

**HAYDEN WHITE'S *TROPICS OF DISCOURSE*.  
AN INTERSECTION OF LITERATURE AND HISTORIOGRAPHY**

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One way of interpreting history is through the analysis of the deep structure of historical imagination. According to Hayden White, the metahistorical element of a historical work proposes a deep structural content in the representation of history “which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature, and which serves as the precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively ‘historical’ explanation should be” (White 1990: ix). In this sense, the historical work is essentially “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” (1990: ix).” As Hayden White argues, the discourse formation in the Foucauldian sense gives historical studies the opportunity to reinvent their objects of studies and to renew themselves by transgressing disciplinary borderlines. The etymology of the word *discourse* comes from the Latin *discurrere*, which makes possible a movement *back and forth* or a *running to and fro* (White 1978: 2). In this sense, language is not a transparent, homogenous entity and we cannot grasp reality completely through it. Although we read through the language, we see first the surface and then the content.

The aim of this paper is to reveal the complicated relationship between literature and historiography in Hayden White’s theoretical works, starting from the assumption that White’s *tropology* can be traced back to Giambattista Vico’s poetic logic of history. I would argue that this “in-betweenness,” shifting from the conventions of historiography to interdisciplinary approaches, provides an alternative conceptual framework for the field of cultural studies. As Hayden White argues, the field of history became much more aware of its linguistic nature; conversely, a work of art — whether a novel, a play, or a movie — could be analyzed and comprehended only in its historical context. These developments raise the question of disciplinary boundaries of history and literature and ask for a critical rethinking of their relationship.

The key argumentation of this essay is connected to the representation of *tropology* in White's theory originating in Vico's poetic logic of history. The organizing principles for analyzing this question can be logically connected to two main points that this paper aims to highlight. Firstly, I intend to investigate the intersection of literature and history by focusing on the historical text as a literary artifact. Secondly, I focus on the poetic logic and aim of tropology as a mode of transition between history and literature that connects the theories of White and Vico. The goal of my investigation is a new understanding of historical imagination within the limits of unconventional history.

### **White's Impact on Humanities**

According to White, conventionalism is a doctrine that determines the interpretation of a historical text (1981: 160). The ambition to acquire a "proper" meaning or interpretation of a historical text is in itself a fallacy. Historical "explanation," with its ideological implications, can be described by the familiar relativist parable — retold by E.D. Hirsch (1989:259) among others — about the blind men and the elephant: the blind man at the tail thinks the elephant is a snake, but the blind man at a leg thinks the elephant is a tree. Thus, White's historical explanation offers an alternative point of view that does not intend to be the history proper but one among others. I would argue that the attempt to deconstruct an historical text needs a hermeneutic signifier-interpretative moment, which is the *blindspot* of the fictional and factual discourses. This blindspot can be seen only by a further *anamorphic* phase, and this process could go on cyclically as a self-reflective repetition of the interpretative process. According to White, historiography offers a verbal image of reality; thus, the historical text as a narrative is nothing but an allegorical representation of facts (White 1987: 45). Allegory as a displaced metaphor, in this sense, covers or hides the lack or the hermeneutic code of history. Moreover, this enigma connects seemingly incomprehensible things with the help of metaphorization (Aristotle 1992: 41). Thus, the factual and figurative characterizations are combined to create an image of an object, which functions as the real referent of the discourse different from the manifest referent (White 1975: 56). White's tropology as a continuation of Vico's poetic logic of history can provide a new meaning for humanities by both rejecting authority and respecting tradition.

In this sense, on the basis of Erwin Panofsky's notion, *humanitas* both means value and limitation (Fernie 1995: 184–185).

White's impact on the theory of history is clear from the different labels that have come to be attached to him. He is considered an historian, a philosopher of history, a cultural relativist, or a subversive figure of human sciences. His name was connected to Structuralism, New Historicism and even to New Criticism (Marnó 2003: 23). White relates different registers to a new conceptual framework of reasoning by transgressing and violating the fixed borders of disciplines. His theory connects the fictional and factual discourses with the rhetoric of history, historiography and literary studies. White's *in-betweenness* can be traced back to Vico's poetic and cyclic logic of history, "which provided White with the poetic theory of consciousness, namely tropology understood as a science of transition — that is the heart of *Metahistory*" (Domanska 1998: 177). This tropology, however, is more than a model or a register; it aims, through the poetics of knowledge, to "disclose the unconscious of historical discourse" (White 1994: xix).

