History & Theory 46 (May 2007): 233-51 (republicado
em *The Fiction of Narrative. Essays on History,
Literature and Theory 1957-2007* [Baltimore,
The John Hopkins University Press, 2010], 318-39).

A pretexto do livro *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (2000) e do falecimento, em 2005, de Paul Ricoeur, que o escreveu, Hayden White publica, em 2007, uma reflexão sobre memória, cidadania e o papel da história. Começa por parecer uma nota de leitura. Parte de um livro para falar do percurso de um autor e escapa a esse autor para colocar questões que incomodam. Hayden White pode, assim, regressar à obra de Ricoeur. Facilmente se entende que aprecia a reflexão sobre o carácter narrativo da história, o questionamento do lugar do historiador, a função cívica do discurso histórico e como, em contrapartida, se sente desafiado quando reconhece que Ricoeur escreve contra as ameaças do relativismo e do cepticismo, contra a moda do multiculturalismo e a celebração de razões locais, aceitando noções de ciência que White não partilha. Desafiado, mas não ameaçado, porque as questões levantadas por Ricoeur vão são problemas do próprio Hayden White. Desde logo, porque Ricoeur combate o fetichismo do singular, que leva à ilusão da

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não necessidade da teoria. Depois, porque sempre recusou uma noção de história como espaço de contemplação ou de passividade. Os dois aspectos estão ligados porque é o império do singular que leva a posições predominantemente descritivas.

Daí este texto não ser uma simples recensão, mas a discussão de problemas sobre a historiografia nos nossos dias, e sobre os “nossos” dias, ou seja, sobre o modo como se entende o presente e o seu papel na condição histórica, sobre o entendimento de modernidade e de pertença a um tempo, com profundidades e cortes diferenciados. A suspeita de que uma posição hermenêutica convida necessariamente à contemplação, a partir de um potencial mal-estar, é, aqui, contrariada.

Hayden White já produzira uma extensa reflexão a propósito de *Temps et récit* (1983-1985), em textos publicados entre 1984 e 1988.¹ Então era claro que a problematização do trabalho de narrar, o “mettre en intrigue”, ia ao encontro do seu “emplotment”, convergindo na forma como se entendia o carácter metafórico das narrativas e criticando uma História que mantinha a quimera da pura objectividade. Aparentemente, a preocupação de Ricoeur em distinguir o tipo de narrativa de historiadores e romancistas, a partir dos seus referentes imediatos (“reais” e “imaginários”), não ofuscava a convergência maior em torno da noção de referentes últimos comuns (o que é identificado como força e não como fraqueza da História).

O livro de 2000 surge como uma sequela da obra de 1983-85 por, alegadamente, a questão da relação entre memória e esquecimento ter ficado fora do projecto inicial. O esquecimento fora temporariamente esquecido. Sucede que os conflitos da memória dos anos 90 tinham criado novas urgências e, seguindo a leitura de White, algumas dessas urgências são também as suas.

1 Sobretudo em “The Rule of Narrativity: Symbolic Discourse and the Experiences of Time in Ricoeur’s Thought,” in *À la recherche du sens/In Search of Meaning* (Ottawa: Univ. of Ottawa Press, 1985), republicado como “The Metaphysics of Narrativity: Time and Symbol in Ricoeur’s Philosophy of History,” in *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 169-84. Ver também “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” *History & Theory* 23, no 1 (1984), republicado também em *The content of the form*, 26-57, e “Literary Theory and Historical Writing,” in *Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1-26, que republica um ensaio de 1988.

O juízo a que chega é sintetizado quando escreve que *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, “Ricoeur’s great book – and it is a great book – challenges all of the common places in which we simultaneously praise ourselves for being so enlightened, so ‘modern’, and wring our hands over the current generation’s lack of ‘values’ and flight from history”. Questões maiores são, neste declarado “grande livro“, escrito por alguém que foge da posição do profeta, as interrogações sobre a modernidade, sobre o lugar da memória, sobre a natureza da história e sobre a relação entre os historiadores profissionais e os cidadãos, sobre a condição da historicidade que liga passado e presente e que o faz a partir da centralidade dos desafios morais que a história coloca e, finalmente, sobre o modo como os grandes crimes do século XX obrigam a uma reflexão sobre a modernidade, a história e a sua relação com a memória.

Sublinho o destaque dado à posição de recusar simultaneamente deslumbramentos e angústias perante a mudança dos tempos, a modernidade tão esperada ou tão temida. Espera e temor partilham, afinal, a centralidade de quem se louva ou se lamenta e de quem se imagina protagonista ou vítima da mudança. Nessa dupla recusa vemos quem publica em 2007, tanto ou mais do que o objecto da leitura, o livro de 2000.

A motivação próxima de Ricoeur está nos conflitos de memória que reactivaram situações de extrema violência na Europa no final do século XX, o retomar da discussão sobre os grandes crimes e o seu lugar na história ou fora dela, a relação entre história e memória e entre narrativa e verdade. O regresso do horror cruza a memória de dois modos, porque ela é razão e instrumento da violência.

Hayden White não pretendia discutir a situação nos Balcãs ou a má consciência dos franceses perante Vichy. Mas o apelo do livro remetia para o seu próprio percurso, desde o que escrevera em “The Burden of History” (1966) sobre o passado como escolha, até aos dilemas morais do final do século XX, provocados pela questão da verdade dos grandes crimes. Retoma-se a noção de que, se nada no passado significa por si só, mas sempre em função de uma posteridade que escolhe, assumem-se e abandonam-se os passados de acordo com os sentidos atribuídos, numa relação necessária entre o presente de quem olha e

aquilo que escolheu ou decidiu preterir. O que vale também para o que se esquece ou se recalca. É certo que a ideia de recalçamento implica uma presença não desejada de dados do passado, e que a noção de patologias da memória se relaciona também com o ter de encarar um passado que, por razões diversas, se impõe à posteridade.

Tendo a comunidade esquecido de esquecer, enfrenta uma presença indesejada e necessita de um qualquer remédio. Mas o esquecimento poderia significar que não se vive o que já se soube, ou que algo persiste fora do olhar da comunidade que esqueceu. Não é esse o sentido razoável que a leitura sugere. Escolhe-se e filtra-se. Reconhece-se o peso excessivo que porventura faz sofrer uma comunidade, libertando-a desse peso.

Demasiada História, escreve White, no sentido de comunidades com narrativas sobrecarregadas de si próprias e com um impensado doloroso, feito de ressentimentos que as narrativas autocentradas reproduziram como patologias. O problema do esquecimento está em distingui-lo do recalçamento, obrigando a questionar o excesso de peso dessas narrativas identitárias. Não se trata de apagar, mas de saber o que se escolhe e porque se escolhe. O “nós” de qualquer comunidade não é um castigo, nem as suas fronteiras (como identidade e duração) são fixas.

