

Hayden White: The Historical Imagination

Review Number:

1149

Publish date:

Saturday, 1 October, 2011

Author:

Herman Paul

ISBN:

9780745650142

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£15.99

Pages:

224pp.

Publisher:

Polity Press

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Adam Timmins

Hayden White is a controversial figure in the world of history. Study any textbook on the theory and philosophy of history, and you will be assured that his 1973 book *Metahistory* marked a revolutionary turning point in historical theory. It marked what came to be known as the 'linguistic turn' in historical theory, and has inspired legions of acolytes whose reverence for the master at times verges on embarrassing. (1) Yet at the same time his influence on the actual practice of history and historical writing has been virtually zero. As Paul puts it in his introduction, Dominic LaCapra's paeon that 'no-one writing history in this country has done more to wake historians from their dogmatic slumber than Hayden White' (pp. 1–2) contains more than a certain amount of wishful thinking. It is this controversy over the precise influence that White has had on the historical profession – and moreover, what White himself has actually tried to say about the process of historical writing – that makes him a suitable candidate for Polity Press' *Critical Thinkers* series. Paul wrote on White for his PhD dissertation, and has consulted White at length in the context of the former project and the current book. His aim in this book is to try and clear away the built-up detritus of secondary interpretation that has built up around White's work over the years, in order to 'offer a more sensitive interpretation of White's philosophy by explaining not what others have said about White, but what White himself might have wanted to say' (p 6).

Given the vastness and diversity of White's oeuvre, attempting to impose – dare we say form? – onto his work is a difficult task. White is a difficult figure to pigeon-hole. One of the terms most often associated with White is 'tropes'; but as Paul notes, anyone who is content to label White as a tropologist has to deal with the anomaly of *The Content of the Form*, which hardly features the word (p. 9). If not a tropologist, then surely White can be categorized as a narrativist? This claim is on more solid ground, as White has always tended to favour dealing with the finished product of historians' labours over looking at actual

historical practice. And yet ‘few commentators reading White through narrative lenses have been able to explain *why* White was so eager to emphasise the artificial, fictive and anti-realist nature of historical narrative’ (p. 10).

In 2010 a collection of White’s essays was published under the title *The Fiction of Narrative*.⁽²⁾ If White’s previous compilations of essays were ‘best ofs’, then there is a temptation to see *Fiction* as ‘the rest of’ – a collection of leftover odds and ends omitted from the previous collections. Yet the collection was a revelation – in the sense that it showed there was a lot more to White than a seeming obsession with tropes. As the editor of the volume remarked, White’s previous collections of essays were based around texts ‘selected, and in many cases revised or rewritten, to cleave to a specific theme ...’.⁽³⁾ As Paul correctly points out, in order to understand White we must begin not in 1973 with the publication of *Metahistory*, but at least 20 years further back. As White’s defenders/ supporters never tire of pointing out, White studied medieval history at university, and wrote his PhD thesis on the Papal schism of 1130, spending two years in Italy in the Vatican archives. Paul argues that during the 1950s and early 1960s, White had three key influences: Max Weber, Carlo Antoni & Benedetto Croce. The influence of Weber hung heavily over White’s dissertation, which utilised Weberian ‘ideal types’ to characterize the competing schools of Gregorio Papareschi and Pietro Pierlione as adhering to ‘charismatic’ and ‘bureaucratic’ leadership ideals respectively (p. 18). Weber’s ideas also continued to play a part in most of White’s output in the 1950s. White’s ‘essays on Collingwood, Toynbee and Dawson ... reflected the same fascination for worldviews and ultimate beliefs that characterized his medievalist studies’ (p. 24).

While in Italy, White met Carlo Antoni, and thus was introduced to the work of Benedetto Croce. Antoni was distrustful of German sociology, and wrote a Crocean book which White translated into English as *From History to Sociology*. Antoni argued there was no such thing as timeless or ideal types, and ahistorical approaches to history are doomed to fail. Instead, Antoni put forth a ‘fully historicized understanding of human thought’ (p. 26). In the introduction to the translation, White avoided doing a full u-turn with regards to his own Weberian predilections, but agreed with Antoni that ‘Weber’s naturalistic historicism put too little emphasis on how ‘history’ differs from ‘nature’ and that, consequently, it ran the risk of ignoring the freedom and responsibility that, above all things, distinguish the human from the animal’ (p. 28). In 1961–2, White returned to Italy, ostensibly to study the relation between science and social thought in Italy between 1543–1643. However, he published nothing on the Renaissance, but did produce a piece on Croce, ‘The abiding relevance of Croce’s idea of history’, an essay that reads, in Paul’s words, ‘in its American context, as the confession of an emerging heretic’ (p. 29). White’s enthusiasm for Croce stemmed not from the idea of history as art, but rather, ‘the emphasis on the complexity of things and the impossibility of fitting reality into a single formula’ (p. 29). There is no such thing as a fixed human nature; and isms such as Marxism are always doomed to fail. Human ‘beings always have to make up their own minds how to act’ (p. 31). As in Croce’s work, the idea of freedom would loom large in the work of White. In what we might call the ‘Italian period’ of White’s work then, we see a shift from questions *in* history to questions *about* history. Although as late as 1964 he would refer to himself as a medievalist, ‘his work became increasingly focused not on the solution of historical problems, but on questions of how the past should be studied, what benefits result from such a study, or how human beings can be liberated from a false sense of history’ (pp. 33–4).

