

HAYDEN WHITE: BEYOND IRONY

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ABSTRACT

A crisis of our age that is usually identified with the loss of the sacred was one of the causes of the fall into irony in the nineteenth century. In the case of historians, as Hayden White has shown in *Metahistory*, this irony was caused by a “bitterness” stemming from the failure of reality to fulfill their expectations. An ironic apprehension of the world arose in an atmosphere of social breakdown or cultural decline. A current stage of irony manifests itself in a doubt as to the capacity of language to grasp reality. Thus we live in a “prison house of language.” An intellectual parlor-game produces “second-hand knowledge” that cannot satisfy the needs of post-postmodern men and women still looking for another metanarrative. Therefore, the main purpose of this essay is to answer the question: how can we go beyond irony?

This text is a “post-postmodern *post mortem* to postmodernism.” I am grateful to postmodernism for many things, especially for giving me an alternative apprehension of the world in terms of difference and continuity rather than binary oppositions, but I am tired of ontological insecurity and epistemological chaos. I need order. I miss metanarrative.

In trying to break with some modern/postmodern “principles” and retain within my discourse the premodernist perspective, I follow the current trend in the humanities. We observe at present the breakdown of methodology and the rise of a more poetic approach in the human sciences. Evidence of this phenomenon is the more autobiographical form of writing in anthropology (James Clifford, Clifford Geertz) and a more literary style in historical writing (Natalie Zemon Davis, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Simon Schama). This trend is associated with a reevaluation of the subjective aspects of research. Perhaps, and I would welcome it, it also could be identified with a reappearance of a Collingwoodian idea of history as human self-knowledge, knowledge about human nature, knowledge about “what it is to be a man . . . what it is to be the kind of man you are . . . and what it is to be the man *you* are and nobody else is.”¹

Perhaps what I am saying is not true but may it be prophetic.

— Jorge Luis Borges

Metahistory is a tiresome and repetitive book. Like many others, I have read it several times (never from cover to cover until I was asked to write this article)

1. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* [1946] (Oxford and New York, 1994), 10. Many thanks to Professor Jörn Stückrath, Professor Hans Kellner, and Dr. Jürg Zbinden, who offered constructive criticism of an earlier version of this essay. My special thanks to Professor Hayden White for his comments. A longer version of this article was published in English in *Metageschichte: Hayden White und Paul Ricoeur: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der europäischen Kultur: Im Kontext von Husserl, Weber, Auerbach, Gombrich* (Baden-Baden, 1997).

usually in order to “exploit” the Introduction (“The Poetics of History”) or to search for inspirational thoughts about the historians and philosophers analyzed there. This book is a myth. It is one of those great works of which Frank Ankersmit wrote that they are more powerful in stimulating debates about themselves than in solving the particular problems they raise.² *Metahistory* was written in a particular context and in response to specific needs. It can be fascinating again, however, if I use a new code to “translate” it: if I consider it, for example, as a source and a way to discover the author, or when I put it into the context of a present historical moment and try to use it for present needs.

In articles White published before 1973, the following names were mentioned in at least four different texts: Auerbach, St. Augustine, Balzac, Bergson, Burckhardt, Camus, Collingwood, Croce, Dawson, Dilthey, Freud, Frye, Gombrich, Hegel, Herder, Ibsen, Jaspers, Joyce, Kafka, Kant, Mann, Marx, Michelet, Nietzsche, Popper, Ranke, Sartre, Spengler, Tocqueville, Toynbee, Vico, and Weber. My presupposition is that one does not frequently mention names unless they share with one an intellectual sensitivity, a point of view, or even the same vision of the world. On the basis of this list I can sketch an intellectual portrait of the author of *Metahistory*. When literature and art are taken into consideration, Hayden White appears as a modernist where modernism is understood as certain literary and artistic movements. When examining philosophy, I discover a realist, but one idealistically oriented and preoccupied by existential concerns. The philosophers of history in the list manifest White’s interest in holistic visions of history and in abstract categories that as explanatory principles can be applied to the whole of history. But there is something more that links all of these individuals together (and with White himself): they were very influential “rebels,” “heretics” changing the legitimate (in their times) way of thinking about the world and modes of its representation.