Aqui residiria por excelência o passado prático materializado na memória e que simboliza, para White, não o reduto do saber difuso das comunidades oposto à história dos historiadores, mas as narrativas mais abertas às dimensões éticas e políticas que tradicionalmente não se encontram nas historiografias fechadas em dimensões epistemológicas e ontológicas. “O que realmente se passou” ou “como é possível conhecer o que se passou” são problemas que se colocam porventura através da separação entre presente e passado, pressupondo um passado que se descobre e que não se constrói. Por isso, o “passado prático” de Michael Oakeshott (a que White se refere com frequência) não é o seu. Esse passado prático, feito de uma mistura de memórias e informações mobilizadas no quotidiano, opõe-se a um passado histórico, puramente teórico, resultante do trabalho dos historiadores, sobre fontes e vestígios, existente apenas nas páginas por eles escritas e sem qualquer

utilidade ou substância. Um construtivismo radical que não é o de White, como não é o de Ricoeur. Resulta numa empresa puramente intelectual, sem uso possível para as grandes interrogações de todo o tipo que a humanidade se coloca. Essa separação parte da preocupação de salvaguardar o saber ocidental de “deformações ideológicas” e de, ao fazê-lo, assumir um papel contemplativo e passivo para a história. Pode parecer estranho trazer à conversa um autor que não pertence ao universo que está em discussão. White diz mesmo que não conhece qualquer referência recíproca entre o britânico e o francês. Mas esse confronto clarifica campos e perspectivas. Serve-lhe para apresentar aquilo que a hermenêutica de Ricoeur não é.

Se as temporalidades não são geometrias variáveis do passado, mas dimensões da consciência do presente de uma comunidade, na sua relação com o que tem por relevante do que já se passou, e com o seu projecto, há que interrogar os modos como a historiografia lida com a ideia de que o passado permanece. O seu carácter construído é ainda relevante pois esclarece os sentidos da permanência. A grande separação, assim, seria entre estar-se interessado no passado “por si próprio” e estar-se interessado em colocar questões que sejam relevantes para a vida presente, o que, para White, configura a diferença entre as tradições “conservadora” e “radical” na reflexão histórica. Para dar nomes às tradições, esta seria a grande diferença entre Ranke e Marx, no século XIX, ou entre Hexter e Foucault, no século XX.

A convicção de que seria errado ficar por explicações que os próprios agentes históricos podiam dar das suas acções ou dos eventos em que participavam estava já nos textos dos anos 80. Mas em 2000 a situação desloca-se para o sentido problemático de muitas dessas acções e da sua memória. Não é apenas o historiador que revisita um acontecimento traumático passado. A memória colectiva torna esse acontecimento presente. Revisitar os grandes crimes do século XX, com os traumas que daí resultaram, nasce da necessidade que Ricoeur sentia de agir sobre esses traumas e sobre essa memória. Não pretendia certamente ficar pela descrição dos problemas, mas compreendê-los na sua continuidade. No modo como o passado era/estava ainda presente

e, por conseguinte, pensar o que, no conhecimento que a história pode produzir, se devia mobilizar para enfrentar os problemas persistentes, identificados como patologias. Daí também o título do ensaio incluir a expressão “longue durée”.

Se regressarmos à ideia de passado como escolha, entende-se que essa escolha será livre no sentido em que quem a faz não está preso a um real pré-definido, nem a uma linha fechada de ocorrências, que o liga a opções e a responsabilidades de gente já desaparecida. Mas trata-se de uma escolha feita nas condições disponíveis, seja dos testemunhos, seja das circunstâncias que tornam relevante uma escolha e não outra (retomando a conhecida fórmula de Marx no *18 de Brumário*). O que significa que essa liberdade condicionada é também a de Hayden White quando se sente obrigado a contrariar os discursos negacionistas. A história oscila, assim, entre os discursos possíveis e os que as circunstâncias tornam necessários. Ou seja, as narrativas a construir nunca são arbitrárias e, se têm bases epistemológicas, têm também bases morais e políticas. Essas escolhas e a sua liberdade implicam novas responsabilidades. Não as que poderiam decorrer de laços essenciais entre a comunidade a que o historiador pertence e outras, passadas, marcadas por genealogias retroactivas, mas as responsabilidades do historiador face ao seu presente e a um possível futuro. O passado presente não teria de implicar essa responsabilidade se o historiador se limitasse a descrever o que lhe aparecia já dado. Se não colocasse perguntas a partir de critérios de relevância que são os dele. Se essas perguntas não levassem à construção de nexos e de explicações com recurso às estratégias discursivas e retóricas que são as dele. E, finalmente, se as narrativas a que chega, os cortes que considera significativos, os modos como se recusa ou se assume uma herança não tivessem consequências para a comunidade.

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Philippe Carrard

Acknowledgments, Endorsements, Misgivings: Hayden White in Conversation with the French

Hayden White's work has been discussed in France since the 1980s, and White himself has made extensive use of French literature, philosophy, and historiography. White, however, was ambivalent toward a certain French style in philosophy and the social sciences. While admiring scholars such as Foucault and Kristeva, he warned that the way the French document their inquiries and write up their materials does not always coincide with Anglo-American standards.

Keywords: Existentialism; *emplotment*; Hayden White; French historiography.

Reconhecimentos, Aprovações e Apreensões: Hayden White em Diálogo com os Franceses

O trabalho de Hayden White tem sido debatido em França desde a década de 1980 e o próprio White recorreu frequentemente à literatura, à filosofia e à historiografia francesa. No entanto, White manteve uma posição ambivalente face a um certo estilo de filosofia e ciências sociais francesas. Admirando estudiosos como Foucault e Kristeva, White sublinhou, ainda assim, que o modo como os franceses documentam e redigem os seus trabalhos nem sempre coincide com os standards anglo-americanos.

Palavras-chave: Existencialismo; *emplotment*; Hayden White; Historiografia Francesa.