In 1966 White made his first significant impact as a historical theorist – with an article entitled ‘The burden of history’. It was published in *History and Theory*, which for its first five years had largely been concerned with refinements of what had come to be known as the analytic philosophy of history. The content of ‘The burden of history’, though, was a far cry from the world of covering laws and narrative sentences; White preferred to invoke ‘literary characters, often from modernist novels and plays, as witnesses against a historical way of thinking’ (p. 38). The main theme of White’s essay was that in the present day the historian was something of an anachronism. The days in which the likes of Michelet and De Tocqueville had played a major role in European intellectual life had gone. How could historians regain their relevance? White argued that trying to trace a line from the past to the present was futile; ‘On the contrary, we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot’.⁽⁴⁾ This links in with White’s ideas on human freedom of action; if ‘human beings learn to see themselves as

disconnected from the past ... they may come to realize what an enormous amount of freedom they enjoy' (pp. 38–9). The job of the present-day historian was 'to re-establish the dignity of historical studies on a basis that will make them consonant with the aims and purposes of the intellectual community at large, that is, transform historical studies in such a way as to allow the historian to participate positively in the liberation of the present from *the burden of history*'.⁽⁵⁾ At this moment in time White was in a half-way house – the medievalist of the 1950s was a thing of the past, but although his tone was more radical, he had not yet graduated to the rejection of scientific history that characterised his later years. Paul calls White's thought at this juncture 'liberation historiography', and argues that the article 'illustrates how important it is to see White not as a philosopher of professional historiography, but as a politically engaged thinker concerned about the relations that people develop with their pasts' (p. 41).

In an address delivered in Toronto in 1969 (later published as 'The politics of contemporary philosophy of history'), White argued that historians that refrained from voicing personal political opinions were seen as practising 'straight history', while those that explicate politically radical views are seen as doing 'meta-history'. The latter term would resurface four years later as the title of his most famous work, a thumping 448 page tome entitled *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth Century*. As one might expect with a book of this size, at times it seems there are several disparate books – or several Hayden Whites – struggling to emerge from its pages. Indeed, Hans Kellner has taken to referring to it as *Metahistories* (p. 58). It is very much a work of its time, in that like contemporaries Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault, White is very much concerned with historicization and discontinuity. The historical profession was not formed in a vacuum; and historical practice was not a matter of *a priori* rules. Rather, as one of White's teaching assistants put it, 'what I got from it all was that history had a history' (p. 62). In his seminal book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn had argued that there was no neutral algorithm that could be invoked to decide between competing scientific theories.⁽⁶⁾ Similarly, White argued that history 'could be practised in radically different ways, each of which, in principle, was equally legitimate' (p. 61).

Paul argues that so far as White's thought is concerned, *Metahistory* blended some familiar themes with some new departures. A new strain in White's thinking was his concern with irony. His use of the term was somewhat vague – one reviewer distinguished no less than 20 variants of the word.⁽⁷⁾ Near the end of the 19th century, historical writing had 'plunged' into a condition of irony and remained 'locked' into it ever since (p. 63). How could history escape from the ironists' cage? White's answer was to perform a sort of conceptual judo; to turn the ironic paradigm against itself using its own weight. *Metahistory* was cast in an ironic mode; but 'the irony which informs it is a conscious one, and it therefore represents a turning of the ironic consciousness against itself'.⁽⁸⁾ In this he, as Paul notes, was heavily indebted to Nietzsche's ideas on showing how history is historically conditioned in order to make way for creative artistic perspectives on the past as shown in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Given the charges of relativism that have been levelled at White throughout his career, Paul is at pains to stress that the forcing open of the ironists' cage does not leave historians free to write whatever they please. Although White frequently challenges the *authority* that historians bestow on practises such as archival research or source criticism, he does not advocate doing away with them. Nor does he hold that there is no difference between the writing of history and the writing of fiction, or that there are no criteria for distinguishing between good and bad historiography. Rather, White's point was that 'the various forms of 'realism' available to historians all presuppose a 'precritically' conceived idea of how reason relates to unreason' (p. 68). The trouble is, however, that, if White's work was concerned with metahistorical prefigurations of the 'real', why did the book claim to treat the historian's work 'as what it most manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse'?⁽⁹⁾ Paul's answer is that in addition to White's already prevalent interest in Vico, he was now falling under the influence of structuralist linguistics, and the rhetoric used in *Metahistory* is a hodgepodge of ideas taken from the likes of Northrop Frye, Karl Mannheim and Kenneth Burke, to name but three (p. 76). This might account in part for the tension that became apparent the further one read through *Metahistory*. On one hand, White was keen to stress that the task of a new form of history was to liberate; but on the other the theory of tropes and emplotments that

White constructed seemed to be putting structuralist bars around these potentially liberating accounts. In particular, ‘the introduction and conclusion to *Metahistory* reflected a shift of emphasis from an unqualified freedom of the imagination to linguistic modes through which that imagination defines what counts as real history’ (p. 79).

