

## FORUM: THE PUBLIC ROLE OF HISTORY

## 1.

HAYDEN WHITE, TRAUMATIC NATIONALISM,  
AND THE PUBLIC ROLE OF HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

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The real dividing line between the philosophers would seem to lie, then, somewhere between those who want to use history to curb the impulse to totalistic (or metaphysical or ethical) generalization and those who want to use it to cultivate that impulse.<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article argues that Hayden White's vision of historiography can be appropriated for the "public use of history" in many ethnic and nationalist conflicts today. That is, it can be used to provide the theoretical arguments that justify the instrumentalization of historical memory by nationalist elites in their sometimes genocidal struggles with their opponents. Historians so far have not adequately understood the implications or possible uses of White's historiography, and therefore to that extent his case remains unrefuted. In the event, White has anticipated and held his ground against possible counter-arguments. The only way to answer him is to ask the question that he poses of historians: what is the purpose of history for "life"? The essay argues that Max Weber's advice to scholars to pose difficult questions and demand clarity about the implications and consequences of specific commitments is morally more responsible than White's in the current climate of ethnic and national conflict. The historical is not opposed to the ethical, as White maintains; the historical *is* the ethical. Historians should engage in "strong evaluations" (Richard T. Vann) in the construction of "bridging" narratives between historical communities, rather than redemptive narratives of liberation that often entail zero-sum claims to contested land.

## I. INTRODUCTION

There are two reasons to reconsider Hayden White's work today. The first is the continuing relevance of his account of the contemporary compartment to historical time, usually referred to as postmodernism. In his magnum opus, *Metahistory* (1973), he called this temporal sensibility "irony," the current origin of which he traced to the late-nineteenth-century "crisis of historicism." Irony is a form of intellectual agnosticism: it is "the perception of the impossibility of choosing, on adequate theoretical grounds, among the different ways of viewing

1. My thanks go to Victoria Bonnell, Clare Corbould, Ned Curthoys, Geoffrey Brahm Levey, Neil Levi, Sam A. Moyn, and Jonathan Walker for helpful comments on previous drafts. They are responsible neither for the views expressed nor any errors committed here.

2. Hayden White, "The Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History," *Clio* 3 (1973), 40. This article was first delivered as a lecture in 1969.

history.”<sup>3</sup> Although White is regarded by some as a harbinger of postmodern literary theory, even its “patron saint,” he is not in fact its avatar.<sup>4</sup> Irony is deeply problematic, he thinks. Already in the mid-1970s, he decried the “absurdist moment in contemporary literary theory” (by which he meant post-structuralism) whose reduction of literature to language “reflects a general want of confidence in our ability to locate reality or the centers of power in post-industrial society and to comprehend them when they are located.”<sup>5</sup> The problem with the ironic mood is its anti-utopian political implication: it “tends to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions.”<sup>6</sup>

But that is not the only problem of irony. Just as gravely, it does not lend societies sufficient metaphysical security or consolation to face what White calls “the burden of history,” namely, the existential “terror” instilled by its apparent meaninglessness, absurdity, and formlessness. Every people needs myths by which to live, he suggests in Sorelian terms, and because Western liberal democracies ostensibly banish them, they are vulnerable to the siren songs of political myth, in the worst case, like the continental democracies were to fascism in the interwar period. The legitimation that orthodox historiography affords modern societies in conceiving of their pasts in terms of secular processes, systems, or narratives, but as devoid of greater cosmic meaning, is therefore woefully insufficient. The question, then, is how to live, as he put it, “with a history explained and emplotted in the Ironic mode without falling into that condition of despair which Nietzsche had warded off only by a retreat into irrationalism?”<sup>7</sup>

Given White’s avowed concern to avoid irrationalism, his critics misread him when they argue that he swims in fascist waters, although he is plainly committed to a vitalist view of history.<sup>8</sup> In fact, his project is as much postcolonial as anti-bourgeois. Anticipating arguments made by Indian and other scholars since the 1990s, White denounced Western historical consciousness as a “prejudice” with which modern industrialized civilization explains and justifies its presumed superiority “not only to cultures and civilizations preceding it but also to those contemporary with it in time and contiguous with it in space.”<sup>9</sup> History and narratives

3. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 432.

4. Geoff Eley made this observation in “Is All the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later,” in *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, ed. Terence J. McDonald (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 207.

5. Hayden White, “The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory,” *Contemporary Literature* 27 (Summer 1976), 378.

6. White, *Metahistory*, 37f.: “It tends to engender belief in the ‘madness’ of civilization itself and to inspire a Mandarin-like disdain for those seeking to grasp the nature of social reality in either science or art.” Similarly, “When the world is denied all substance and perception is blind, who is to say who are the chosen and damned?”: *idem*, “The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory,” 403.

7. White, *Metahistory*, 378.

8. Carlo Ginzburg, “Just One Witness,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 82-96.

9. White, *Metahistory*, 2; For similar arguments, see Vinay Lal, *Empire of Knowledge: Culture and Plurality in the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 68, 117-120; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Gyan Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism,” *American Historical Review* 99 (December 1994), 1475-1490.

of progress underwrite the universalization of Western temporality, Western epistemological practices, and the West's imperialist domination of the globe.<sup>10</sup>

The second reason for paying close attention to White concerns his answer to these perceived problems. For he wishes to end irony by disabling the epistemological reasons for its existence, an aim that entails challenging the role of professional historiography in policing the way in which the past is invoked in the present for political projects. The myth-deficit of postmodernity can be remedied and utopianism revived, he believes, by admitting the sublime of history and using it in the service of *conscious* meaning-creation. The purpose of *Metahistory*, and indeed all his writings, therefore, is to reconstitute history "as a form of intellectual activity which is at once poetic, scientific, and philosophical in its concerns."<sup>11</sup> The historian should take on the role of the artist-critic—an insight he took from Northrop Frye—to overcome the real with the conceivable in the name of a free society.<sup>12</sup>

White's concern is with the fate of human collectives, a concern that led him to reject Nietzsche's theory of the will to power whose nihilism he thinks undermines communal life and politics.<sup>13</sup> On a crucial matter, however, he is at one with Nietzsche, namely, with his conception of the uses and disadvantages of history for life, "that dark, compulsive power, insatiably avid of itself." In his well-known essay on historiography, the German philosopher outlined three modes of historical memory—exemplary, monumental, and critical—that he thought should serve life rather than enslave it in the name of a putative objective science. Strange as it may seem, it is the third type that White adopts. For critical history as Nietzsche means it does not stand in the tradition of leftist ideology-critique. It is emphatically mythical. Nietzsche regarded it as the sovereign posture for "the man who suffers and needs liberation" by allowing him to "shatter and disintegrate the past."<sup>14</sup> It is in other words a trauma-driven repudiation of the past in the name of a better future.

The Zionist conception of history, with its attempt to master the conditions of Jewish fate so never again would Jews be endangered by anti-Semitism, is a good example of this temporal modality.<sup>15</sup> And sure enough, White asserts that the Zionist interpretation of the Holocaust possesses an important truth. The reasons he adduces for this view go to the heart of his position and are worth quoting in full:

In fact, its truth, as a historical interpretation, consists precisely in its effectiveness in justifying a wide range of current Israeli political policies that, from the standpoint of those

10. Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Nicholas Dirks, "History as a Sign of the Modern," *Public Culture* 2 (1990), 25-32. I thank Adrian Carton for pointing me to these references.

11. White, *Metahistory*, xii.

12. Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 18.

13. White, *Metahistory*, 372.

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, "History in the Service and Disservice of Life," in his *Untimely Observations*, ed. William Arrowsmith (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 95, 102f.