Acknowledgments, Endorsements, Misgivings: Hayden White in Conversation with the French

Philippe Carrard*

In the entry “Postmodernisme et histoire” written for *Historiographies*, a two-volume collection of essays edited by the French historians Christian Delacroix, François Dosse, Patrick Garcia, and Nicolas Offenstadt, Hayden White (2010) presents once again some of the theses about history that he views as postmodern—and that also can be regarded as his own. Postmodern theorists, according to White, believe that if the past might be out there in the form of traces, descriptions of it are not. Narratives of past events, therefore, are not found in the evidence; they are constructed by scholars, who recount them in different ways, all equally acceptable from an epistemological (if not always an ethical) standpoint. Such conception of course undermines history’s aim to “get the story right,” as well as it undermines the oppositions between factual and fictional discourse. It leads to a skepticism and relativism that according to White should not be lamented. Indeed, both stands are not specifically postmodern; they have been inherent in a discipline

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that directs its practitioners to be “skeptical” toward their sources, and to make the events that they describe “relative” to their context.¹

This entry, to my knowledge, is the sole text written by White for a French publication, and only the second to appear in a French translation. The first one was the introduction to *Metahistory*, translated by Laurent Ferri and commented upon by David Schreiber and Marc Aymes (2009) in an issue of the journal *Labyrinthe*. According to François Dosse, the editors of *Historiographies* asked White to contribute to their anthology because his work was both unavailable in French and the subject of angry polemics. Their goal was to give exposure to White’s positions in a book aimed at a general audience, and in so doing to help clarify (some of) the terms of the debate surrounding postmodernism and White’s stance toward it.²

Although White’s work had not been translated into French, it had been discussed in France starting in the 1980s. Its main introducer was the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who in the first and third volumes of *Temps et récit* (1983, 1985), then in *La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (2000), granted several pages to detailed analyses of White’s theses. On the historians’ side, it is Roger Chartier (1993) who first asked White “four questions” in the journal *Storia della Storiografia*, questions to which White (1995) replied later in that same journal. Following in Chartier’s footsteps, noted members of the French historical community such as Antoine Prost (1996), Gérard Noiriel (1996), Bernard Lepetit (1999), and—more recently—François Hartog (2013) and Sabina Loriga (2016) have dealt with White’s work in the studies they have written about the state of their discipline. These scholars have generally acknowledged White’s contribution to the philosophy of history, specifically his ascertaining that the data patiently collected by the historian must at some point be written up, and that that writing up must be done according to conventions that history shares at times with literature. Their reser-

1 This essay of course is not the only one in which White describes his stand toward postmodernism. His position is more detailed and explicit in the 1999 essay “Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties.”

2 Email message of François Dosse of April 11, 2018.

vations have born mainly on White's neglect of the implications of the "historical method" on procedures of writing, as well as on the difficulty of applying White's emplotment model to historiographic studies that no longer rely on narrative for their organization. The literary theorist Françoise Lavocat (2016) has also questioned White's periodization of the relations between factual and fictional discourse, maintaining that in seventeenth-century France, for instance, these relations were hotly debated and history was not unanimously regarded, as White believes, as a literary art. While the French historians and theorists, I have just mentioned thoroughly argue the objections they may have about White's theses, some of their colleagues have not always manifested the same scruples. They have attacked White without even referring to specific texts, blaming him for spreading the idea that the gas chambers were "only discourse",³ and congratulating the French historical establishment for having maintained "the principle of the quest for truth as the fundamental intention of the construction of knowledge" (Bédarida).⁴

While the French intellectual community, compared to that in other countries, showed only a limited interest in White and French publishers for a long time failed to have his work translated, White himself, if not a devout francophile, was at least an attentive reader of French literature, philosophy, and history. Before allocating chapters of *Metahistory* (1973) to Michelet and Tocqueville, White, in his important essay "The Burden of History" (1966), had already drawn on French sources to argue his point. Making the historian in Gide's *L'Immoraliste* and Sartre's *La Nausée* into an old-fashioned researcher, disgruntled or overwhelmed by his never-ending task, illustrated his view of the discipline as an unfortunate combination of "mid-nineteenth-century art and late nineteenth-century science." This state of affairs, according to White, forced twentieth-century histori-

3 Ivan Jablonka, *L'Histoire est une littérature contemporaine. Manifeste pour les sciences sociales* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), 109.

4 See François Bédarida, "Postface," in *L'Histoire et le métier d'historien en France, 1945-1995*, ed. François Bédarida (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1995), 415-422. For a detailed study of White's reception in France, as well as an account of my experience as a translator of White's essays, interviews, and book reviews, see my "Hayden White in/and France: Receptions, Translations, Questions," forthcoming in *Rethinking History*.

ans to make choices. They had to select not only a stance toward the past but appropriate means of representation, means that would no longer be those employed by novelists such as Dickens or Balzac. The way White sees the relations between situation and freedom, in this instance, between circumstances over which historians have no control and the choices that they must acknowledge they are making, has been emphasized by specialists of White such as Hans Kellner (1980), Herman Paul (2011), and Robert Doran (2013). They see in this way of looking at the historical condition an aspect of White's Sartrian "existentialism," that is, of a kind of humanism that distinguishes White from the most extreme forms of Marxian, Freudian, and linguistic determinisms, as well as from the "death of man" aspects of some postmodern theories.

White was to turn to French literature and historiography to make his point in more essays, notably in "The Problem of Style in Realistic representation: Marx and Flaubert"⁵ and "Storytelling: Historical and Ideological"⁶. Analyzing Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* and Marx's *Le Dix-huit Brumaire de Louis Bonaparte*, White applies his theory of tropes to demonstrate that these two texts, though they clash at the ideological and stylistic levels, still have one thing in common: both are structured on the model of the *Bildungsroman*, as the consciousness of the main characters (Frédéric in *L'Education*, the French bourgeoisie in *Le Dix-huit Brumaire*) move from a "metaphorical" to an "ironic" understanding of the relations they have to reality. Similarly, Braudel's and Barthes's writings on history, as well as Proudhon's study of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's coming to power, are among the texts White makes use of in "Storytelling: Historical and Ideological." Returning to his familiar thesis about the function of emplotment, White shows here how the selection of the archetype of the "epic" shapes Proudhon's conception of Louis-Napoléon's coup—an event that Marx, adopting a different model, makes into a "farce."

5 Hayden White, "The Problem of Style in Realistic Representation: Marx and Flaubert," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 213-29.

6 Hayden White, "Storytelling: Historical and Ideological," in *Centuries' Ends, Narrative Means*, ed. Seth Leren (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 58-78.

Aware of White's interest in the French intellectual scene, British and American publishers and editors also called on him to contribute to various intellectual endeavors. Thus, he was asked to write the introduction to the translation of Rancière's *The Words of History*;⁷ the entry "Gobineau" in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*;⁸ the article on Foucault in the anthology *Structuralism and Since*;⁹ the section "Romantic Historiography" in *A New History of French Literature*;¹⁰ and especially book reviews. White's important review article of Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* is examined in this issue by João Luís Lisboa, and I won't consider it here. But White, over the past forty years, has discussed several other important books written by French scholars, notably Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*¹¹ and *History of Sexuality*¹² (I am using the French or the English-language title to indicate which version White is taking up); René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*; Lévi-Strauss's *The Origin of Table Manners* (1980);¹³ Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*;¹⁴ and Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*.¹⁵

For my purpose here, these reviews are in interesting —among many other things— in that they reveal two aspects of least of White's attitude toward what is perceived in the English-speaking world, beyond "French theory," as a certain French way of doing, in this instance, of pre-

7 Hayden White, "Foreword: Rancière's Revisionism," preface to Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), vii-ix.

8 Hayden White, "Gobineau, Comte Arthur Joseph de," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Donald M. Borchert, vol. 4 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 106-07.