But I claim that Hayden White’s exposition of the writers, literary critics, philosophers, and historians that constitute his own object of analysis (especially those studied in *Metahistory*) masks his philosophical position. His analysis of historical thinking interferes with his own philosophy. That is why *Metahistory*—a “cult book” of theory of history and history of historiography—will receive a special kind of attention primarily when I declare that I am interested mainly in Hayden White himself as a unique thinker.

Two Hayden Whites are exposed in the two main (and completely different) parts of *Metahistory*. Beneath the structuralist surface manifested in the Introduction, there is the Vichian depth where a defense of a poetic apprehension of history and a poetic Hayden White can be found. Hence, the essence of my essay is Hayden White, and one of the questions that preoccupies his thinking: how to structure the world and produce meaning for a chaotic reality.

2. Cf. Frank Ankersmit, “Historiography and Postmodernism,” *History and Theory* 28 (1989), 141.

It is so much easier to analyze the world than to try to change it.

—Hayden White³

A REBEL

*a man fighting for the world
where he can be himself*

I heard from Hayden White a very precious remark that helped me to look at *Metahistory* from a different point of view. He mentioned once that the Introduction to *Metahistory* (“The Poetics of History”) was written at the end, after the main body of the book was finished. Remembering this remark, I read *Metahistory* again, avoiding the Introduction. I then understood that Hans Kellner was absolutely right when he said that this work is not one book but several books in one.⁴ Thus, when one views the book without its Introduction, it appears as a well-written intellectual history that elaborates White’s previous articles and his book *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism*.⁵ Part one explains the transformations of consciousness from a metaphorical stage through the metonymical to a synecdochic stage. Parts two and three are devoted to the ironic phase. These parts analyze styles of thinking that characterize four chosen historians (Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt) and four philosophers of history (Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Croce). Thus, the main body of *Metahistory* originates from White’s early interest in intellectual history, generally speaking. The shock and main “offense” of the book were caused by the methodological Introduction in which White explains the interpretive principles on which the work is based. Here he introduces his formal theory of the historical work. This part was born in White’s thoughts later and originated from his interest in literary criticism, mainly in the structuralist approach.

I

For White any special interest in intellectual history—“history as thought or history as consciousness” (humans as feeling, thinking, willing entities, culture as a product of consciousness)—reflects a more general crisis, either in humanistic scholarship or in society as a whole.⁶ Intellectual history begins to supplant history as action and emerges as a principal form of historiography when received traditions in thought and mythic endowments appear to have lost their relevance to current social problems.

3. Hayden White, “Ibn Khaldūn in World Philosophy of History,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2 (1959), 115.

4. Cf. Hans Kellner, “Twenty Years After: A Note on Metahistories and Their Horizons,” *Storia della Storiografia* 24 (1993), 109.

5. Cf. Willson H. Coates and Hayden White, *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism: An Intellectual History of Western Europe* (New York, 1970), ii.

6. Cf. Hayden White, “The Task of Intellectual History,” *Monist* 53 (1969), 607 and 625.

“This book is a history of historical consciousness,” wrote White in the Introduction to *Metahistory*. Evidently he is one of those thinkers who sees historical knowledge as a problem of consciousness, and not merely one of methodology. Similarly to Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Michelet, Ranke, and Tocqueville, White is conscious that the way one thinks about the past has serious implications for the way one thinks about one’s own present and future. And that is why he put the problem of historical consciousness directly in the center of his philosophy.

Hans Kellner made an important remark about White’s strong identification with the principal concerns of humanism. He claimed that White is interested in Renaissance thought because of the process of secularization whereby humans recognize their power of creation and begin to escape from divine will.⁷ It was also the beginning of “the culture of criticism.” As White wrote, humanists, by finding the root of every cultural artifact in human reason, played a crucial role in the process of secularization and the demystification of culture. This process culminated in the foundation, at the end of the nineteenth century, of the social sciences.⁸ White’s favorite late nineteenth-century theorists of consciousness—Bergson, Croce, Weber, Durkheim—who took “spirit” as their object of study, could not agree over its nature but, as White stresses, they agreed uniformly over the limited power of science to define reality.⁹ White explained the turn of English thinkers to the study of history in a similar way: “it springs from the inability of scientific philosophy to deal with contemporary moral issues.” Collingwood’s and Toynbee’s attack on positivism and scientism in historical thought originates from the conviction that historical knowledge can be used to build a philosophy of history, thanks to which values that have suffered as a result of scientism can be reestablished. Also as analyzed by White, Christopher Dawson wanted to find a *via media* between the modern concept of secular progress and the medieval history as salvation, between the world of fact and the world of value.¹⁰