15. According to Theodor Herzl, a Jewish state would provide "the solution of the Jewish Question after eighteen centuries of Jewish suffering": Herzl, *The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution to the Jewish Question* (London: Henry Pordes, 1993), 30.

who articulate them, are crucial to the security and indeed the very existence of the Jewish people. Whether one supports these policies or condemns them, they are undeniably a product, at least in part, of a conception of Jewish history that is conceived to be meaningless to Jews insofar as this history was dominated by agencies, processes, and groups who encouraged or permitted policies that led to the “final solution” of the “the Jewish Question.” The totalitarian, not to say fascist, aspects of Israeli treatment of the Palestinians on the West Bank may be attributable primarily to a Zionist ideology that is detestable to anti-Zionists, Jews and non-Jews alike. But who is to say that this ideology is a product of a distorted conception of history in general and of the history of the Jews in the Diaspora specifically? It is, in fact, fully comprehensible as a *morally responsible response* to the meaninglessness of a certain history, that spectacle of “moral anarchy” that Schiller perceived in “world history” and specified as a “sublime object.” The Israeli political response to this spectacle is fully consonant with the aspiration to human freedom and dignity.<sup>16</sup>

Not that White is taking sides. The “effort of the Palestinians to mount a politically effective response to the Israeli policies,” he continues, “entails the production of a similarly effective ideology, complete with an interpretation of their history capable of endowing it with a meaning it has hitherto lacked.”<sup>17</sup> Denuded of its metaphysical pathos and heroic rhetoric of historians “avenging the people,” the deployment of history for life on these terms simply means that the political imperatives of nationalist movements and their leadership determine collective memories of the past.

White thinks that national or ethnic mythologies are a legitimate use of the past insofar as they are an answer to the burden of history. Certainly, no amount of “objective” historical scholarship can disprove them.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the attempt to do so is a “luxury” of dominant groups for which sobriety and realism in dealing with the past serve to entrench their position. Oppressed groups only stand to lose in such a view of history. They require “a conception of the historical record as being not a window through which to view the past ‘as it really was’ . . . but rather a wall that must be broken through if the ‘terror of history’ is to be directly confronted and the fear it induces dispelled.”<sup>19</sup>

White’s endorsement of the power of nationalist mythologies needs to be taken seriously because his view of the “public role of history” (Jürgen Habermas) can be said to hold the field in many recent global problems. For the past thirty years, nationalist “revisionisms,” including Holocaust denial, which challenge the critical, post-nationalist consensus among historians, have been unleashed in, for instance, Irish, German, Israeli, Italian, and Australian historiography.<sup>20</sup> More seriously, since 1989, east-central Europe, the Caucasus, Africa, and not least the Middle East have witnessed unspeakable atrocities as ethnic groups and nationalizing states in thrall to traumatic memories engage in geno-

16. Hayden White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,” in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 80. Emphasis added.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 80ff.

20. I discuss them in A. Dirk Moses, “Revisionism and Denial,” in *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle’s Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, ed. Robert Manne (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2003), 337-370.

cidal or repressive acts of violence.<sup>21</sup> In a world in which narratives of victimization underwrite group identity and are used to license paranoid attacks, and where rival claims to land and indigeneity are so vexatious, interrogating the political use of historical memory is as urgent as ever.<sup>22</sup>

Consider the conflict between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis. Both sides construct their respective collective identity in such a way as to totally negate the victimization experience of the other. This is not just a symbolic conflict. As two Israeli scholars have observed recently, “the struggle over control of the memory of victimization is a matter of life and death, and suffering and death—as actuality and as memory—are philosophical, political and existential issues.”<sup>23</sup> Is White’s vision of history’s role the “morally responsible response” in this environment?<sup>24</sup> Not in the opinion of this writer.

How have historians reacted to White’s vision of their profession? Overwhelmingly, they have not appreciated the purpose of his voluminous writings. He is seen sometimes as making a contribution, however unorthodox, to their discipline by providing a formal method for raising the theoretical self-consciousness of working historians, or by contributing to postmodern historiography.<sup>25</sup> On this basis, he is faulted for his professed moral relativism, epistemological skepticism, and failure to provide the criteria by which to distinguish myth from history, as if he were engaged with historians in the same universe of discourse.<sup>26</sup> Even those commentators who have focused more on the intent rather than the content of White’s arguments have not attended as much to the former as the latter.<sup>27</sup> His obviously passionate commitments are noted as back-

21. No sooner had the “wall come down” than Ralf Dahrendorf warned that ethnic nationalism would fill the void of meaning left by the demise of communism: *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* (New York: Time Books, 1990); See also Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (London: BBC Books, 1993).

22. A. Dirk Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the ‘Racial Century,’ 1850–1950: Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 37 (2002), 7–36; Zdenko Zlatar, “The Poetics of Slavdom: The Mythopoeic Foundations of Yugoslavia,” paper presented to the Special Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, Warsaw, July 18–21, 2004. The book of the same title is currently in preparation.

23. Ilan Gur-Ze’ev and Ilan Pappé, “Beyond the Destruction of the Other’s Collective Memory: Blueprints for a Palestinian/Israeli Dialogue,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 20 (2003), 93f.

24. This question for historians generally was the subject of a special issue of this journal: *Historians and Ethics, History and Theory*, Theme Issue 43 (December 2004).

25. Donald Ostrowsky, “A Metahistorical Analysis: Hayden White and Four Narratives of ‘Russian’ History,” *Clio* 19 (1990), 215–235; C. Lorenz, “Can Histories be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the ‘Metaphorical Turn,’” *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 309–329; Perez Zagorin, “History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now,” *History and Theory* 38 (1999), 1–24; Elizabeth Tonkin, “History and the Myth of Realism,” in *The Myths We Live By*, ed. Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (London: Routledge, 1990), 34; Lloyd Kramer, “Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra,” in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 97–128.

26. Paul A. Roth, “Hayden White and the Aesthetics of Historiography,” *History of the Human Sciences* 5 (1992), 26. Inexplicable is Sande Cohen’s observation that White actually seeks to defend the historical tradition: Cohen, *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 81.

27. Wulf Kansteiner, “Hayden White’s Critique of the Writing of History,” *History and Theory* 32 (1993), 273–295; Michael Roth, “Cultural Criticism and Political Theory: Hayden White’s Rhetorics of History,” *Political Theory* 16 (November 1988), 636–646.

ground information with the implication that they are not crucial for understanding the essence of his formal system.<sup>28</sup> Or he is criticized for not clarifying what our comportment towards the past should be, as if he had never addressed the issue.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, the picture we have of White is curiously bifurcated: on the one hand, the wayward historian under Nietzsche's spell with the consequent dubious politics and seeming inability to guard the historical integrity of the Holocaust's facticity<sup>30</sup>; on the other, the lopsided formalist whose analyses of historical rhetoric appear as intellectually sterile as they are politically impotent.<sup>31</sup> Both these views are wide of the mark. The two Whites separated in the literature in fact comprise an integrated whole. Until historians appreciate the radical nature of his challenge to their discipline they will not be able to answer his most telling criticisms. What are they?

## II. THE PROBLEM OF IRONY

White has maintained essentially the same course that he set as early as the 1960s. His numerous writings over the past forty years, whether on the politics of historiography, modernist forms of representation, or theories of historical discourse, disclose a fundamental unity of purpose and continuity of theme.<sup>32</sup> His tactics may have changed but the strategy and indeed most of the arguments have remained essentially the same. They were foreshadowed in numerous early articles, expressed most famously in *Metahistory*, and refined in later work.<sup>33</sup>

To be sure, there have been some changes. For most of his career, he denied the existence of a specifically historical perspective on any particular issue, decrying the fact that "[people] want to believe that what they have in fact created could not have been otherwise. Out of the chaos of individual choices, the historian finds the order which even the choosers could not have seen."<sup>34</sup> Almost a quarter-century later, he was prepared to distinguish between ideological and historical accounts of events. Historical was Karl Marx's depiction of heroic and

28. Hans Kellner, "A Bedrock of Order: Hayden White's Linguistic Humanism," in Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). Originally published in *History and Theory*, Beiheft 19, *Metahistory: Six Critiques* (December, 1980), 1-29.