9 Hayden White, "Foucault," in *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida*, ed. John Sturrock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 81-115.

10 Hayden White, "Romantic Historiography," in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 1823-27.

11 Hayden White, review of *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, by Michel Foucault, *American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (1977).

12 Hayden White, "The Archeology of sex," review of *Histoire de la sexualité* by Michel Foucault, *Times Literary Supplement*, May 6, 1977.

13 Hayden White, review of *The Origin of Table Manners*, by Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Annals of Science* 37, no. 2 (1980).

14 Hayden White, review of *The Production of Space*, by Henri Lefebvre, *Design Book Review* 29/30 (1994).

15 Hayden White, review of *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, by Julia Kristeva. *Journal of Modern History* 54, no. 4 (1982).

senting the results of a scholarly investigation. On the one hand, White praises a book like *Surveiller et punir* for being what he calls a brilliant “speculative essay,” that is, a text whose merit is to challenge the categories of traditional historiography by asking new questions and opening new perspectives. Yet White also points out that Foucault’s study, evaluated by the standards of Anglo-American academic discourse, is in many respects lacking: it ignores recent research in the area of penology, and includes neither the index, nor the bibliography, nor the documentary apparatus that could provide information to the historians working in the same field. Similarly, White insists that while Kristeva’s *Desire in Language* does not fall under historical scholarship, it could be read with profit by historians. Indeed, it contains many provocative ideas about language, culture, and society, that is, about domains that should engage specialists in intellectual history. (White stresses that he takes “provocative” in a positive sense, whereas the adjective often signifies “brilliant but hardly solid” in the British and American academic environment.) As he does in his review of Foucault, however, White there feels obliged to warn his fellow historians: Kristeva’s writing habits do not fall under the “plain style” whose employment is the rule in Anglo-American social sciences, and the translation does not always clarify what Kristeva “really means.” For White, in other words, Foucault’s and Kristeva’s works are valuable in that they offer new ways of looking at issues concerning such domains as imprisonment and the relations between desire and bourgeois culture. But they do not, if I interpret White’s caveat correctly, provide instances of the type of scholarly discourse White has been calling for since “The Burden of History”: a discourse that would incorporate techniques of literary modernism, that is, techniques derived from the works of writers such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Franz Kafka. To put it differently, White greatly admires the contributions of French scholarship to research in the humanities and the social sciences. On the plane of discourse, however, he does not seem to deem that those contributions can provide a model for the kind of historiography he has been advocating—a historiography that would not just explore new territories, but devise new modes of writing.

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Aitor Bolaños de Miguel

El Holocausto, la postmodernidad y las ansiedades textuales: una lectura de Hayden White

Este artigo procura refletir sobre o texto “Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties”, escrito por Hayden White, no qual o historiador norte-americano oferece várias pistas para a compreensão o seu pensamento histórico e moral. Em concreto, a sua distinção entre facto e acontecimento, a sua teoria do “evento modernista”, a sua visão sobre a pós-modernidade (e as ansiedades textuais que produziu) e a sua análise do Holocausto. Palavras-chave: Hayden White; Holocausto; Sofrimento; Acontecimento; Textualismo.

Holocaust, postmodernity, and textual anxieties: a reading on Hayden White

In this article the author analyses “Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties”, a paper written by Hayden White, where the American historian leaves several clues for understanding his own historical and ethical thought. In particular, his distinction between fact and event, his theory of “modernist event”, his vision about postmodernity and textual anxieties and his analysis of the Holocaust. Keywords: Hayden White; Holocaust; Suffering; Event; Textualism.

El Holocausto, la postmodernidad y las ansiedades textuales: una lectura de Hayden White

Aitor Bolaños de Miguel*

Este artículo está dedicado a la memoria de Hayden White

Introducción

En este artículo pretendo reflexionar sobre un texto que considero imprescindible para estudiar el pensamiento histórico y moral de Hayden White: “El posmodernismo y las ansiedades textuales”.¹ En primer lugar, voy a intentar clarificar la distinción entre hecho y acontecimiento, que nos ayudará a entender la clase de historicismo lingüístico que practicaba White. En segundo lugar, me voy a centrar en lo que White denomina “acontecimiento modernista” (*Modernist Event*) porque tiene una estrecha relación con el fenómeno del Holocausto y, por extensión, con nuestros intentos por representar el dolor, el trauma y el sufrimiento.

La distinción entre hecho y acontecimiento

Para comenzar, me gustaría recordar que algunas de las características de la historiografía postmoderna no son privativas de este movimiento.

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¹ Hayden White, “La postmodernidad y las ansiedades textuales,” in *La ficción de la narrativa. Ensayos sobre historia, literatura y teoría (1957-2007)* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2011).

White considera que la postmodernidad es una cosmovisión basada en una concepción específica de la naturaleza y de los usos de la historia.² La postmodernidad continúa el proyecto comenzado por la modernidad de desmitificar nuestro conocimiento del pasado, subrayando la naturaleza constructiva y textual de nuestras representaciones historiográficas. Así, la “postmodernidad reconoce que la ‘realidad’ es tanto lo que se descubre en los documentos históricos como lo que se construye en el discurso³. En este sentido, la postmodernidad pone el énfasis “en que, cuando se trata de estudiar el pasado, el historiador debe aceptar la responsabilidad de la construcción de lo que previamente pretendía tan solo haber descubierto”.⁴ Y es esta situación (frente a la situación anterior, donde se predicaba la objetividad de la historiografía académica, disciplinada y profesional), la que crea distintas ansiedades e inseguridades. En primer lugar, textuales. Y es que el textualismo es el corazón de la postmodernidad⁵. Por textualismo, White considera “la idea de que el texto escrito constituye el paradigma de la cultura, que la mejor forma de entender la producción cultural es a partir del modelo de la producción textual y que la mejor manera de interpretar la cultura es a través de prácticas de lectura análogas, punto por punto, a las de la lectura de un texto”.⁶ Pero, claro, hay que recordar que esta concepción textualista de la cultura se basa en la idea de que un texto nunca está de acuerdo consigo mismo, es siempre un tejido problemático de tropos y figuras, un artefacto lingüístico inestable y libre. Algo que nunca está fijo. Como un acontecimiento.

