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Hayden White

The Historical Imagination

Herman Paul

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Acknowledgments

It is hard to say whether this is my first or second book on Hayden White. Originally, I planned this study to be a reworked version of my 2006 Ph.D. dissertation, which traced how White's philosophy of history was shaped by existentialist concerns about human dignity and moral responsibility in a world believed to be meaningless in itself. However, the revisions to the thesis gradually became so thorough that the outcome is an almost entirely new book. In marked contrast to its unpublished predecessor, the present book is first and foremost an introduction to White. Written for an audience unfamiliar with his work, it explains White's views as clearly as possible, while offering an interpretation that I claim to be more accurate than the sort of *Wikipedia* wisdom ("history is a form of fiction") that many seem to associate with his name. What has not changed, though, is my historicizing approach, as evidenced, among other things, by the chronological organization of this study and the use of past tense forms throughout the book. This is not to suggest that White's interventions belonged to an age now long gone – even though *Metahistory* appeared well before I was born – but to show how his (often changing) views on history were rooted in specific historical situations, social structures, political realities, and generational sensitivities.

The greatest debt I have incurred in the course of writing this book is to Hayden White himself, who immediately took me out for coffee and pizza when I reluctantly knocked on his office door at Stanford University in the Fall of 2002. Ever since, he has been a stimulating conversation partner, generous with his time and ideas,

always prepared to answer my questions or to recommend a new historical novel, but fierce in his insistence that I should write “with” rather than “about” his work. Although this was not precisely what I had in mind with the current book, I trust my other work in the field of historical theory testifies that my ideas are often shaped in conversation with White’s. Also, I am most grateful to my former doctoral advisors, Frank Ankersmit and Chris Lorenz, for their support and many helpful suggestions. I cannot imagine how I would have entered the historical profession without the encouragement and scholarly example of especially Frank Ankersmit.

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Introduction: How to Read Hayden White

"No one writing in this country at the present time has done more to wake historians from their dogmatic slumber than has Hayden White," wrote Dominick LaCapra.¹ In a sense, these words aptly describe how White, the American scholar best classified as a philosopher of history, spent a good part of his career explaining why historians are unjustified in thinking they have privileged access to the past. Over the years, in both his writing and teaching, White invested considerable energy in challenging the conventional wisdom that archival research and historical analysis enable historians to offer "better" accounts of the past than, say, historical novels or films. In expressive and often ironic prose, he fired volleys of questions: Who is to decide what counts as better? Better for what purposes? By whose standards? In whose interest? The word "history," in particular, often aroused White's critical attention. What does it mean to write history, to classify an event as historical, or to say that a phenomenon must be explained historically? What is it that historians and the general public in the West take as "history?" And what reasons could one possibly have for preferring this way of looking at history, this view of what counts as history, over alternatives proposed in other times and places? Like David Hume, the Scottish philosopher whom Immanuel Kant famously declared had awakened him from his "dogmatic slumber," White raised a number of difficult questions disturbing the peaceful sleep of those assuming that the only way of doing history was taking notes in an archive and "getting the facts straight."

Yet, in so far as LaCapra, in the words just quoted, implied that White's wake-up calls were heard or answered by these note-taking historians, there was no small amount of wishful thinking in his claim. Who was White after all? Presumably, by the time LaCapra wrote his favorable review, in 1976, few American historians had ever tried to read White. They might have recognized his name as the director of Wesleyan's Center for the Humanities or as a history professor who had taught at Wayne State, Rochester, and UCLA. But it is unlikely that more than a few historians ever reached the last page of White's often long and difficult essays, published in such high-brow journals as *History and Theory* and *New Literary History*. Admittedly, by 1976, the leading historical journal in the United States had welcomed White's path-breaking study, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), as "a daring, ingenious, and sometimes bewildering tour de force."² But nor does that count as an indicator of the sort of influence that LaCapra seems to detect. Only by the 1980s did *Metahistory* begin to acquire fame and notoriety.³ LaCapra's statement is therefore best understood as a friendly encouragement, or as the enthusiastic endorsement of a program that LaCapra – himself a soon-to-be-famous theorist – considered healthy for historians still suffering from faith in truth and objectivity.⁴