29. Roth, "Cultural Criticism and Political Theory," 644.

30. An exception here is Dan Stone, "Paul Ricoeur, Hayden White, and Holocaust Historiography," in *Metageschichte: Hayden White und Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Jörn Stückrath and Jürg Zbinden (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 1997), 254-274.

31. Russell Jacoby, "A New Intellectual History," *American Historical Review* 97 (April 1992), 405-424; Gene H. Bell-Villada, "Criticism and the State (Political and Otherwise) of the Americas," in *Criticism in the University*, ed. Gerald Graff and Reginald Gibbons. Triquarterly Series on Criticism and Culture 1 (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1985).

32. Cf. his early work with "Between Science and Symbol," *Times Literary Supplement* (January 31, 1986), 109f., and "Writing in the Middle Voice," *Stanford Literature Review* 9 (1992), 179-187. See also *idem*, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5 (1966), 111-134; *idem*, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation"; *idem*, "The First Historical Event: A Rhetorical Exercise," Colloquium, Department of Rhetoric, University of California, Berkeley (October 13, 1995).

33. White, *Metahistory*; *idem*, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

34. White, "What is a Historical System?," in *Biology, History and Natural Philosophy*, ed. A. D. Beck and W. Yourgrau (New York: Plenum Press, 1972), 242.

craven social classes because it is subtended by what White perceives as a real historical process, namely, “the global effort of humanity to achieve the conditions of freedom both from natural necessity and social division.”<sup>35</sup> This concession to historicism does not violate White’s overall project. On the contrary, it is, as we will see, entirely consistent with his political aims.

The key to understanding White’s politics is the ensemble of essays from the period between 1966 and 1973 in which he revealed his understanding of the contemporary crisis of historicism.<sup>36</sup> “The Culture of Criticism” shows that he viewed the combination of mass, youth culture and the artistic avant-garde as heralding a brave new world beyond the ruins of the Western humanistic tradition, just as Nietzsche did before him.<sup>37</sup> What unified the new youth culture and the avant-garde, he argued, was a shared hostility to the separation of art and life. The humanities, which had assumed a profoundly conservative, *mediating* role between art and life, were superannuated in conditions where much of the population and its artistic vanguard rejected this distinction.<sup>38</sup> Historians, in particular, he continued, viewed themselves as playing this mediating role between “the genius” on the one side and the public on the other.

White identifies with the avant-garde (“the genius”), and the purpose of this early essay is to clear it of damaging charges of totalitarian tendencies. To that end, he takes on the senior spokesmen of the humanities, E. H. Gombrich, Erich Auerbach, and Karl R. Popper, whose shared experience of National Socialism underlay their suspicion of the younger generation’s utopianism. As the antidote to totalitarianism, they held fast to precisely those Western traditions that the avant-garde so detested. Put briefly, these traditions, which White gathers under the rubric of “humanistic realism,” originated in the “Greek Miracle” (Gombrich’s formulation), and comprise narratively structured time and historical con-

35. Hayden White, “Storytelling: Historical and Ideological,” in *Centuries’ End, Narrative Means*, ed. Robert Newman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 78. White may have made this concession in reading Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, which he discusses in this essay. It is in this famous text, after all, that Marx writes that “Men make their own history, but not just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.” In other words, there are processes inaugurated by the unintended consequences of individual choices.

36. White, “The Burden of History”; *idem*, “The Tasks of Intellectual History,” *Monist* 53 (October 1969), 606-630; *idem*, “The Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History”; *idem*, “The Culture of Criticism,” in *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution*, ed. Ihab Hassan (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 55-69; *idem*, “What is a Historical System?”; *idem*, “Interpretation in History,” *New Literary History* 4 (Winter 1973), 281-314.

37. Nietzsche “History in the Service and Disservice of Life,” 143: “And here I recognize the mission of this *youth*, this generation of warriors and dragon-killers who presage a more felicitous, more beautiful culture and humanity, without experiencing anything more than an auspicious presentiment of this future happiness and beauty.”

38. White, “The Culture of Criticism,” 55-58: “Call this new public whatever you wish: pop, youth, body, drug, or nonlinear—the fact is that it constitutes a large, rich, and increasingly powerful constituency which shares with the avant-garde a distrust of the very category of the artistic and with the utopian radical thinker an indifference to the benefits of historical consciousness as we have cultivated it up to now. This means that by virtue of this new public’s dedication to the cult of the casual, the immediate, the transitory, the unstructured, and the aleatory, the avant-garde has an important new ally in its traditional attack upon the critical and custodial operations of the humanities. Thus the sense of crisis, the sense of being in a revolutionary situation, in the humanities is more than justified: humanists have to face the prospect of a foreclosure on their most highly valued operations.”

sciousness, realism in literature and art, and the inductive method in science. Together they guarantee piecemeal, technological, human progress by gradually evacuating the world of mythical and supernatural forces so that a modest concept of reason can do its work. The problem is that as humanistic realism disenchant the world, it denies the claim of anything to replace the old myths. It accustoms men and women to live with the status quo and provisional truths by ensuring material incremental advancement. Utopian longings for absolute certitude are viewed as regressions to the mythical consciousness—the re-enchantment of the world—that the Greeks overcame in the first place. “For realism is a product of a decision, unique in world history, to put off utopian assaults upon reality, to defer any form of thought and action based on a passionately held conviction of the way things *ought* to be.”<sup>39</sup> Realism and status-quo conservatism thus go together.

But White’s main point in this essay is that the problem with humanistic realism is its foundation on hierarchy and domination. As he averred in 2000, “Western historiography in its main lines of development since the late eighteenth century has served this ideology [of universal rationality]—as it has served the imperialism, racism, and statism justified by this ideology.”<sup>40</sup> The crucial move is history’s positing of an external reality that is internally differentiated and available for mapping and gradual conquest. White calls this mastery *syntaxis*, by which he means “that both reality and the sole possible strategies for its encodation are regarded as homologously *hierarchical* in principle.”<sup>41</sup> Humanistic realism is linked to the beginnings of imperialism in the Greek *polis* and the decline of what he calls the “middle voice.” The ensuing relations of domination issued in the prevalence of the active and passive voices over the non-objectifying middle voice.<sup>42</sup> White wants to recover the middle voice, and has suggested it as the means by which to responsibly represent the Holocaust.<sup>43</sup>

In 1971, White used the term “parataxis” as the desirable alternative to syntaxis. Parataxis is the non-hierarchical, egalitarian arrangement of phenomena “in what might be called a democracy of lateral coexistence, one next to another.”<sup>44</sup> He is attracted to parataxis as a form of social transformation because it does not augur the replacement of one elite or hierarchy by another that claims omnipotence and omniscience. The new mass culture and avant-garde was the latest incarnation of the parataxis that has been a sub-current of the Western tradition since the Renaissance. White acknowledged the strength of the liberal-humanist critique that paratactical rebellions in the past have merely destroyed traditional hierarchies only to see them replaced by new and sometimes diabolical

39. White, “The Culture of Criticism,” 65.

40. Hayden White, “An Old Question Raised Again: Is Historiography Art or Science (Response to Iggers),” *Rethinking History* 4 (2000), 401.

41. White, “The Culture of Criticism,” 66.

42. White, “Writing in the Middle Voice.”

43. White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. Friedländer; *idem*, *Figural Realism*. This intention has been appreciated by Richard T. Vann, “The Reception of Hayden White,” *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 143-161.