En relación con la distinción entre acontecimientos y hechos, conviene recordar que el historiador no puede observar al pasado para comprobar cómo es.⁷ O, como nos recuerda repetidamente White, el pasado está ausente, ya no existe. No es como el presente, no puede

2 Ibid., 517.

3 Ibid., 528.

4 Ibid., 518.

5 Ibid., 526.

6 Ibid.

7 Robert Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as a Text and Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 63-64.

ser observado. De aquí proviene la clásica distinción entre “hecho” y “acontecimiento”. No hay que confundir al uno con el otro. Los “acontecimientos” ocurren, suceden, en un espacio y un tiempo material, mientras que los “hechos” son constituidos por las descripciones lingüísticas que elaboran, entre otros, los historiadores: no tienen realidad fuera del lenguaje. Una otra forma de decirlo: “mientras los acontecimientos pueden haber tenido lugar, su representación como hechos los dota de todos los atributos de los temas literarios e, incluso, míticos”, es decir: ficcionales.⁸ Como escribe White, “cualquier intento de describir o de representar la realidad [incluida, especialmente, la pasada] en lenguaje debe enfrentar el hecho de que no existe un lenguaje literal, de que todo lenguaje es en su ‘esencia’ figurativo”.⁹

Un hecho es, según White, un fenómeno discursivo, “un enunciado acerca de un acontecimiento en la forma de una predicación” o una descripción que es figurativa o conceptual.¹⁰ “The fact is a statement about the event”, como ha dicho Hayden White en una serie de entrevistas disponibles en *YouTube*.¹¹ Mientras los acontecimientos ocurren y pueden ser probados a través de los documentos y de los testigos, los hechos son elaborados imaginativamente por el historiador, que los mantiene en su pensamiento hasta que les da forma discursiva en una representación historiográfica (textual o gráfica). Es decir, los hechos son construcciones. Roland Barthes afirmaba que los hechos solo pueden tener una existencia lingüística y/o visual¹². Por otro lado, White afirma que, según nos vamos acercando al presente, “hay más acontecimientos escondidos detrás de las enormes cantidades de documentos que certifican que ocurrieron”.¹³

El problema implicado en esta distinción es que, a veces, el historiador olvida que una simple crónica de los acontecimientos es ya, de

8 White, “La postmodernidad”, 530.

9 *Ibid.*, 529.

10 Hayden, White, *El texto histórico como artefacto literario* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2003), 53.

11 Hayden White, “Hayden White on the Distinction Between Facts and Events”, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rf0qCabqQU0> (15 de abril de 2018).

12 Roland Barthes. “Le discours de l’histoire,” in *Le bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 175.

13 White, “La postmodernidad”, 521.

por sí, una interpretación de los mismos; es decir, una crónica ordenada y cronológica de los acontecimientos acaecidos en un momento y en un lugar del pasado ya es, de por sí, una selección y una jerarquización de los mismos: lo que los convierte en “hechos” (significativos, por tanto). Y esta distinción tiene la máxima importancia a la hora de reflexionar y de representar acontecimientos tan espinosos como el Holocausto. Por eso, se puede considerar, no sin cierta polémica historicista, que el postmodernismo, en su relación con el postestructuralismo, es, en buena medida, una respuesta al Holocausto, como demuestran las obras de Derrida, Lyotard o del propio White¹⁴. Derrida, por ejemplo, que llamaba al Holocausto el “quema-todo”, “el abrasamiento”, “la cremación final”, “la ceniza universal” (siguiendo a Maurice Blanchot y a Paul Celan), pensaba que, en realidad, “hay un holocausto para cada fecha”, en alguna parte del mundo, en cualquier instante.¹⁵ Por su parte, Lyotard se ha encargado de subrayar, en varios de sus escritos, lo sublime del Holocausto, su naturaleza “excesiva”, lo inconmensurable del sufrimiento que ha producido.¹⁶ Finalmente, White también ha tenido muy presente el Holocausto en su obra y, en concreto, cuando habla del “acontecimiento modernista”.

El “acontecimiento modernista” y la representación del sufrimiento

Entre los acontecimientos modernistas, habría que mencionar las dos Guerras Mundiales, la Gran Depresión, la superpoblación, la pobreza mundial, los genocidios o el propio Holocausto. White considera que todos los acontecimientos históricos son, por definición, únicos y diferentes entre sí. Por eso, considera que estos acontecimientos son propios del siglo XX, debido a determinadas condiciones materiales e ideológicas específicas, que no se han dado en siglos anteriores, especialmente

14 Robert Eagleston, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.

15 Jacques Derrida, *Schibboleth. Para Paul Celan* (Madrid: Arena Libros, 2002), 78 y 104); Jacques Derrida, *Seminario. La bestia y el soberano*, vol. II (Buenos Aires: Manantial, 2011), 231.

16 Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and ‘the jews’* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

respecto de las nuevas tecnologías y de las nuevas formas de organización social. Por otro lado, como Zygmunt Bauman, White piensa que el Holocausto participa de una naturaleza “dialéctica, de singularidad y normalidad”.¹⁷ El acontecimiento modernista, dice White, “viene a cambiar aquello que nosotros llamamos evento histórico. Podemos interpretarlo, pero de innumerables formas. Solo podemos interpretarlo porque no podemos clasificarlo por género y especie”.¹⁸ En este sentido, White considera que la consciencia postmoderna surge, en parte, como una respuesta a este tipo de acontecimientos específicamente modernos del siglo XX.¹⁹ La conciencia histórica desarrollada a lo largo del siglo XIX y comienzos del siglo XX “no cuenta ni con las categorías ni con las técnicas representacionales que exige la efectiva historización de estos acontecimientos”²⁰. Hay un “salto cuántico”, dice White, un “cambio radical”, en nuestra consciencia histórica postmoderna.

Como escribe White en *The Practical Past*, acontecimientos como el Holocausto “have to do with the fates of, the suffering of, and the destruction visited upon the victims of the Nazi program. The extent, nature, and gratuitousness of this suffering make of it — for many — a sacral event, by which I mean an event that admits of no ‘representation’ and even less ‘interpretation.’ The idea that the Holocaust could be adequately represented, much less ‘explained,’ by being emplotted as a story with a discrete beginning, middle, and end, a discernible ‘moral’ from which we might learn a lesson, and a coherence that leaves no loose ends to wrap up and account for— all this offends against the feeling that the Holocaust is much more complicated and certainly much more difficult to comprehend than any traditional kind of story or dramatic treatment might lead us to believe possible”.²¹

Además, los acontecimientos modernistas producen un efecto interesante: para las personas directamente involucradas, su significado

17 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernidad y Holocausto* (Madrid: Sequitur, 1997), 18 y 119.

18 Gilda Bevilacqua, “Entrevista a Hayden White,” *Humo* 2 (2015).

19 White, “La postmodernidad”, 520.

20 Ibid.

21 Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 82.

permanece indeterminado, confuso. De hecho, estos acontecimientos no se prestan para su explicación o descripción en los términos habituales de la historiografía tradicional. Son fenómenos que no se dejan “formular con las expresiones establecidas” de la narrativa tradicional.²² Al contrario, pareciese como si estuvieran demandando nuevas categorías, para pensar estos acontecimientos, así como nuevas técnicas de representación.²³ De hecho, “es la naturaleza anómala de los acontecimientos modernistas, la que socava tanto el estatus de los hechos con relación a los acontecimientos como el estatus del acontecimiento en general.²⁴ White se ha preguntado si hay algún límite para tramar de forma responsable un acontecimiento como el Holocausto, un acontecimiento modernista que encapsula una extraordinaria dosis de violencia, dolor y sufrimiento humanos. White considera que esta clase de acontecimientos no son irrepresentables o inefables, ni en un sentido lingüístico ni en un sentido estético o artístico. La cuestión más importante es que requieren técnicas de representación diferentes a las usualmente aceptadas.²⁵ O, en todo caso, una mezcla de técnicas tanto “positivistas” como “postmodernistas” (lo que White llama “modernistas”). Por eso, es de valorar la existencia de los nuevos intentos de la representación posmoderna, tanto los visuales como los textuales.