Kellner again is right in saying that *Metahistory* is a moral text that deals with the problem of freedom of moral choice. That is one of the reasons why Croce was so important for White’s thinking. For Croce, and I would say for White too, true historical investigation was always inspired by some moral concerns. Also for Collingwood, history was pre-eminently a moral discipline. What White liked in Collingwood’s philosophy was his understanding of the purpose for which one studies history—in order to find out *what kind of person you are*.¹¹

7. Hans Kellner, “A Bedrock of Order: Hayden White’s Linguistic Humanism,” *History and Theory*, Beiheft 19 (1980), 5.

8. Cf. Hayden White, “The Culture of Criticism,” in *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution*, ed. Ihab Hassan (Middletown, Conn., 1971), 55.

9. White, “The Task,” 612.

10. Cf. Hayden White, “Collingwood and Toynbee: Transitions in English Historical Thought,” *English Miscellany* 7 (1956), 150 and his “Religion, Culture and Western Civilization in Christopher Dawson’s Idea of History,” *English Miscellany* 9 (1958), 249-250.

11. Cf. Hayden White, “The Abiding Relevance of Croce’s Idea of History,” *Journal of Modern History* 35 (1963), 109-124 and his review of Alan Donagan’s, *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* in *History and Theory* 4 (1965), 248, 251.

II

Hayden White is a “balanced” person. He does not like contrasts and prefers to see the world in terms of continuity.¹² This “in-betweenness” approach influenced his aspiration to restore imagination as the most valuable level of human perception and to replace limited comprehension in terms of binary oppositions by promising understanding in terms of part–whole relationships. Analyzing eighteenth-century historical thinking, White noticed that the main problem of the Enlightenment philosophers and historians was that they “viewed the relationship of reason to fantasy in terms of an opposition rather than as a part–whole relationship.” This is why thinkers like Voltaire, Hume, Gibbon, and Kant failed in their search for “*metahistorical* principles by which the general truths derived from the contemplation of the past facts . . . could be substantiated on *rational grounds*.” They failed because they were lacking a theory of human consciousness in which “reason was not set over against imagination as the basis of truth against the basis of error, but in which the *continuity* between reason and fantasy was recognized.” They lacked the recognition that imagination can contribute as much to the discovery of truth as reason. Among the Enlightenment thinkers, only Vico was so little obsessed by reason as to recognize that the imagination should not be opposed to reason but rather seen as continuous with it. This “eccentric arationalist,” as White called him once, was especially important for the author of *Metahistory*. First, Vico recognized the value of imagination; second, he saw the world not in terms of oppositions but in categories of continuity;¹³ third (and most importantly), Vico provided White with the poetic theory of consciousness—namely, tropology understood as a science of transition—that is the heart of *Metahistory*.

According to the author of the *New Science*, the relationship between language and the world as perceived by primitive humans could be characterized in terms of “poetic logic”—the logic of the tropes. Vico followed a Renaissance tradition in reducing the figures of speech to four: metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and irony. Vico identified the metaphorical transformation occurring in language with the process of transformation prevailing in human consciousness and society. Thus, the theory of tropes not only offered a basis for a general theory of poetic language and a way of characterizing the dominant modes of historical thinking, but also generated another system of “speculative philosophy of history.” It gave a perfectly ordered model of cyclical transformation leading from metaphor to

12. Continuation provides a man with ontological security. White claims that thanks to continuities the world of cultural forms can be perceived as “a stable plenum . . . rather than undergoing the kind of change we would call historical.” Hayden White, “Frye’s Place in Contemporary Cultural Studies,” in *The Legacy of Northrop Frye*, ed. Alvin A. Lee and Robert D. Denham (Toronto, Buffalo, and London, 1994), 33.