Much, though, has changed in the meantime. Hayden White hardly needs a word of introduction today. His essays, collected in *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), *The Content of the Form* (1987), *Figural Realism* (1999), and *The Fiction of Narrative* (2010), are required reading for graduate students throughout the humanities. Friends and foes alike consider White a major spokesman of "narrativist" or "postmodernist" approaches to the study of history. Wherever historians refer to the "linguistic turn" in their profession, they mention the name of White. In the English-speaking world, his views have dominated the research agenda of philosophers of history ever since the early 1970s. Of course, wherever White goes, or wherever his texts are discussed in class, he receives negative feedback, especially from historians who see their "craft" threatened by the language of discourse and representation. Yet, whereas in earlier decades the mere mention of White's name was sufficient to ensure vigorous debate, younger generations of historians have increasingly absorbed the "tropes" and "plots" from *Metahistory* – as have literary scholars, who have learned from White how to treat historical writing as discourse.

In this way, White has become a short-hand reference to “literary analyses of historical texts” or “narrativist philosophy of history,” much in the way that Hans-Georg Gadamer represents hermeneutics and Jacques Derrida symbolizes deconstruction. Arguably, no other philosopher of history since Robin G. Collingwood, in the second quarter of the twentieth century, has had such a profound impact on historical thinking. Indeed, “[n]o one writing in this country [the United States] at the present time” has done more to revolutionize the way we reflect upon history.

White’s achievement

How has White managed to achieve this? According to many, his work challenges three conventional distinctions, or demarcations between fields that are often believed to differ significantly. Take, first of all, the field, or activity, called “philosophy of history.”⁵ Since the eighteenth century, philosophy of history has traditionally been identified with the study of the laws of historical development. A prime example of this tendency is Saint Augustine, who depicted the process between Creation and Judgment Day as a constant war between the City of God and the City of Man. Other examples could include G. W. F. Hegel, for whom history was the gradual self-realization of the spirit, and Karl Marx, who believed that history would eventually culminate in a Socialist society. By the mid twentieth century, however, this type of thought was almost unanimously dismissed as speculative and unscientific (also, one might add, because many saw the Fascist and National-Socialist regimes in 1930s Europe as illustrating the potentially dangerous political implications of such philosophies of history).⁶ The only legitimate sort of philosophy of history, William Walsh and others argued, was the analytical philosophy found in, for instance, the early volumes of the journal *History and Theory*. This kind of philosophy did not study the historical process, but historical scholarship. It did not offer grandiose syntheses, but scrupulous reflections on what can be accepted as valid historical explanations, or the relative faults and merits of competing concepts of causality.⁷

One can imagine the consternation caused by White’s provocative claim that this distinction between “speculative” and “analytical” philosophy of history conceals as much as it reveals. White argued that the former only makes explicit what the latter chooses

to leave implicit. Obviously, he did not say that philosophers of history in the analytic branch tacitly subscribe to Augustinian, Hegelian, or Marxist theories of historical development. Nonetheless, in White's view, it is impossible for them to study historical scholarship without making substantive assumptions about what "history" is, what counts as "past" and "present," what a historical "agent" is, or how historical events are "caused." There can be no reflection on historical scholarship that is metaphysically neutral. Therefore, analytical philosophy of history may pretend to be detached, impersonal, and devoid of the metaphysical speculation often found in Augustine, Hegel, or Marx. In fact, however, it has an ineradicable metaphysical dimension as well. All reflection on historical studies stems from what White called "metahistorical" assumptions. (This, of course, is also true of White's own work.)

Even more disturbing was White's second attack, on the distinction between "proper" historical practice and (speculative) philosophy of history. Since the days of Leopold von Ranke, the alleged father of modern historical scholarship, historians had been taught to avoid all speculation and to stick to "facts" derived from primary source material. Indeed, Ranke himself already had explicitly contrasted his ethos of meticulous source criticism with the grand-scale narratives offered by Hegel.⁸ But, again, White argued that the antithesis is misleading. For what is a historical fact? Do all events recorded in ancient documents classify as "historical"? If not, how then to justify the distinction between historical and other facts? Doesn't that distinction presuppose a substantive vision of what history is (a vision, perhaps, like Hegel's, who spoke about the "people without history" in Africa)? And what is a "fact" or an "event?" White was among the first to show that these categories cannot be defined without a metaphysics or substantive view of what reality is.