A cynic might argue that there is a slight gloss to Paul’s contention that post-*Metahistory*, ‘encouraged also by the rather enthusiastic reception of his tropology among students of literature, White began to put his hope in novelists and film directors rather than historians’ (p. 80). True enough; but what is left unsaid here is that – contrary to the Whiggish narrative that posits *Metahistory* as inaugurating the triumphant march of the linguistic turn in history – by and large, historians were not so much hostile as simply uninterested in White’s arguments. In a sense he had no-one to blame but himself – statements such as ‘I am a relativist’ and ‘there can be no such thing as a non-relativistic representation of historical reality’, although uttered mainly for provocative effect, tended to overshadow the nuance and depth of his arguments (p. 96). There has always been more to White’s arguments than the simplistic ‘anything goes’ accusation that many a postmodernist has been tagged with.⁽¹⁰⁾ During the 1970s, White attempted to further define his position while at the same time developing his interest in literary theory. This led to charges that White was not a relativist, but rather, a linguistic determinist. But despite some extremely strong statements in support of the kind of theories of languages that Foucault was putting forward, White never quite let go of the humanism that was the hallmark of much of his pre-*Metahistory* work. In particular, the attack on Derrida in his essay ‘The absurdist moment in contemporary literary theory’ put many a poststructuralist theorist’s nose out of joint. Paul argues that White spent most of the 1970’s struggling with the tensions exhibited in *Metahistory* – how to reconcile the autonomy of language with the autonomy of the human subject.

In the 1980s, White turned his attention to narrative, developing a position succinctly expressed in the title of his second collection of essays, *The Content of the Form*. Narratives were not found; they were invented. Instead of ‘revealing the true essence of past reality, historical narrative imposes a mythic structure on the events it purports to describe’ (p. 113). However, whereas other anti-realist narrativists such as Louis Mink and Frank Ankersmit tended to present epistemological arguments, White’s reasoning was metaphysical, leading back from his humanism. To think of life as narratively structured would ‘deprive history of the kind of meaninglessness which alone can goad the moral sense of living human beings to make their lives different for themselves and their children, which is to say, to endow their lives with a meaning for which they alone are fully responsible’.⁽¹¹⁾ At the turn of the 1990s, White’s philosophy came face to face with the event that most historians regard as a touchstone of historical realism. Could the Holocaust be ‘emplotted’ as a comedy or a romance, as ultimately implied in *Metahistory*? White argued that the Holocaust belonged to a special class of events, *modernist events* (p. 130). Modernist events had three underlying components that differentiated them from what had gone before. Firstly, these events could not have not have taken place without modern technologies. Secondly, these events call ‘into question the inherited categories and conventions that the twentieth century West is most familiar with’. Finally, these events resist historicization (pp. 131–2).

As an introduction to the thought and work of Hayden White, it is hard to see this volume being surpassed for some considerable time. Paul not only has a comprehensive familiarity with White’s published output, but also has spoken with him at length about his work. One of the main reasons that White has been given such a cool reception by historians is that his supporters such as Keith Jenkins – in presenting a bowdlerised version of White *oeuvre* in order to further their own agendas – have regrettably done more harm than good.⁽¹²⁾ Paul fully captures White’s thought, and presents him not as a caricature historical relativist in thrall to literary theory, but as a committed humanist thinker who sees a greater role for historical writing than simply something that should be undertaken ‘for its own sake’. In particular the first two chapters covering White’s early pieces should go some way to correcting the misconception that White’s career began in 1973 with the publication of *Metahistory*. I still remain to be convinced that White’s impact on historical writing is as great as the current narratives claim; but he certainly is an original thinker, whose work always stimulates, even if one does not always agree with the conclusions.

1. See for instance, Alun Munslow, *The Future of History* (Basingstoke, 2010).[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative : Essays on History, Literature and Theory 1957–2007* (Baltimore, MD, 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Robert Doran, ‘Editors’ introduction’, in White, *The Fiction of Narrative*, p. xiii.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. White, ‘The burden of history’, *History and Theory*, 5 (1966), 134.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Ibid, p. 124.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, IL, 1962). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. John Nelson, ‘Review of *Metahistory*’, *History and Theory*, 14 (1975), 81. There are echoes here of Margaret Masterman discerning 21 different uses of the word ‘paradigm’ in Kuhn’s *Structure*. See Masterman, ‘The nature of a paradigm’, in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Musgrave and Lakatos (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 61–5.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore, MD, 1973), p. xii.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Ibid, p. ix.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. That said, there are many postmodernists that do deserve this tag, although here is not the place to enunciate names.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. White, ‘The politics of historical interpretation’, reprinted in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD, 1987), p. 72.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. See for instance, Keith Jenkins , *What Is History Now? From Carr & Elton to Rorty and White* (London, 1995).[Back to \(12\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1149>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7792>