44. White, “The Culture of Criticism,” 67. The middle voice, of course, is to parataxis what the active and passive voices are to syntaxis.



cally worse ones. But the situation was different in the early 1970s, he declared. His rationale is worth quoting at length:

The paratactical style is an intrinsically *communal* style, rather than a *societal* one; it is inherently democratic and egalitarian rather than aristocratic and elitist, and it is possible that the rebirth of parataxis in art and thought in this century does not represent the fall back into myth or the advent of a new totalitarianism so much as the demand for a change of consciousness that will finally make a unified humanity possible.

For although there is much that is merely exotic and perhaps even pathological in contemporary avant-garde art and utopian thought, what is characteristic of its best representatives—from Joyce and Yeats on down to Resnais, Robbe-Grillet, Cage, Merce Cunningham, Beckett, and the rest—is a seeming ability to live with the implications of a paratactical consciousness: a language of linear disjunctions rather than narrative sequences, of deperspectivized space, and of definalized culminations without any need for that mythic certitude that has always attended the flowering of such a consciousness in the past. And this may indicate that the current avant-garde is able to take as a fact what every previous one had to regard finally as only a hope—that is, the condition of material scarcity is no longer an inevitability and that we are at last ready to enter a utopia in which neither myth, religion, nor elites of taste and sensibility will be able to claim the right to define what the “true” aims of either art or life must be.<sup>45</sup>

We are now in a position to situate White’s thinking. He describes himself as a Marxist, and continues to employ the categories of that intellectual tradition. “Western historical thinking,” he wrote in 2002, belongs to “a cultural superstructure informed by a capitalist mode of production.”<sup>46</sup> He is beholden to no orthodoxy, however. Like the leftism of 1968, which comprised an uneasy alliance of Marxism, libertarianism, and communitarianism,<sup>47</sup> White’s commitments are by no means commensurable. His hypergood, to use a term of Charles Taylor’s, is the radical autonomy of human agency, which inclines him to Kant and Nietzsche, and marks him as a left-wing existentialist.<sup>48</sup> But how can individual historians change their profession and effect change when ultimately all is determined by the means of production? This tension is not resolved explicitly by White, but utopianism remains central for him regardless. For whether historical processes are constructed (the 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 genetic or social forces.”<sup>49</sup>

What are the intellectual sources of White’s critique? Influenced by French structuralist thinkers, especially Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Fernand Braudel, he cultivated a suspicion of narrative as an intrinsically ideological mode of representation. He also attributed the impulse to write history, as

45. *Ibid.*, 69.

46. Hayden White, “The Westernization of World History,” in *Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate*, ed. Jörn Rüsen (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), 115.

47. For a brief discussion of this distinction, see Peter Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory after May ‘68* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 6. On the left generally, see Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

48. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), part one. White’s debt to Nietzsche has been explored in Hans-Peter Soder, “The Return of Cultural History? ‘Literary’ Historiography from Nietzsche to Hayden White,” *History of European Ideas* 29 (2003), 73–84.

49. White, “The Culture of Criticism,” 56.

opposed to the antiquarian impulse to ascertain simply what has happened in the past, to the desire to understand what the past *means*. It is the search for origins and coherence. It cannot be stressed too strongly that for White the business of the historical profession is meaning rather than knowledge because it is always written *for* a certain group, society, or culture that draws on the past for its praxis in the present and future.<sup>50</sup> The past is experienced between the two poles of its incoherence at the micro-temporal scale (the minutiae of daily life), and the coherence of the macro-temporal scale where long-range continuities (the rise and fall of civilizations) may be discernible. An interest in writing history represents a desire to move in the direction of the coherence of the macro-perspective. For Lévi-Strauss, as for White, this imposition is a mythic act insofar as it is a quest for the totality of experience. In its Western incarnation, the myth appears as the assumption of the past's coherence, which means the positing of systems and processes of which the present is the product. The dramas of development and process we (including Marxists) claim to find in the past reflect both Western culture's prejudice in relation to "less developed" cultures, and the ideological legitimation of its governing classes.<sup>51</sup> Here, too, White evinces his adherence to Lévi-Strauss's condemnation of the "historical cultures" of Europe, and his admiration for the atemporal consciousness of so-called primitive societies whose members were firmly in control of their environments.

All the talk of systems and process serves to obscure the reality that the status quo rests on human choices and that it is eminently alterable.<sup>52</sup> "Socio-cultural systems do not have lives of their own," he insisted, "they exist solely as a function of the choices of individuals to live their lives this way and not another, regardless of what the environment would seem to require for survival. And when individuals cease to choose a given way of life, this way of life ceases to exist."<sup>53</sup> To look to history for meaning, therefore, is to live under a delusion and to fall into heteronomy: "In choosing our past, we choose a present; and vice versa. We use one to *justify* the other. By constructing our present, we assert our freedom; by seeking retroactive justification for it in our past, we silently strip ourselves of the freedom that has allowed us to become what we are."<sup>54</sup>

Northrop Frye, one of White's intellectual influences, distinguished between two kinds of criticism. One is "historical" and relates culture only to the past. The other is "ethical" and relates it only to the future. White rejects the former for the latter.<sup>55</sup>

50. Hayden White, "Historical Pluralism," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Spring 1986), 487; *idem*, "Storytelling," 59-62.

51. Hayden White, "Between Science and Symbol," *Times Literary Supplement* (January 31, 1986), 109.

52. Hayden White, "Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination," *History and Theory, Beiheft* 14 (1975), 48-67.

53. White, "What is a Historical System?" 236; cf. 238: "Once constituted *and accepted by a group as a genetically provided past*, this past *is* the past for that group as a socio-cultural entity. And no amount of 'objective' historical work pointing out the extent to which this *chosen* ancestry is *not* the *real* ancestry can prevail against the choosing power of the individuals in the system." Emphasis in the original.

54. *Ibid.*, 242.

55. White, "The Culture of Criticism." 56.

What is at issue here are not methodological questions or linguistic strategies, but pre-methodological and pre-disciplinary concerns: the moral significance of a man's perspective on the past, the implications for his present that his perspective has, the cultural worth of any merely academic interest in materials properly entertainable as constituting the ways we create a future world.<sup>56</sup>

We can locate White's hostility to the historical profession in this distinction. For history is, of course, the incarnation of the "historical" approach in the world today because it legitimates the "escapist" process of establishing historical systems.<sup>57</sup>

The triumph of the "historical" over the "ethical" attitude to culture, White thinks, is discernible in the development of capitalism and the nation-state over the past two centuries. The Europe of the French Revolution—what Eric J. Hobsbawm calls "The Age of Revolution"—was a "golden age" of utopian thought and ethical thinking. At this time, when no academic discipline of history existed—historical writing was regarded then as a branch of rhetoric<sup>58</sup>—heroic intellectuals with passionate and explicit commitments used "a vision of a desirable future" to form their accounts of the past and present.<sup>59</sup> What White calls the "burden," and later the "terror" or "sublime" of history, impelled these men (as was the case then) to make something of the present for the future. "Prior to the nineteenth century, history had been conceived as a spectacle of crimes, superstitions, errors, duplicities, and terrorisms, that justified visionary recommendations for a politics that would place social processes on a new ground."<sup>60</sup> This view stands in stark contrast to the milk-toast, bourgeois idea of progress and even the Marxist philosophy of history, both of which in their imputation of meaning and direction to history are unable to motivate "visionary politics."

But as the nineteenth century unfolded, so his account continues, Western societies failed to take advantage of the ideological openness of the revolutionary era. Liberals and conservatives, anxious to stabilize post-revolutionary regimes against the democratic left and reactionary right, exorcised presentist concerns and explicit political commitment from historical thinking by institutionalizing an *autonomous*, academic historiography that claimed a specifically "historical" approach to phenomena, and whose greatest virtues were a supposed realism and objectivity. The villain here is Leopold von Ranke, whose historiography represented a justification of the restorationist European settlement because of its conviction "that the simple description of the historical process in all its particularity and variety will figure forth a drama of consummation, fulfillment, and ideal order in such a way as to make the telling of the tale an explanation of why it happened as it did."<sup>61</sup> White denounces the Rankean discipline

56. White, "Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History," 51. See also "Droysen's *Historik*: Historical Writing as a Bourgeois Science," in *idem*, *The Content of the Form*, 99f.