Estudiando los elementos estilísticos distintivos de la llamada “literatura modernista” (de Proust, Joyce o Woolf a H. G. Adler, W. G. Sebald o Primo Levi, pasando por Serrate, Beckett, Mailer o Robbe-Grillet), White llega a la conclusión de que las representaciones asociadas a este movimiento pueden mejorar, completar e, incluso, sustituir las posibilidades de la historiografía positivista académica.²⁶ Específicamente, subraya las posibilidades de la “escritura intransitiva” y de la “*middle voice*”, que considera una forma adecuada para la representación de experiencias y de pensamientos ajenos porque permite que nos

22 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 56.

23 White, “La postmodernidad”, 522.

24 White, *El texto histórico*, 225.

25 *Ibid.*, 241.

26 *Ibid.*, 52.

situemos en medio de distintas relaciones entre el tiempo del narrador, el del autor y el de los personajes históricos²⁷, tal y como hacen *Noche y niebla*, de Alain Resnais, *Maus*, de Art Spiegelman, o *Borrados*, de Omer Bartov.

El pasado práctico y el Holocausto

En este capítulo final, me gustaría sugerir dos conclusiones provisionales. En primer lugar, he seguido la distinción entre hechos y acontecimientos de White para subrayar la idea de que toda representación del pasado se construye bajo un punto de vista, el del historiador, que conceptualiza y trama la información suministrada por las fuentes históricas en un todo del que no se puede predicar una correspondencia total y absoluta respecto de los hechos que dice describir o explicar (los “acontecimientos”). En este sentido, dicha distinción señala la naturaleza interpretativa, figurativa e ideológica de nuestras representaciones sobre el pasado. Por otro lado, hay que tener presente que cualquier fenómeno histórico, y especialmente el Holocausto, nunca está totalmente protegido respecto de las distorsiones, las manipulaciones o el olvido.

En segundo lugar, la concepción del acontecimiento modernista de White nos alerta de la nueva consciencia histórica en la que vivimos, una consciencia postmoderna que todavía ha de convivir con buena parte de la consciencia histórica moderna tradicional, académica y disciplinada. Una nueva consciencia que, además, ha de encontrar su plasmación en una nueva forma de representación historiográfica, alejada de lo que Ankersmit ha llamado una representación mimética o especular y más cercana a lo que se denomina representación sustitutiva. En *The Practical Past*, White ha vuelto a defender que el estudio de la historia nunca es inocente o desideologizado. Al contrario, toda forma de conocimiento histórico es producida desde una posición ideológica determinada y, por tanto, es usada para los intereses y las necesidades de esa ideología. Para los grupos subalternos, olvidados o resistentes, una historia elaborada

²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Tiempo y narración II. Configuración del tiempo en el relato de ficción* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2004), 530.

a la manera tradicional (objetiva, neutral, imparcial) no sería sino una recomendación improductiva y, en la práctica, significaría una asimilación respecto de la ideología dominante en los estudios históricos desde finales del siglo XIX: el realismo positivista burgués.²⁸ Por otro lado, dicha concepción ofrece una solución de compromiso en el debate sobre la naturaleza del Holocausto como acontecimiento histórico. En este sentido, White se posiciona a favor de nuestra capacidad para representar tal fenómeno, especialmente a través de las técnicas de la literatura modernista, y de lo que yo he llamado los “experimentos historiográficos postmodernos”. La conclusión es que las representaciones artísticas y visuales pueden ayudarnos a enfrentar eventos históricos como el Holocausto e, incluso, pueden ayudarnos a desarrollar interpretaciones adecuadas a las cuestiones fácticas archivadas o disponibles, por un lado, pero, también, fieles respecto de las experiencias del sufrimiento de las víctimas y de los supervivientes y, por tanto, éticamente responsables.

La postmodernidad, dice White, precisamente por las ansiedades textuales, representacionales y profesionales que produce, nos puede enseñar que “un pasado virtual es lo máximo a lo que podemos aspirar”.²⁹ Una historiografía que sea más consciente de su elemento constructivo, textual y ficcional es una historiografía que puede ponerse más al servicio de otros intereses más plurales y democráticos. Una historiografía, como la postmoderna, que relaje su pretensión de imparcialidad y de objetividad, que subraye su naturaleza constructiva, textual y autoreferencial, puede dejar de ser usada por las instituciones del poder y del estado para la creación mitificadora de una identidad nacional y/o estatal a su servicio. Así, una vez explicitadas las ansiedades que provoca la historiografía postmoderna, como las que pudiera provocar una visión histórica pragmatista como la que propone Richard Rorty, el textualismo puede hacer el resto: socavar la autoridad moral que se encuentra detrás de esa historiografía positivista y objetivista, que pretendía estar describiendo y representando “la verdad en sí”, el noúmeno, del pasado.³⁰

28 Hayden White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,” in *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore y London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 91-92

29 White, “La postmodernidad”, 522.

30 *Ibid.*, 530.

La historia es una “memoria cultivada”, una “memoria disciplinada”, “a fin de producir un pasado ‘colectivo’ a partir del cual se puede forjar una identidad colectiva”. Sin embargo, es la memoria, después de todo, lo que nos obliga “a confrontar el enigma de cómo lo que ha sucedido en el pasado perdura en el presente”. En un texto sobre Paul Ricoeur, White escribe que la memoria, esa sensación de una presencia ausente, “es la base de la conciencia específicamente histórica, si bien la historia ha sido convencionalmente presentada como un correctivo para la memoria, o una aproximación más confiable al estudio del pasado que la ‘memorización’”.³¹ Y es que parece que la historia nos habla de lo que se recuerda (y de quién y para qué lo recuerda), mientras que la memoria nos pone sobre alerta acerca del olvido, acerca de lo que la historia ha olvidado. Como escribe Timothy Snyder, nuestras representaciones del Holocausto deben ser contemporáneas, deben permitirnos poder comprender e, incluso, poder experimentar lo que aún queda en el presente del nazismo, de Hitler, del genocidio judío y de la industrialización de la muerte de seres humanos.³² Porque el Holocausto no es solamente historia sino, fundamentalmente, advertencia.