Yet, the most provocative border incursion, so to speak, took place at the (supposed) boundary between history and fiction. White is known as a narrativist because of his claim that historians write stories, or produce narratives, much in the same way that authors of fictional novels do. As such, this is hardly a surprising insight: historians have often felt inspired by novelists. However, under the influence of positivist presuppositions, many of them considered the literary qualities of their writing a matter of form, more than of content. White, on the other hand, spoke about the "content of the form" or about the constraints that narratives put on how historians interpret the past. As long as historical writing

is supposed to display the sort of coherence and plot development typical of the nineteenth-century realistic novel, said White, historians will view the past through the prisms of coherence and development. They will interpret the past in such a way that it fits their narrative model. Indeed, historians are often so accustomed to this narrative format that many of them would dismiss a history book following the stylistic example of, say, a modernist anti-novel or a Lacanian essay. White's point, then, was not that such an a-priori commitment to a particular (narrative) mode of representation must be avoided. He only wanted historians to realize that there are no obvious reasons why a history book needs to resemble a Sir Walter Scott novel more closely than a modernist work by Virginia Woolf. Whatever the genre they prefer, historians always adopt a mode of representation. They always construct a version of the past and cannot help but impose their own assumptions upon the reality of the past. In that respect, they resemble authors of fictional literature. Emphasizing this constructive element, White provocatively spoke about the "fictions" historians employ and even about the "the fictions of factual representation" (see chapter 4, this volume).

Conceivably, this was a recipe for controversy. "If the distinction between history and philosophy of history had been basic to historians, the most sacred boundary of all was that between history and fiction, and nothing outraged historians more than White's blurring of that dividing line," writes Peter Novick in his history of the American historical profession. Suspicious "of those who like Hayden White argue that historical narrative is just another form of fiction," at least a segment of the discipline began to treat White as a "symbolic embodiment" of "nihilistic relativism."⁹ Of course, the accused could have objected that fiction is by no means identical to "say whatever you please." Doesn't the Latin word *fictum* mean "created" or "formed?" But such subtleties, like many others that will be addressed in this book, were lost in the turbulent reception history of White's philosophy of history. His blurring of three seemingly well-demarcated borders – all of which were supposed to distinguish good academic performance from the less good – turned White into a much-discussed and most controversial figure.

White's reputation

In a sense, controversy is what transforms important authors into "key contemporary thinkers." Without the polemics surrounding

his work, White would not have acquired the status that justifies book-length treatment of his ideas in Polity's Key Contemporary Thinkers series. At the same time, this debate ranks high among the reasons why White is sometimes hard to understand. Indeed, there is no lack of misunderstandings stemming from stereotypes and prejudices about the nature and aims of his work. For example, if several polemical pieces assert that White does not offer any rational criteria for judging between competing interpretations of, say, the Russian Revolution, it is difficult to pick up *Metahistory* without the expectation that this issue of competing historical interpretations lies at the heart of the book. As soon, then, as one reads in the preface that White thinks there are only moral or aesthetic grounds for preferring one "perspective on history" over another, one may be forgiven for interpreting this as meaning that one can have only moral or aesthetic reasons for claiming that a certain study of the Russian Revolution is better than its competitors. In fact, however, White talks about "perspectives on history" or views on what counts as historical; not about interpretations of a particular historical event. This is not a minor difference. If White's phrase "perspectives on history" refers to cultural patterns of defining the mode called "history," rather than to a book shelf containing four or five different monographs on the Russian revolutionaries of 1917, the claims proposed in *Metahistory* turn out to be dramatically different than is suggested in much of the polemical literature. (I elaborate on this example in chapter 3.) One aim of the present book, then, is to offer a more sensitive interpretation of White's philosophy of history by explaining not what others have said about White, but what White himself might have wanted to say.¹⁰