57. White, "What is a Historical System?," 241f: "Historians try to provide both the sufficient and the necessary reasons for any achieved socio-cultural complex being what it is and not something else. They put 'life' . . . where formerly there was only chaos. They do this by establishing putative genetic connections between an achieved present and past socio-cultural systems."

58. White, "The Westernization of World History," 116.

59. White, "Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History," 44.

60. White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation," 74.

61. White, *Metahistory*, 190; *idem*, "An Old Question Raised Again," 405.

as the “bourgeois ideology of realism,”<sup>62</sup> because it marginalizes the historical sublime and obscures from itself its own commitments and political function.

The foundation of professional historiography, then, changed the focus of interest in the past from the urgent ethical question of its meaning for the present and future to the historical question about how the present developed from the past.<sup>63</sup> History was seen now as a *coherent process* susceptible to the analysis of the “disinterested” historian. The narrative mode of representation, because it posits a conclusion to the story, implied that the future was closed and present conditions were immutable.<sup>64</sup> Under the sign of historicism or “historical consciousness,” what was once sublime was rendered explicable, and what used to be drawn upon with passion, imagination, and commitment was viewed now with limp, disinterested objectivity “for its own sake.” Which is another way of saying that a strict line was drawn between utopian, speculative philosophy of history (theory or “metahistory”<sup>65</sup>) and a “realistic,” empirical history that was “testable” by appeal to the putative past facts. It was also an abjection of the “irrational” from historical writing, thereby positing what White takes to be a false dichotomy between myth and history.<sup>66</sup>

### III. WHITE'S POST-IRONIC TEMPORALITY AND FORMAL ANALYSIS

White casts his lot with “the theorists of the sublime [who] divined that whatever dignity and freedom human beings could lay claim to could come only by way of what Freud called a ‘reaction-formation’ to an apperception of history’s meaninglessness.”<sup>67</sup> Consequently, he sees himself as continuing a tradition of historical theory that “took shape in opposition to the specious claim, made by Ranke and his epigoni, for the scientific rigor of historiography.”<sup>68</sup> This aim took two forms in his early writings. In the “The Burden of History,” an essay explicitly indebted to Nietzsche’s “History in the Service and Disservice of Life,” White called upon historians to abandon their discipline and side with the critics of historical consciousness (the modernist avant-garde) who were “liberating the present from the ‘burden of history.’” Three years later, in 1969, he recommended the only slightly more moderate course of entreating historians (and indeed all scholars) to “abandon the luxury of ignoring the ‘involvement’ or ‘confrontation’ or

62. White, “An Old Question Raised Again,” 405; *idem*, “The Suppression of Rhetoric in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Rhetoric Canon*, ed. Brenda Deen Schildgen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 21-32.

63. White, “The Burden of History,” 111-113; *idem*, *Metahistory*, 74-78; *idem*, “The Westernization of World History,” 115f.

64. *Metahistory*, 433, 65-67: “He who approaches history as a field of cause-effect relationships is driven, by the logic of the linguistic operation itself, to the comprehension of that field in Ironic terms.” See also *idem*, “Criticism and Cultural Politics,” *Diacritics* (Fall 1976), 13.

65. White takes the term “metahistory” as a synonym for “speculative philosophy of history” from Northrop Frye’s “New Directions from Old,” in Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 52-66.

66. *Metahistory*, 65f. Here White anticipates the arguments of postcolonial critics listed in note 5.

67. White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” 73f.; *idem*, “The Burden of History,” 123; cf. *Metahistory*, 57.

68. White, “Interpretation in History,” 283.

even 'relevance' of the sort that militant social reformers are (legitimately) demanding of the academic community all over Western Society."<sup>69</sup>

White readily admits that the type of intellectual inquiry he urges entails the risk of alienating history from the lay reading public. Indeed, in its allegiance to the avant-garde, history should possess an "occult" character, rather than curry favor with the "common man": "For an appeal to the esteem in which a learned discipline is held by the common man might be used to justify any kind of activity, harmful as well as beneficial to civilization. . . . In fact, taking the case of journalism . . . the more banal the journalism, the better its chances of being esteemed by the common man."<sup>70</sup> This statement also expresses White's belief that the "common man" was more inclined to choose an escapist historical system than face the burden of history. The key distinction, said Frye, is between Apollonian and Dionysian cultures, the former based on "obedience to ritual," and the latter on "a tense exposure of the prophetic mind to epiphany."<sup>71</sup> The trick is to have historians become heralds of Dionysius rather than Apollo in order to shock the "common man" into seeing the historical sublime. Historians, therefore, need to recognize that what they and the public regard as "common sense" is really one of a number of styles of encoding and emplotting past events, or theories of explanatory truth, or views of what is really going on in the historical process.<sup>72</sup> The "common sense" that the public and historical profession share is the dispersive, empirical, and contextual understanding of the historical process that alone counts as "straight" history.<sup>73</sup> And far from being scientifically neutral, it is ideologically loaded. "By appealing, implicitly or explicitly, to the common wisdom or the publicly sanctioned social sciences of his generation, the historian provides confirmation of the conservative-liberal canon on the nature of the social process."<sup>74</sup>

White also expresses this point in terms of Althusserian ideology-critique. Realistic historiography summons and reinforces a subjectivity in the reader "who is supposed to entertain this representation of the world as a 'realistic' one in virtue of its congeniality to the *imaginary* relationships that the subject bears to his own social and cultural situation."<sup>75</sup> White's aim is to cultivate a utopian subjectivity in his readers rather than a "realistic" anti-utopian one.

White's strategy to this end is to highlight the irreducible ideological or metahistorical component in every historical account. Because all historians are

69. White, "The Burden of History," 124; *idem*, "The Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History," 53. Compare these statements with the last sentence in the preface and conclusion of *Metahistory*.

70. White, "The Burden of History," 12.

71. Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 17. Frye takes this distinction from Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* [1935] (London: Routledge, 1968).

72. White, *Metahistory*, 275f.

73. *Ibid.*, 268.

74. White, "Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History," 44, 47.

75. Hayden White, "Method and Ideology in Intellectual History: The Case of Henry Adams," in *Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. Dominick LaCapra and Stephen L. Kaplan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 289; see also *idem*, "Droysen's *Historik*," 86-88; Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in his *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 160.

metahistorians, he seeks to show that what they and the public consider common sense is in fact an implicit philosophy of history as arbitrary as any other. This aim necessitates a *formal* analysis of how historical works are constructed because the explanatory effect of a historical work resides not in what it can explain but in how it is constructed. And this means that the primary mode of analysis should be *rhetorical*: “historical writing *must* be analyzed *primarily* as a kind of prose discourse before its claims to objectivity and truthfulness can be tested.”<sup>76</sup>

In *Metahistory*, White elaborated a theory of tropes as the bedrock of his formal analysis. I do not propose to rehearse the argument here, as it has been the subject of considerable commentary. What is significant is that his enduring point is not the necessity of tropology in historical writing, about which he has admitted to “hesitancy.”<sup>77</sup> It is about those discursive structures that prefigure historical argumentation. He now employs terms such as “theories’ guiding articulation of the discourse,”<sup>78</sup> and “models for construing history.”<sup>79</sup> His point is that because history is not a science it must perforce rely on natural, ordinary, non-technical language.<sup>80</sup> History therefore does not possess a specifically “historical” way of knowing its subject matter. There is no “genuinely scientific analysis of the modes of relationship obtaining among the elements of the historical field.”<sup>81</sup> Since there is no distinctively “historical” way of knowing the past, historians should not be constrained by the past in their interpretations.<sup>82</sup>