Tanto la historiografía como las distintas ciencias sociales Occidentales “son más o menos útiles según la situación en que se encuentren” las comunidades que las producen.³³ White aboga por una historia que tenga una naturaleza terapéutica y que nos permita imaginar el presente de nuestras sociedades. La historiografía postmoderna nos permite adiestrarnos en la idea de que una multiplicidad de versiones sobre el pasado (como la que, en la práctica, ya existe), no es algo perjudicial sino, al contrario, es algo beneficioso, puesto que nos permite comprender las diversas dimensiones y los diversos actores implicados, por ejemplo, en el origen y en el desarrollo de quien nació de la mano de la historia tradicional: el estado nacional y la nación contemporánea.³⁴ Y además, y en concreto, el sufrimiento que ha producido.

31 Ibid., 541-542.

32 Timothy Snyder, *Tierra negra. El Holocausto como historia y advertencia* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2015), 17.

33 White, “La postmodernidad”, 531.

34 Ibid., 532.

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Gabrielle Spiegel

Hayden White's Return to the Past as a Source of Human Practice

This article investigates Hayden White's use of the concept of the practical past, borrowed from Michael Oakeshott, as a means to argue for individual choices --ethical, moral and existential-- in contemporary life, and hence as a way to escape the burden of history, a problem that had motivated White's examination of historiographical practice from the beginning of his career as a historian. Thus for White, the practical past, in allowing the individual to choose one's past in order to choose one's present, also had the ultimately Utopian goal of shaping not only the present but the future as well.

Palavras-chave: The Practical past; the Historical Past, The Burden of History.

O Regresso ao Passado de Hayden White como Fonte de Prática Humana

Este artigo investiga o uso que Hayden White faz do conceito de passado prático, inspirado por Michael Oakeshott, como forma de argumentar em favor das escolhas individuais – éticas, morais e existenciais – na vida contemporânea e, conseqüentemente, como forma de escapar ao fardo do passado, um problema que motivou a análise que White fez da prática historiográfica desde o início da sua carreira como historiador. Neste sentido, para White, ao permitir ao indivíduo escolher o seu passado para que possa escolher o seu presente, o passado prático tem também o objetivo utópico de moldar não só o presente, mas também o futuro.

Keywords: Passado Prático; Passado Histórico; Fardo da História.

Hayden White's Return to the Past as a Source of Human Practice

Gabrielle Spiegel*

In light of Hayden White's lifelong critique of professional historians' claims to transparent veracity in the depiction of the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, it is hardly surprising that towards the end of his life he advocated, instead, for what he called "the practical past" in place of the "historical past." This "practical past" White defined as the past of "particular persons, groups, institutions and agencies –that is to say, the past that individuals or members of groups draw upon in order to help them make assessments and make decisions in ordinary everyday life as well as in extreme situations (such as catastrophes, disasters, battles, judicial and other kinds of conflicts in which survival is at issue)."¹ In espousing the notion of a "practical past," in place of the "historical past," White was drawing on the distinction between these approaches to history first articulated by Michael Oakeshott in the 1930s and revisited by Oakeshott in the early fifties and again in the sixties.² The "practical past" for Oakeshott, as David Harlan has shown, was the past "we create in order to make valid practical beliefs

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¹ Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014), Preface, p. xiii. White initially published his article on "The Practical Past", *Historiein* 10 (2010): 10-19.

² Michael Oakeshott, *On History and other Essays*, forward by Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1999; originally published by Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1985). Essay 1, "Present, Future and Past," 1-48. Notably, for Oakeshott, the "practical past" was a present-future oriented past, which may have been part of its attraction for White, for whom –as will be discussed– the "practical past" had a decidedly Utopian aspect.

about the present and the future, about the world in general.”³ Initially, Oakeshott sharply differentiated between the two and, despite acknowledging the utility of the practical past for moral reflection, upheld the authority of a truly ‘historical past’ as constructed by professional historiography. Yet by 1967, while still maintaining the validity of his original distinction, Oakeshott had become more sympathetic to the potential that the ‘practical past’ had for human life, seeing it as “our primary means of locating ourselves in time, even the condition of all human self-consciousness.”⁴

In many ways, this final phase in White’s thought can be seen as the logical culmination of his earliest writing and, in particular, of his desire to escape “the burden of history”, or at least history as traditionally understood as the precursor and, in fundamental ways, the determination of the present. In place of the Rankean, positivist notion of continuity, White, in his article on “The Burden of History,” already in 1966 claimed that historians must acknowledge rupture and discontinuity as man’s lot,⁵ particularly in light of the disenchantment of a world without secure religious or metaphysical tenets. In the absence of metaphysical foundations, history alone could sustain man’s existential issues, but such ethical and moral guidance was no longer provided by traditional historiography. For as White proclaimed in *Metahistory*, the chaotic –or what White called the “sublime”– nature of history “does not make a significant contribution to the problem of understanding human nature in general, for it does not show us anything about man that cannot be learned from the study of living men.”⁶ In some ways, if

3 David Harlan, “The ‘Burden of History’ Forty Years Later,” in *Re-Figuring Hayden White*, eds. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domanska, Hans Kellner (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), 173. See also Chris Lorenz, “It Takes Three to Tango, History Between the ‘Practical’ and the ‘Historical Past,’” *Storia della Storiografia* 65, no. 1 (2014): 29-46. Lorenz explains White’s privileging of the practical past over the historical past in his later years as a defense of its existential priority, especially in light of the consequences of modernist events like the Holocaust and other catastrophes, which are incapable of narrativization and other forms of structuration due to their intrinsic “modernist” nature.

4 *Ibid.*, 174.

5 Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory* 5, no. 2 (1966): 134.

6 Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 57.

one considers “The Burden of History” and “The Practical Past” as the framing articles of White’s career, then *Metahistory*, with its undermining of the truth claims of traditional historiography, can be seen as the instrument chosen by White to liberate humankind from the tyranny of the (positivist) past. Hence his emphasis on rhetoric (and narratology), which he construed as “a theory of composition by which a certain body of information was worked up for different practical uses, persuasion, incitement to action, inspiration of feeling of reverence or repulsion.”⁷ And for White, this was a return to history’s original conception from the time of Herodotus and Thucydides, for whom history functioned as a “pedagogical and practical discipline *par excellence*.”⁸

As White argued in an exchange with Dirk Moses, whatever the source of the individual’s knowledge of the past on which to shape a desired future, it will not come from within professional historiography, but rather history as offered in the “practical past.” White’s evident belief here that history alone, given the disenchantment of a world without secure religious or metaphysical tenets, “offers the individual a basis of judging the present and thus imagining a better future” remains faithful to his position, articulated as early as the ‘Burden of History,’ that “only a chaste historical consciousness can truly challenge the world anew every second, for only history mediates between what is and what men think ought to be with truly humanizing effect.”⁹ The grounds for constructing one’s past as well as one’s future, thus, remain ethical and willed. What the notion of a ‘practical past’ seems to offer White is not only the crucial ability for people to locate themselves in time and hence make history available in a post-metaphysical world, but also access to memory, that which, in Oakeshott’s initial formulations, makes up the fragments and traditions upon which people draw in crafting a practical, hence personal, past.