13. White stressed Vico’s genius in showing the fallacies contained in such oppositions in “The Irrational and the Problem of Historical Knowledge,” in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, ed. Harold E. Pagliaro. Vol. 2: *Irrationalism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cleveland and London, 1972), 315.

metonymy, from metonymy to synecdoche, and from synecdoche to irony. White reconstructed Vico's model as follows:¹⁴

STAGE:	RELIGIOUS	HEROIC	HUMAN--> REPRISÉ
Transition:	metaphor to metonymy	metonymy to synecdoche	synecdoche to irony
Subphase:	birth and growth	maturity	decadence and dissolution
Type of human nature:	poetic	heroic	human
Type of society:	theocratic	aristocratic	democratic
Type of language:	mute	heraldic	articulate
Type of law:	divine	contractual	forensic
Type of reason:	divine	natural	civil
Type of writing:	hieroglyphic	imaginative	vulgar

In the chapter on Hegel in *Metahistory*, White applied Vico's "linguistic universals" and distinguished among three ways of apprehending the world, three phases of consciousness: first, the metaphorical, in which the universal was not separated from its living existence in the particular object; second, the metonymical, in which "experience had been atomized and denuded of its ideality"; third, against this threat of atomicity and causal determination, consciousness erected the synecdochic, characteristic of speculative thought in which the universal is seen in terms of the particular. In *Metahistory*, White described in detail a fourth phase, the ironical—which he correlates with the philosophical positions of skepticism and relativism. Step by step he demonstrated how selected historians and philosophers of history had fallen into irony because of a "bitterness" stemming from the failure of reality to fulfill their expectations. An ironic apprehension of the world arose in an atmosphere of social breakdown or cultural demise. The world is seen in the imagery of the *wheel*, eternal recurrence, closed circles, cycles from which there is no escape. "The linguistic mode of the Ironic consciousness"—wrote White—"reflects a doubt in the capacity of language itself to render adequately what perception gives and thought constructs about the nature of reality." In the end, irony tends to turn into word play, to become a language about language, to conceive the world as trapped within a prison made of language, the world as a "forest of symbols."

Metahistory itself is written in an ironic mode, as White admitted in the Preface. But this is a conscious irony that "represents a turning of the Ironic consciousness." However, beyond this ironic posture we cannot go to science for further enlightenment—speculated White—"because, since we exist *in* history, we can never know the final truth *about* history. We can glimpse the *form* which that truth will take, however—its form as harmony, reason, freedom, the unity of consciousness and being."¹⁵ It seems to me that when the "circle" is closed, we will come back to "poetic" (*mere* in Hegel's terminology) historical consciousness. If that happens, the higher truth of historical consciousness will unite with the truth

14. Hayden White, "The Tropics of History: The Deep Structure of the *New Science*," in *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Donald Philip Verene (Baltimore and London, 1976), 77.

15. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London, 1973), xii, 130-131.

of reason that rules over history as Hegel wanted. And the ultimate result will be the possible integration of consciousness with being.

In this way White more or less explicitly touches the problem of language's detachment from being. According to the Polish sociologist Andrzej Zybertowicz the concept of fiction—the discovery of an alternative world that exists in itself—is a cultural (and truly ontological) invention. It contributed to the collapse of the word–world relationship; it helped to separate language from being. This change (a transformation from metaphorical to metonymical consciousness) gave birth to a new apprehension of the world in terms of oppositions.¹⁶ But White, as I noted above, opts for continuity and part–whole relations. This worldview, however, implies one significant “inconvenience”—relativism. White is very anthropocentric (that is why Kellner links him to Renaissance and humanistic thinking): he always looks for a reference to human choice in humans themselves. There is nothing beyond (or above) that can legitimate (and explain) human behavior.¹⁷ This point is important for understanding White. A conscious or responsible relativist, such as White is, can only be a person with very strong fundamentals, with ethics, a person who is perfectly aware of the difficulties of keeping alive values and principles in situations shot through with contradictions and the necessity of choice.