The polemical reception history of White's publications is only one reason why new readers often find themselves struggling with these texts. There are at least two other reasons. One is that White's oeuvre displays a greater interest in originality than in consistency over time. In a sense, the author seems constantly on the move. The 27-year-old graduate student in the Vatican library who presented his doctoral dissertation as an "objective" account of the papal schism in 1130 represented a rather different type of historian than the flamboyant teacher at Rochester, in the mid-1960s, who captivated the freshmen in his classroom with amazing stories about nineteenth-century intellectuals.¹¹ The aged celebrity who gave, and still gives, skillfully improvised speeches to audiences varying from artists in Rome to young faculty in Oklahoma City reminds one only remotely of the structuralist-inspired pieces that White pub-

lished as a mid-career scholar in the early 1970s. Also, White's first attempts to grasp the historians' work in terms of narrative – attempts still formulated in the language of analytical philosophy of history – emerged from concerns rather different from those that motivated his devastating critique of the historical discipline in *The Content of the Form*, or his perhaps surprising interest in ancient Christian Bible exegesis in the early 1990s. These examples do not intend to downplay the element of continuity in White's work or *modus operandi* – for instance, his frequent invoking of a theory of tropes and its application upon such diverse topics as texts, dreams, and music.¹² But even in this case, what White wanted his tropes to achieve, and how he employed them to gain maximum rhetorical effect, varied from context to context. Historian Richard T. Vann therefore rightly requires that any reflection on White must start with the question: "Which White?"¹³ For this reason, the current book does not offer a systematic presentation of White's philosophy of history, but a chronological account of how his thoughts about history changed over time.

A third and final reason for the relative inaccessibility of White's work (despite, sometimes, the appearance of the contrary) is the author's preference for the genre of the essay.¹⁴ When Vann calls White "perhaps the premier academic essayist of our times," he identifies a striking and important feature of much of White's writing.¹⁵ White's favorite genre, indeed, was not the monograph, but the essay; not the 250-page answer to a single question, but the 25-page outburst of creativity. Guided by his fine intuition for what is original or exciting in the world of letters, White employed the essay-format to test new ideas and to provoke discussion. This should warn the reader not to expect from White a "position," in the sense of a well-grounded system of philosophical beliefs. The German critic Patrick Bahners certainly exaggerates when he claims that almost everything *Metahistory* asserts is refuted by other statements elsewhere in the book. But, admittedly, White's love of *inventio* – the style figure "related to concepts of creativity, productivity and progress" – always far exceeded his care for consistency.¹⁶

It therefore seems crucial for any interpretation of White not to focus too much on positions and answers. It is far more illuminating to examine the *questions* that motivated his work. White's oeuvre is better understood from its guiding concerns than from the variety of sometimes contradictory assertions it makes. It is more illuminating, for students of his work, to examine which questions captivated White in different phases of his career than to observe that,

over the course of the years, the ideas, hypotheses, and theories proposed in response to these questions changed with the circumstances. In other words, the challenge is to treat White neither as a system builder nor as a constructor of theories, but as the author of a wide-ranging oeuvre that finds its coherence, not in answers, but in some deeply felt questions about history.¹⁷

Accordingly, when this study identifies White's work as a "philosophy of history," the word "philosophy" has not to be mistaken for rigid system thinking or for analytical thought in the tradition of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell. Neither is it limited to what some authors call "historical theory," that is, philosophical reflection on the work of professional (academic) historians. As this study will make clear, White's interest was anything but confined to the historical discipline: his prime interest rather was historical imagination, in and (especially) outside the ivory tower of professional scholarship. "Philosophy of history," then, is better understood as indicating that the variety of issues White addressed in the course of his career were always informed and motivated by questions dealing with history.

White's questions

What, then, were these questions of history that guided White's work? On this issue, the literature on White – dozens of articles, in several languages, the most important of which are listed in the bibliography near the end of this book – is remarkably divided. Due, perhaps, to the ease with which White participated in a variety of scholarly debates, or to the fact that many commentators have taken up their pens in response to what appeared to be temporary positions, the answers White formulated at particular moments in time have sometimes been mistaken for the questions his oeuvre as a whole sought to address. In other words, the rhetorical and conceptual instruments White employed in particular phases of his career are often quickly identified with the principal concerns informing his work.