The aged Kant was right . . . we are free to conceive “history” as we please, just as we are free to make of it what we will. And, if we wish to transcend the agnosticism which an Ironic perspective on history, passing as the sole possible “realism” and “objectivity” to which we can aspire in historical studies, foists upon us, we have only to reject this Ironic perspective and to will to view history from another, anti-Ironic perspective.<sup>83</sup>

By foregrounding the choices that historians must make, White shifts the terms of debate from the past to the present and future; that is, from the stories that are supposed to inhere in the past to the stories to which the historian is committed by his or her ideological convictions. In this way, he hopes that historians can, so to speak, put the past behind them and with him embrace the radical freedom that

76. White, “Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination,” 52f. Emphasis added. “Modern literary theory . . . directs attention to what is most obvious about historical discourse, but has not been systematically taken account of until recently, namely, that every history is *first and foremost* a verbal artifact, a product of a special kind of language use. And this suggests that, if historical discourse is to be comprehended as productive of a distinctive kind of knowledge, it must be *first* analyzed as a structure of language”: *idem*, “‘Figuring the Nature of the Times Deceased’: Literary Theory and Historical Writing,” in *The Future of Literary Theory*, ed. Ralph Cohen (New York: Routledge, 1989), 22. Emphasis added.

77. White, “Interpretation in History,” 310, n42.

78. White, “Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination,” 64.

79. White, “New Historicism: A Comment,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 296.

80. White, “Interpretation in History,” 309; *idem*, *Metahistory*, 20, 438f.

81. White, “Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination,” 64.

82. See esp. White, “‘Figuring the Nature of the Times Deceased.’”

83. White, *Metahistory*, 433f.

they possess.<sup>84</sup> They can face the burden of history and terminate the peculiarly Western form of mythology that goes by the name of “history” and enlist it in the service of life. Not for nothing has Dominick LaCapra noted recently that White’s belief that historians can construct meaning *ex nihilo* ascribes “quasi-divine powers to humans” tantamount to a “secular creationism.”<sup>85</sup>

#### IV. NOT ANSWERING WHITE

For all that, it is unlikely that historians will join critics like Hans Kellner in applauding White’s views.<sup>86</sup> After all, they reject the metahistorical perspective because it seeks to “*change the professionally sanctioned strategies by which meaning is conferred on history.*”<sup>87</sup> The autonomy of the historical profession remains as stable as ever, notwithstanding the enduring debate about its epistemological foundations. Supporters of White might respond that this fact only reflects the uncritical dismissal of his arguments. In the event, it is insufficient to reject White by pointing out that his criterion for the truthfulness of a historical account, which is its capacity to endow “real” events with meaning, lacks a critical edge.<sup>88</sup> He may just be right. Unless his actual arguments, as opposed to his conclusions, are challenged, resistance to them is open to the charge of professional self-interest or complacency.<sup>89</sup> Let us therefore assess the case against White.

It could be maintained that White has a limited understanding of historians’ work because he reduces it to “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse,” an approach that would demand that the primary analysis of it be formal and rhetorical rather than substantive and evidential.<sup>90</sup> There is no denying that history writing is textual, as are the materials it uses as sources, and that the form of a text *is* itself a content insofar as its emplotment as a romance, for example, must be considered in rendering its meaning. But this is no reason, it could be argued, to privilege rhetorical and formal analysis. Significantly, White is

84. *Ibid.*, 57, where White sympathetically explicates Kant: “Historical knowledge 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 considered as individuals and as groups. But it does provide an occasion for comprehending the problem, the moral problem, of the end or purpose *for which* a life ought to be lived.” See also Roth, “Hayden White and the Aesthetics of Historiography,” 27.

85. Dominick LaCapra, “Tropisms of Intellectual History,” *Rethinking History* 8 (December 2004), 513.

86. Kellner, “A Bedrock of Order”; cf. David D. Roberts, *Nothing but History: Reconstruction and Extremity after Metaphysics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 254; and William H. McNeill, “Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians,” *American Historical Review* 91 (February 1986), 1-10.

87. White, *Metahistory*, 276. Emphasis in the original.

88. Roth, “Hayden White and Aesthetics of Historiography.”

89. Frank R. Ankersmit, “Hayden White’s Appeal to Historians,” *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 182-193.

90. White, “Method and Ideology in Intellectual History,” 289: “The more interesting question is . . . not *what* Freud, Foucault, etc., assert, allege, argue, and so on, but *how* do they establish, through the articulation of their texts, the plausibility of their discourse by referring the ‘meaning’ of these texts . . . to a complex sign system that is treated as ‘natural’ rather than as a code specific to the praxis of a given social group.”

always careful not to deny the existence of the rational level of meaning in the explicit argument of a work. Indeed, in a recent reply to a critic he concedes:

that historians can endow the past with meaning by advancing arguments purporting to explain this past “scientifically” or to interpret it “hermeneutically.” But I was more interested in the ways by which historians *constituted* a past as a subject that could serve as a possible object of scientific investigation or hermeneutical investment and, more importantly, as a subject of a narrativization.<sup>91</sup>

White seems to have dispensed with the case for the rationality of historiography by choosing not to address it directly, and also by mischaracterizing the goal of historical writing as chronological mimesis. History, he writes, is “a discourse that typically aims towards the construction of a truthful narrativization of events”; the historian is “interested in constructing an accurate description of her object of interest and of the change it undergoes in time, based on the documentary record,” he avers.<sup>92</sup> Only in a few places does he acknowledge that historians also intend to *explain* events. Accordingly, his critics may conclude that while historians may not be able to dispense with meaning, their business is *also* and even *primarily* knowledge or understanding, conceived as claims about *why* events occur. They analyze as well as describe.<sup>93</sup>

Does this reply answer White’s charges? Not really, because what counts as a convincing explanation is always indebted to what a specific group regards as the criteria for an explanation. A historical account is considered convincing or plausible because the writer shares two culturally-specific customs of linguistic usage: first, certain modes of explanation to which he or she and readers are pre-critically committed, and second, a culturally limited range of plot structures or stories that readers recognize. In other words, the persuasive or disclosive dimension of any account lies in the *style* of its rendering of a meaningless chronicle of events into a meaningful narrative or story. This style gives historical accounts the illusion of *explanatory effect*. Different groups or publics will find one account more plausible than another because they are pre-critically committed to a certain mode of explanation and story-type. The ideological commitments or philosophies of history that shape a historian’s ordering of his or her material account for its plausibility to a given audience.<sup>94</sup> To this extent, writing history is like writing fiction because what is persuasive in a narrative are not the facts or evidence adduced or the perceived plausibility of an account but the way in which events are “explained” and emplotted into a story:

history—the real world as it evolves in time—is made sense of in the same way that the poet or novelist tries to make sense of it, i.e., by endowing what originally appears as problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognizable, because it is a familiar,

91. White, “An Old Question Raised Again,” 397.

92. *Ibid.*, 397, 404.

93. Allan Megill acknowledges the presence of explanatory dimensions while defending the integrity of description and interpretation: “Recounting the Past: ‘Description,’ Explanation, and Narrative in Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 94 (1989), 627-653.