White is aware that since humans “discovered” the world of fiction (an alternative reality) the truth started to be thought rather than lived. “People begin to talk about virtue instead of practicing it”—writes the author of *Metahistory*—“they begin to live Ironically: speaking of virtue publicly, practicing vice privately.”¹⁸ On the other hand, humans discovered the power of imagination. They can play the role of God and can create their own worlds. In those worlds they can choose their pasts and use it to construct their presents. By forming our present in turn, we assert our freedom—claims White.¹⁹

“Men choose who they are by choosing who they were”—thus Kellner interprets White's notion of freedom—“to choose a tradition is to belong to it.”²⁰ But the only tradition White had was an intellectual ancestry of anti-scientific and anti-positivistic thinkers. But this tradition was not adequate, dominated as it was by analytical philosophy of history and the covering-law model that he admired but the limitations of which he recognized. Thus, White raised a rebellion against a positivistic notion of history. He wanted to “deconstruct the so-called science of history.” Ergo, White himself introduced (or better, *re*-introduced) an alterna-

16. Cf. Andrzej Zybertowicz, *Przemoc i poznanie: Studium z nie-klasycznej socjologii wiedzy* [Violence and Cognition: An Exercise in Non-classical Sociology of Knowledge] (Torun, 1995). (On separating language from being, see chapter VII: “(Pre)historia wiedzy” [(Pre)history of Knowledge], 209-270.)

17. “*Metahistory* undercuts all foundationalism,” claims Kellner, “except one . . . human will.” Kellner, “Twenty Years After,” 115.

18. White, *Metahistory*, 118.

19. Hayden White, “What Is a Historical System?” in *Biology, History and Natural Philosophy*, ed. Allen D. Breckand and Wolfgang Yourgrau (New York and London, 1972), 242.

20. Kellner, “A Bedrock of Order,” 4.

tive way of thinking. He created the (intellectual) world of which he was a “god” or rather a “guru.”

III

In 1965 John Higham, Leonard Krieger, and Felix Gilbert published the book *History* about which Hayden White wrote a short comment in which he raised a problem that appeared in his next article: “The question for the historian today is not *how* history ought to be studied, but *if* it ought to be studied at all.”²¹ Richard Vann recalls that he found White’s remarks interesting and asked him to expand it in an article for *History and Theory*.

In 1966 White published “The Burden of History.” There was nothing new or original in it in comparison with his earlier works, although many scholars consider “The Burden” to be White’s first important piece.²² It contains motifs that have appeared over and over again since White began to publish. Thus, we again read a story about culture in crisis. This time, however, it is about how history did not fulfill its role as *magistra vitae*, since it failed to prepare humans for the wars of the twentieth century and to provide reasons for studying the past caused by this failure. White again highlighted the nineteenth century as a time of “Clio’s paradise” when art, philosophy, and history were united “in a *common effort* to comprehend the experience of the French Revolution.” There was a time when intellectuals were “crossing the borders” of different disciplines in order to find illuminating metaphors that could help them to organize reality. Nineteenth-century thinkers had the same problem as their twentieth-century successors. They tried to find out how to provide reality (past and present) with meaning when, after traumatic experiences of revolutions and wars, it seemed to have none. Thus they raised the question of the purpose of studying history and what its cultural function might be in contemporary times. These are also the crucial problems for Hayden White. These are also crucial problems for *us*.

In *Metahistory* I find a theory of the transformation of historical consciousness, which maintains that from a metaphorical comprehension of the world, humans passed through metonymical, synecdochic, and ironic stages. However, according to Vico’s complex theory of development, after irony a return can be expected to the first stage, that of metaphor, but at a higher level of self-consciousness—to the metaphorical phase in which word and world are united in the Whole. The question remains, if this is the future we want, what past do we need? Can we start again from the beginning, from stories about gods? If the answer is “yes,” one could write stories emplotted in the mode of satire. According to

21. Hayden White, a comment on *History* by John Higham, Leonard Krieger, and Felix Gilbert, in *AHA Newsletter* 3 (1965), 6.

22. In fact, “The Burden” was an atypical piece because it was the first article published in *History and Theory* that had no footnotes. Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory* 5 (1966), 111-134.

White, satire views the hopes, possibilities, and truths of human existence ironically, since it is aware of its own inadequacy as an image of reality. "It [satire] therefore prepares consciousness for its repudiation of all sophisticated conceptualizations of the world and anticipates a return to a mythic apprehension of the world."²³ One could write a story of *logos*, God, reason, or love and treat them as epistemological principles. One could be a "poetic historian" for whom there is no distinction between the history one lives and the history one writes.

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23. White, *Metahistory*, 10.