Take, for example, the figures of speech that almost every student first learns to associate with White: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (not to mention the four plot structures that White distinguished, or the ideological dimensions he detected, or the explanatory strategies he discerned, all of which can be neatly classified and presented in graphical diagrams). Given that White pre-

sented these rhetorical figures as “tropes,” his analysis of historical writing in terms of these figures is often characterized as “tropological.” For some authors, then, White is nothing but a tropologist, whose greatest pleasure consisted in analyzing the world of human affairs in terms of his fourfold rhetorical pattern. There is, of course, some truth in this observation. One of White’s favorite rhetorical strategies, after all, was to show that an author, a tradition, or even an entire scholarly debate was locked within the confines of a single trope (in the mode of metonymy, for example) and then to suggest that other points of view were also available (in the metaphoric and synecdochic modes, for instance). But if White was a tropologist in his heart of hearts, then how to account for the almost complete absence of tropes in *The Content of the Form*? Or how to explain White’s interest in “modernist events,” “intransitive writing,” and the “practical past,” none of which can easily be encapsulated in a tropological theory (chapter 6)? It is no coincidence that the “tropological” interpretation of White was most forcefully suggested by reviewers of *Tropics of Discourse*. It may be less appropriate for White’s later work, not to mention his pre-*Metahistory* writings. Moreover, interpretations of White focused on tropes run the risk of forgetting that, in White’s hands, these rhetorical figures were never an end in themselves, but always an instrument for performing a specific type of analysis. And it remains to be seen whether this was an analysis of texts or discourse, as is usually assumed, or rather an analysis of patterns of thought metaphorically identified by rhetorical figures (chapter 3).

Others claim that White was first and foremost a narrativist. This usually refers to White’s interest in how story-forms shape the way in which humans think about the world, and is an interpretation developed in the 1980s and 1990s in response to *The Content of the Form*. Those classifying White as a narrativist, or crediting him with a “theory of narrative explanation,” usually do so in order to indicate a typical feature of White’s mid-career work. White’s philosophy of history, they say, is not focused on historical research, but on historical writing. Moreover, in so far as this writing is concerned, White is not interested in historical statements (in individual sentences such as “Nero was the fifth Roman emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty”), but in historical narratives (in book-length stories such as Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*). In particular, for White, such narratives are “autonomous linguistic entities,” in the sense that they are underdetermined by the individual sentences they contain. Consequently, the

argument goes, narratives such as Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* cannot be verified or falsified by empirical historical research: they fall into a category beyond truth and falsity. This, then, is the "anti-realist narrativism" that philosophers of history, in polemical manner, have ascribed to White (chapter 5).

Admittedly, this narrativist interpretation of White has some plausibility, too. For example, I will argue that White's understanding of narrative indeed relied heavily on arguments intended to challenge dominant forms of "realism." Also, it is appropriate to call White a narrativist as long as one deals with the work published in and around *The Content of the Form*, or when one refers to the effect that this part of his oeuvre has had, and still has, on the humanities. Yet, as an interpretative framework for understanding White's entire work, this narrativism is as limited as the tropological interpretation. For one thing, few commentators reading White through narrativist lenses have been able to explain *why* White was so eager to emphasize the artificial, fictive, and anti-realist nature of historical narrative. Few have realized that White – unlike his Dutch colleague Frank Ankersmit, for example¹⁸ – has never tried to offer even the beginning of an argument as to why "truth" in a classic correspondence sense of the word is inapplicable to narratives like Gibbon's tragedy. More generally, few have recognized that White almost invariably approached narrative from rhetorical, ideological, and political angles, and almost never from an epistemological point of view. Besides, just like the tropological reading, the narrativist interpretation focuses on a specific phase in White's intellectual trajectory, thereby ignoring much of what White wrote prior to *Metahistory*. Finally, as chapter 3 will reveal, even *Metahistory*, often considered the flagship of narrativist philosophy of history, suffers if read through the lenses of White's later work.