White’s initial valorization of the “practical past” derived from his analysis of the past as presented in literature, poetry and drama, and

⁷ White, *The Practical Past*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁹ White, “The Burden of History,” 134.

especially in the realist novel. For White, the depiction of history in the realist novel “resulted over time in the creation of a past quite different from that which served as the object of professional historians.” This, he proclaimed,

was the practical past of my title, a past which, unlike that of the historians, has been lived by all of us more or less individually and more or less collectively and which serves as the basis for the kinds of perceptions of everyday situations of the kind never experienced by the “heroes” of history.¹⁰

Thus, for White, what an appreciation for and study of the practical past enabled was access to “the ways in which lay persons and practitioners of other disciplines call upon, recall, or seek to use ‘the past’ as a ‘space of experience’ to be drawn upon as a basis for all kinds of judgments and decisions in daily life.”¹¹

In the emphasis on “experience” and the utility of knowledge of the practical past as a guide to personal and collective action, 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,”¹² or as Lenin might have said, “what is to be done?” In this, as well, White drew a sharp distinction between the “historical past” and the “practical past,” since he averred: “history in its status as a science of or the study of the past purported to purge the study of the past of any **ethical** content.”¹³ What the practical past offered was precisely the ability to choose, for as he repeatedly said: “In choosing

¹⁰ White, *The Practical Past*, 14-15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

our past we choose our present.”¹⁴ In the article on “The Public Relevance of Historical Studies A reply to Dirk Moses,” White criticized history not only for its abjuration of ethics, but more profoundly for the fact that “it has sold out any claim to relevance to present existential concerns of the societies in which it is practiced in order to purchase a much more dubious claim to ‘objectivity’ in the study of the past.”¹⁵ Choice, therefore, not the pursuit of some fable of “truth,” lay at the core of the historian’s activity, a choice governed not by epistemological or cognitive goals for knowledge, but by aesthetic and moral aspirations. And behind this view of the historian’s task, as Hans Kellner already argued, lies “the hidden presence of Sartre and Existentialism.”¹⁶

Robert Doran has recently demonstrated that White’s reliance on Sartrean existentialism shaped both the future-oriented character of the historian’s choice i.e. “in choosing our past we choose our future”—and the absolute need to make such choices, for in Sartre’s thought the burden of being itself imposes the *necessity* of doing so. As Doran explains:

Sartre holds that...we are always essentially and inescapably ‘free,’ free to *choose* ourselves but also *obliged* to choose ourselves in every moment for even to refuse to choose is still a choice, and thus passivity is an illusion.¹⁷

For Sartre, although the “the meaning of the past is strictly dependent on my present project... [and] I alone decide at each moment the *bearing* of the past,” transcendence of the past is not tantamount to its denial, since, Sartre insists, “by projecting myself towards my ends, I

14 White, “The Burden of History,” 123.

15 White, “The Public Relevance of Historical Studies. A Reply to Dirk Moses,” *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 336.

16 Hans Kellner, “A Bedrock of Order: Hayden White’s Linguistic Humanism,” *History and Theory* 19 (1980): 17.

17 Robert Doran, “Choosing the Past: Hayden White and the Philosophy of history,” introduction to *Philosophy of History after Hayden White*, ed. Robert Doran. (New York, Bloomsbury: Studies in American Philosophy, 2014), 12.

preserve the past with me, and by action I decide its meaning.”¹⁸ White, Doran argues, effectively adopted this existentialist view, “transforming it into a full-blown philosophy of history,” for according to this mode we realize our present aspirations “by projecting them backward as well as forward.”¹⁹ The voluntarism central to such a use of the past remains faithful to White’s existentialist faith, which Hermann Paul has also emphasized.²⁰ Indeed, Peter Novick even refers to White’s “existentialist *quasi* obsession with the historian’s liberty of choice. It is not too much to call him historiography’s philosopher of freedom.”²¹

The argument that this existentialist project underlies White’s work from the time of his writing “The Burden of History” to the present helps to explain White’s continuing focus on the historical “sublime” –understood as the inherently chaotic and meaningless nature of history– a characteristic of human history that had been masked by the nineteenth-century, Rankean pretense that the structure of the historian’s narrative was merely a representation of structures already present in the past itself, a claim that, as White was to argue in “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,”²² worked to de-sublimate the past by disciplining the historian’s imagination, thereby demoting the ‘sublime’ to the status of the merely ‘beautiful’.²³ Hence White’s repeated insistence, following Louis Mink, that “stories are not lived, they are told,” are invented, not found and that “recognition of the sublime is the only path to changing history.”²⁴ White’s embrace of the sublime, therefore, was a deeply ethical gesture for, he argued, it represented “the kind of meaninglessness which alone can goad the moral sense of living human beings to make their lives

18 *Ibid.*, 14.

19 *Ibid.*, 15.

20 For a discussion of this principle in White’s work, see Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).

21 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: “The Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 601.

22 Hayden White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-sublimation,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982): 113-137.

23 *Ibid.*, 122.

24 *Ibid.*, 135.

different for themselves and their children, which is to say, to endow their lives with a meaning for which they alone are fully responsible.”²⁵

In particular, White saw his criticism as a means of liberating modern man from the Irony –in effect, the trope-- that dominated modern consciousness and disabled mankind from making precisely the kind of choices implied by the notion of the practical past. For as Moses demonstrated, whether historical processes are constructed (early White) or “real” (the later White) utopianism remains “the dream in the name of which men dared to demand something better than the hand dealt them by generic or social forces.”²⁶ As White himself wrote in “The Future of Utopia in History,” he wished “to challenge the party of history for its repression of the utopian moment in history’s own makeup and for casting it out of any properly historical reflection on history as a residue either of infantile self-indulgence or of senile imbecility.”²⁷ In the end, it is the rejection of the “historical past” in favor of the “practical past” and the embrace of the sublime of history and its freedom to constitute the meaning of the past for the present as a conscious choice concerning a desirable, even utopian, future that situates ethical goals long banished from the practice of professional historiography. Throughout his career and writings, White sought to bend that practice to human needs and aspirations. No one argued more forcefully for an ethically responsible and morally meaningful approach to the past, whose ultimate goal is to lead the historian towards an ethics of historical science.”²⁸

25 *Ibid.*, 128.

26 A. Dirk Moses, “Hayden White, Traumatic Nationalism and the Public Role of History,” *History and Theory* 44 (October, 2005): 319.

27 Hayden White, “The Future of Utopia in History.” *Historiein* 7 (2007): 12.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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