94. White, “Historicism, History and the Figurative Imagination,” 65: “And because these modes [tropes] correspond to the readers’ modalities of language use (and therefore to their ways of conceptualizing the world), they provide the ground for the communication of understanding and meanings between specific ‘schools’ of historians, on the one side, and specific publics, on the other.”



form. It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined, the manner of making sense of it is the same.<sup>95</sup>

White licenses his argument by the enduring appeal of the “classics” of historiography—the works of Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Michelet, Huizinga, and so on—that persist long after their particular arguments have been discredited and descriptions superseded. What endures is the historians’ artistic or moral qualities that are, of course, aesthetic or ideological in appeal.<sup>96</sup>

What about the proposition that narratives pose historical questions, and therefore have a specific orientation towards understanding discrete phenomena, as R. G. Collingwood, Jörn Rüsen, and Reinhart Koselleck have pointed out?<sup>97</sup> Historians are not just telling a story for its own sake, it is argued: they pose and try to answer specific questions. If we take this feature of historical writing into account, is it not possible to accept much of White’s argument about the creative role of historians, and still retain a measure of discursive rationality? For in posing specific questions, historical narratives gain their plausibility insofar as they answer them, and here explicit arguments rather than suggestibility are more important. Historical knowledge is tentative and, as White points out, related to the questions that a group or society ask of the past. To this extent, history performs a cultural function and is mythical in his terms. But the arbitrary imposition of meaning that he sees as its corollary is limited by the need for historians to provide reasons for their particular choice of codes and plots. In this case, would not the search for “understanding” rather than “meaning” be a more felicitous way of describing what historians are doing? It may be true that history has no distinct method of its own, the reply continues, and that there are as many historical approaches as ideological positions on the current spectrum, but so long as intellectual curiosity is directed towards answering specific questions, historians will be oriented to explanations that deliver answers. Scholarly consensus is based ideally on the force of the strongest argument, which means that explanation that the community of historians adjudges best accounts for the object of enquiry.<sup>98</sup> The ideological pluralism that White has perceptively identified at the heart of the historical discipline and that he takes to explode history’s putative objectivity is tamed, therefore, by the rationality inherent in the process of redeeming validity claims among historians in relation to historical questions. Historical consensus is always open to revision on the basis of new research and conceptualization.

95. White, “The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact,” *Clio* 3 (1974), 301.

96. White, “The Structure of Historical Narrative,” 18f.; *idem*, “Historicism, History and the Figurative Imagination,” 65-67; *idem*, “Figuring the Nature of the Times Deceased,” 23. Cf. Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 22, 54.

97. See the illuminating discussion in John Zammito, “Koselleck’s Philosophy of Historical Time(s) and the Practice of History,” *History and Theory* 43 (February 2004), 124-135; Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

98. Jörn Rüsen, *Studies in Metahistory*, ed. and intro. Pieter Duvenage (Pretoria: Humanities Science Research Council, 1993). An English-language discussion of his work is Henk de Jong, “Historical Orientation: Jörn Rüsen’s Answer to Nietzsche and his Followers,” *History and Theory* 36 (1996), 270-288. A sympathetic rendering is Georg G. Iggers, “Historiography between Scholarship and Poetry: Reflections on Hayden White’s Approach to Historiography,” *Rethinking History* 4 (2000), 373-390.

But White has anticipated this argument. The question–answer procedure may well inject a measure of rationality into its mythic discourse, but it remains mythic all the same because ultimately historical narratives are designed to stabilize identity by stressing continuity.<sup>99</sup> Historians are asking the wrong questions, White retorts. Instead of “where did we come from?” or “why did this happen?,” they should be asking “how do we build a better future?” His answer, then, is political.<sup>100</sup>

#### V. REDEMPTIVE OR BRIDGING NARRATIVES?

With this we come ineluctably to Max Weber and his agonized identification of modernity as the irrational playground of warring “gods and demons.” Weber is the thinker to counterpoise to White because they both basically agree on the nature of modernity but come to opposite conclusions regarding the public role of scholarship. Science (*Wissenschaft*), Weber noted, has contributed to the “disenchantment of the world” and to a “progress” that renders life and death “meaningless.” This result raises an important question:

What stand should one take? Has “progress” as such a recognizable meaning that goes beyond the technical, so that to serve it is a meaningful vocation? The question must be raised. But this is no longer merely the question of man’s calling *for* science, hence, the problem of what science as a vocation means to its devoted disciples. To raise this question is to ask for the vocation of science within the total life of humanity. What is the value of science?<sup>101</sup>

Like Nietzsche and White, Weber does not think this question can be answered on scientific grounds, and not surprisingly, he proposes the same answer: “It [the value of science] can only be *interpreted* with reference to its ultimate meaning, which we must reject or accept according to our ultimate position towards life.”<sup>102</sup>

Weber advanced this argument in the celebrated essay, “Science as a Vocation.” First delivered as a speech in 1918 to Munich university students who were seeking ultimate answers to their burning, existential questions, it is Weber’s attempt to articulate the relationship between science and life for the teacher. In a world in which every person has to choose his or her god and where students “crave a leader and not a teacher,” and were tempted by religion and political romanticism, the professor’s role is emphatically not to play the guru. “It [science] is not the gift of grace of seers and prophets dispensing sacred values and revelations, nor does it partake of the contemplation of sages and philosophers about the meaning of the universe.”<sup>103</sup> Rather than indulge the actionistic impulses of their students or to convert them to their own god, the role of teachers is to help them “gain *clarity*” about the choices they make by pre-

99. Rüsen, *Studies in Metahistory*, 6.

100. White, *Metahistory*, 433: “When it is a matter of choosing among these alternative visions of history the only grounds for preferring one over another are *moral* or *aesthetic* ones.”

101. Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 140.

102. *Ibid.*, 143. Emphasis in the original.

103. *Ibid.*, 149, 152.

senting “inconvenient facts” and having each of them give an “*account of the ultimate meaning of his own conduct.*”<sup>104</sup> The sober subjectivity that Weber seeks to inculcate in his students is the opposite of that prized by White.

What, then, should be the role of the historian in relation to the ethnic or national community to which he or she belongs? There are good reasons for regarding the redemptive role that White desires as seriously inadequate, indeed, as positively dangerous. Proffering narratives for postcolonial liberation may be salutary in some circumstances, but not in others. For example, Michael Walzer’s reading of the Exodus story presents a redeeming *telos* from the labor Zionist perspective, but at the terrible cost of the Palestinians, as Edward Said pointed out insistently.<sup>105</sup> Narratives of Job are more timely than those of Exodus.<sup>106</sup>

The morally responsible alternative is that entreated by the Israeli “new historian,” Ilan Pappé.<sup>107</sup> Rejecting positivist pretensions to aperspectival objectivity, and motivated by the desire for peace and justice in a region captured by national egoisms, he has been working with Israeli and Palestinian scholars in the social sciences to free historiography from the two competing national narratives. First meeting in 1997 during the Oslo negotiations, the group, known as the “Palestinian Israel Academic Dialogue” (Palisad), attempts to construct what Pappé calls a “bridging narrative” to force both sides to distance themselves critically from the reigning nationalist ideologies.<sup>108</sup> Such narratives “can be defined as a conscious historiographical effort taken by historians in societies wrought with long internal and external conflicts, to cross over conflicting narratives and historiographies.”<sup>109</sup> The dialogue that ensues expands intellectual and emotional horizons. Inspired by Said’s call to Arab intellectuals to submit themselves “in horror and awe to the special tragedy besetting the Jewish people,” Palisad addressed, among other issues, the sensitive topic of Palestinian tendencies to deny or downplay the existence or enormity of the Holocaust.<sup>110</sup>

Bridging narratives do not entail an impotent and depoliticized history. Their aim of rectifying the blindnesses of nationalist teleologies is itself necessarily

104. *Ibid.*, 151f. Emphasis in the original. An excellent explication is Wilhelm Hennis, “The Meaning of ‘Wertfreiheit’: On the Background and Motives of Max Weber’s ‘Postulate,’” *Sociological Theory* 12 (July 1994), 113-125.

105. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Edward Said, “Michael Walzer’s *Exodus and Revolution: A Canaanite Reading*,” in *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question*, ed. Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 166; see also Jonathan Boyarin, “Reading Exodus into History,” *New Literary History* 23 (1992), 523-554, and William D. Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

106. I owe this biblical trope to Carla Hesse, “After Exodus: A History Lesson for Generation X,” unpublished ms., Department of History, University of California, Berkeley, May 1996.