Reinterpreting White

The alternative this book presents rests on three assumptions.¹⁹ First, it supposes that White's philosophy of history can only be understood if it is read from the context of his entire oeuvre. Accordingly, this book does not start with *Metahistory*, but devotes two entire chapters to the "early White." Second, unlike some polemical pieces in *History and Theory* and other journals, this book does not merely treat White as a "philosopher of historiography," that is, as someone engaged in a philosophical examination of the knowledge

that historians produce.²⁰ White's views on professional historiography were always part of a broader philosophy, in which existential attitudes towards the past, the uses and abuses of traditions, the paralyzing effects of bourgeois modes of realism, and the moral dimensions of historical knowledge were at least equally important themes. In other words, White was not primarily interested in the historical profession *per se*, but in what it means to live in a historical world, to orient oneself in the present, and to envision a morally responsible future. This is why historical imagination, as referred to in the subtitle of this book, served as a key concept in White's philosophy of history.

Finally, building on work done by Hans Kellner, David Harlan, Ewa Domańska, and Dirk Moses, this book argues that White's desire to challenge the historical imagination of his contemporaries stemmed from his moral and political views, or more precisely, from his existentialist humanist idea that human beings ought to throw off their "burdens of history" if they are to contribute to "a better world for our children and their progeny."²¹ More precisely, this book argues that at the heart of White's philosophy of history lies an existentialist-inspired understanding of human flourishing, which reveals itself, among other things, in White's unshakable confidence in the abilities of human beings to endow the "meaningless" realities of past and present with self-won meanings; in his imperative that human individuals must develop such meanings in order to free themselves from traditions, conventions, and other tyrannical powers; in his insistence that every historical interpretation entails a moral judgment, for which the author bears personal responsibility; and in what Novick calls White's "quasi obsession with the historian's liberty of choice."²² White's philosophy of history is a series of reflections inspired by what one might call the first commandment in his moral universe: "thou shalt be responsible for thine own life." His rebellion against anti-utopian modes of realism and his recommendation of anti-narrative modes of representation were invariably motivated by the existentialist-inspired ideal of human individuals who take responsibility for their own existence and dare to plot the course of their own lives (as captured nicely in the image on the cover of this book).

Detecting such an existentialist-inspired program in White's philosophy of history is not the same as reducing his work again to a "position" or "system." In White's case, after all, it was part of his existentialist ethos to adapt his thoughts to changing circumstances. And although the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus

– the French existentialists whose writings White absorbed in the 1950s and ever after invoked as uncrowned authorities in matters of moral decision-making – was more explicitly acknowledged in his early writings than in his later work, its traces can be found throughout his oeuvre. Indeed, this book will argue that without a proper appreciation of White's existentialist-inspired agenda, his reflections on language, imagination, discourse, and narrative remain hard to understand, and often difficult to relate to each other. White's thoughts on history and historical scholarship only come together and fall into place if they are traced back to his central question: how to live a morally responsible life in a thoroughly historical world?

Structure of the book

The structure of this book is relatively simple. As indicated above, the book starts with two full chapters on White's early work (1955–73). The first of these shows that White's earliest writings, from the 1950s, were heavily indebted to the German sociologist Max Weber. In applying Weber's leadership types to medieval Roman church leadership, White not only offered a new explanation of the papal schism of 1130, but also aimed at developing a sociological model describing the "rise and fall" of cultural powers. The opening chapter also shows that a similar theme can be found in the three textbooks White (co-)authored in the 1960s and early 1970s: *The Emergence of Liberal Humanism* (1966), *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism* (1970), and *The Greco-Roman Tradition* (1973). Focusing on the rise of humanist ideals in Western thought, these volumes testify that White's Weberian views on ideology and human agency could be called "humanistic" if combined with a particular educational agenda. However, they also show that, by the end of the 1960s, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus had replaced Weber as White's main sources of inspiration.

Chapter 2 shows how White blended existentialism, structuralism, and American Marxism into a philosophy of history that openly advocated "liberation historiography" (a term coined in analogy to liberation theology and liberation philosophy). In particular, this second chapter argues that White's fascination for the structuralist philosopher, Lucien Goldmann, strengthened his conviction that "visionary politics" in the Marxist manner were needed for realizing his existentialist ideal of moral freedom and responsibility.