107. A recent discussion of these historians is Neil Caplan, “Zionism and the Arabs: Another Look at the ‘New’ Historiography,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 36 (2001), 345-360.

108. For details on Palisad, see <http://www.palisad.org>, accessed February 7, 2005; Ilan Pappé, “Humanizing the Text: Israeli ‘New History’ and the Trajectory of the 1948 Historiography,” *Radical History Review* 86 (Spring 2003), 108f.

109. Jamil Hilal and Ilan Pappé, “Introduction,” in *Talking to the Enemy* (London: I. B. Tauris, forthcoming).

110. Edward Said, “Bases for Coexistence,” *Al-Hayat* (November 5, 1997), reprinted in *idem, The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001), 205-209; Pappé, “Humanizing the Text,” 110; Gur-Ze’ev and Pappé, “Beyond the Destruction of the Other’s Collective Memory.”

ideological. Said, for example, has long complained about the instrumentalization of Holocaust memory by Israeli and American elites, but also about its equation with the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, the *Nakbah*: “Who would want to equate mass extermination with mass dispossession?”<sup>111</sup> The critical—and political—edge inheres not in fruitless competitive victimization, but in the *historical* link between the Holocaust, the foundation of Israel, and the Palestinian catastrophe. “The simple fact is that Jewish and Palestinian experiences are historically, indeed organically, connected.”<sup>112</sup> What Said is saying is that recognizing the causal nexus between European anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and the foundation of Israel entails acknowledging that this foundation was carried out at the expense of Palestinians. This is the realization that has animated the “new historians” of Israel like Pappé and his colleagues, and their work has caused many of their country-men and -women to cast a critical eye at the origins of their state.

#### VI. THE HISTORICAL AS THE ETHICAL

Yet by standing with Weber in resisting White’s plea to re-enchant the world through a politically poetic historiography, we need not bind ourselves to the determinative binary logic of utopianism/anti-utopianism. Weber’s resignation or “joyless reformism” is not the only alternative to White’s “secular creationism.” Frye’s distinction between historical and ethical criticism needs to be reformulated. The historical *is* the ethical. In an age when genocides, ethnic cleansings, and imperial wars of domination are as prevalent as ever, using history to forestall their occurrence (where possible) is a profound expression of hopefulness. In this sense, historians assume the role of “moral commentators,” as Richard T. Vann has enjoined recently.<sup>113</sup> Certainly, engaging in “strong evaluations” (Vann) is what Said believed. “Arabs generally, and Palestinians in particular,” he wrote in 1998, “must also begin to explore our own histories, myths, and patriarchal ideas of the nation, something which, for obvious reasons we have not so far done. . . . These are serious, and even crucial matters, and they cannot either be left unanswered or postponed indefinitely under the guise of national defense and national unity.”<sup>114</sup>

A utopian or ethical historiography does not posit a totalizing vision of a society beyond conflict, then, but attempts to recognize the perspective of the Other, or least relativize its own. It expands emotional empathy rather than demonizing the Other as a hindrance requiring annihilation. If ethnic nationalism is a consciousness in which the dead haunt the present by demanding vengeance and redemption, and its temporal correlate is the old historicism that constructs the collective “we,” then such secular theologies need to be subject to the “healing

111. Said, “Bases for Coexistence”; *idem*, *The Politics of Dispossession* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 34.

112. Said, “Bases for Coexistence”; *idem*, *The Politics of Dispossession*, 167.

113. Richard T. Vann, “Historians and Moral Evaluations,” *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 43 (2004), 3-30.

114. Edward Said, “New History, Old Ideas,” *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line*, May 21-27, 1998 (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1998/378/pal2.htm>, accessed February 8, 2005).

exorcism” of a reflective historicism alive to mutual recognition and the contingency of identity. As John E. Toews explains,

In the production of our different identities, in the constant struggle to organize our heterogeneity into at least provisional unities we find ourselves participants in a common (dare we say “human”?), though unequal and asymmetrical, politically conflicted, process of self-fashioning. Not in the particular categories and forms historically available for constructions of identity and difference, but in the process, in the making and remaking of selves within inherited systems of signification and the political power relations they articulate, do we find the basis of our mutuality, our dialogue with the dead.<sup>115</sup>

White and nationalist critics may object that this entreaty sounds like a technology of Western domination from which subject peoples can derive little benefit because they need to cultivate group solidarity to face the “terror of history.” Why engage in games of mutual recognition with the oppressor? Yet abandoning the communicative rationality inherent in the appeal to the putative universal reader risks relinquishing that weapon with which to unmask exploitation and oppression. Moreover, an overarching moral consensus on the value of alterity is necessary to secure its existence, and this perforce entails appealing to standards to which everyone can assent. Historians, then, are Kantians to the extent that they universalize the value of the good of alterity, an epistemology and ethic that Thomas M. McCarthy felicitously calls “multicultural universalism.”<sup>116</sup>

White persists in thinking that the communicative action implicit in this approach is calculated to perpetuate bourgeois hegemony.<sup>117</sup> It is, as he wrote of humanists in general, ideally engaged in by persons “whose personal integrity was assured by the attitude of irony which allowed them to see all sides of every question but in the end bow down to authority in the public sphere as the sole alternative to anarchy.”<sup>118</sup> But this is a dismal caricature of the intention and work of scholars like Ilan Pappé and the Palisad group who, far from shrinking back from the hobgoblin of anarchy, work in difficult circumstances to secure justice and end the *Nakbah* of the Palestinian people. The rationality inherent in discursive validity testing offers an alternative to the blind self-assertion that White appears to endorse. If it is true that it does not provide a knock-down, “correct” answer or single perspective to clinch an argument, it does demand of its participants that they advance reasons that can be assessed against criteria that themselves can be disputed. This is the rationality that inheres in the historical discipline, and indeed, all scholarly discourses.<sup>119</sup> In many circumstances, the persistent posing of uncomfortable questions and evidence may be a threat to the very elites and their own myths that White opposes. Aboriginal history in Australian historiography is a case in point.<sup>120</sup>

115. John E. Toews, “Historiography as Exorcism: Conjuring up ‘Foreign’ Worlds and Historicizing Subjects in the Context of the Multiculturalism Debate,” *Theory and Society* 27 (1998), 550, 557.

116. Thomas McCarthy, “Doing the Right Thing in Cross-Cultural Representation,” *Ethics* 3 (1992), 644; cf. Jörn Rüsen, “How to Overcome Ethnocentrism,” *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 43 (2004), 118-129.

117. White, “An Old Question Raised Again,” 400f.

118. White, “The Culture of Criticism,” 56.

119. Martin Jay, “For Theory,” *Theory and Society* 25 (1996), 167-183.

120. *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, ed. A. Dirk Moses (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004).

It is no use pointing out that White engages in a performative contradiction insofar as he subjects his own work to discursive validity testing. His aim, after all, is to change the *political vision* of historians by appealing to them, ultimately, on ideological as well as on technical/formal grounds. His real prey is the subjectivity of historians and their readers, not their discursive argumentation. For as Weber noted, “No science is absolutely free from presuppositions, and no science can prove its fundamental value to the man who rejects these presuppositions.”<sup>121</sup> As for those who do accept the presuppositions of professional historiography, holding fast to its critical role by demanding clarity and presenting uncomfortable facts will be the precondition for fashioning the bridging narratives necessary for the utopian task of preventing the genocidal rhetoric and violence of recent times. It would be wiser, then, to follow Max Weber rather than, as Julien Benda put it in 1927, abase “the values of knowledge before the values of action.”<sup>122</sup>

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121. Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 153.

122. Julien Benda, *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals* (Boston: Beacon, 1958).