### **The Intersection of Literature and History as Art**

White argues that the literary form of a historical text reveals a unique content that can provide an alternative interpretation for the historical evidence. The truth value of a historical artifact is defined by power relations and by creating a context in which historical evidence gets the meaning of being true. Moreover, because of the limited capacity of language and because of the problematics of referentiality, historians are not able to reconstruct *what actually happened* (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*; notion originating from Ranke 1972:57), even if they try to endow their sources with absolute meaning. Thus, the discourse of history is approaching the allegorical representation of facts. Therefore discourse theory reveals the logocentric relations between words and things, *the visible and the invisible*, (Foucault 1991: xii) and the gap between the factual and fictional discourses. Unconventional histories can fill this gap by abandoning the truth claims of history, that is the Rankian doctrine of what actually happened, and by focusing on the principles of authenticity. Thus, the main focus from the time-spaced language of the historical texts as narratives can be shifted to a new understanding of historical imagination, *the content of the form* that can represent the incomprehensible enigma of *past/ness*.

The difference between content and form, in other words, between the literary image of history and the historical text can be cancelled by putting them in the same category as functional symbols. Thus, this *paragone* can be suspended by making a dialogue between words and constructed images. The historical *explicandum* of the text with its ideological implications provides an alternative, distorted perspective constructed by the historian. I would argue that this metaphor of interpreting the past could be best explained by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's statement that visibility itself involves non-visibility (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 247):

When I say that everything visible is invisible, that perception is imperception that consciousness has a '**blindspot**', that to the sense of a *contradiction* — it must be imagined that I add to the visible perfectly defined as in Itself a non-visible (which would be only objective absence)... — One has to understand that is visibility itself that involves non-visibility. (emphasis mine)

Thus, the gap or blindspot between fictional and factual representation can be explained with the process of *anamorphosis*, when the constructed verbal image of the past "turns inside out" and reveals the otherwise invisible content matter: this verbal image cannot be seen as such "without a paradoxical trick of consciousness, an ability to see something as *there* and *not there* at the same time" (Mitchell 1986: 17). This shift in vision may provide an alternative point of view that does not claim to be the history proper but one among others. Readers of the text can create their own histories since they do not manufacture mental images on the basis of what they are immediately given to see, but on the basis of their memories, "filling the blanks and their minds with images created retrospectively" (Virilio 1988: 110). The impact of this kind of *encodation* is to familiarize the otherwise unfamiliar. Accordingly, the reader in this encodation process gradually realizes that the story or chain of events he is reading is a different one. In other words, through perceiving the form of the plot, the reader draws inferences, attaches connotation. Then at a certain point, the reader feels that he understands the meaning by successfully following the story. The reader has become familiarized with the text because he has been shown the *icon* of emploted data, "a plot structure with which he is familiar as a part of his cultural endowment" (White 1978: 110).

In what follows, I would like to explain White's theory of the interpretation of the historical text by connecting it with one concept borrowed

from the field of fine arts: the process of *anamorphosis*. The process of *anamorphosis* can reveal the blindspots of the texts by opening up a new perspective. The element that disturbs the traditional way of studying a pictorial image is the *punctum*, which stings, cuts, specks and is a little hole which pricks the viewer (Barthes 1984: 26–27). Barthes describes the *punctum* also as the right moment or “the kairos of desire” (1984: 59) The literary blindspot (Cristian 2001: 240) has the same function as the Barthesian *punctum* and it is a device to reach the point of *anamorphosis*, where the picture — in this case the verbal image — “turns inside out.” Moreover, this blindspot corresponds to Eco’s *catastrophic point* in the interpretation process. Accordingly, at first we perceive the substance as the form of the image in Alpha modality then we translate it into the figurative language of words on the basis of our encyclopedia in Beta modality, that is, we realize the content of the form. In the interpretation process, as Eco argues, we are constantly switching from Alfa modality to Beta modality and vice versa (Eco 1999: 480). This process corresponds to White’s statement that the latent meaning of the discourse serves as a code “by which the reader is invited to assume a certain attitude toward the facts and the interpretation of them offered on the manifest level of the discourse” (White 1975: 55). The place of this catastrophic point, where the reader switches to interpretation, is not an *a priori* but a culturally dependent category (Szőnyi 2004: 241).

Thus, every representation is both revealing and hiding; and the role of art and literature, as Paul de Man argues, is to reveal both the hidden and the visible reality (de Man 2002: 71). With the help of *anamorphic* processes, however, there can be a shift in vision. Painters like Hans Holbein, practiced a kind of iconography in which apart from the displacement of the observer’s point of view, complete perception of the painted work could only happen with the aid of instruments like glass cylinders and tubes, mirrors, magnifying glasses and other kind of lenses (Virilio 1988: 110).

This *anamorphic* process can be illustrated by Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*. There is a strange or obscured form in the foreground of the painting that is an elongated or distorted image of a skull. This skull can be seen in a certain way if it is looked at from a particular point of view (bottom left hand side). This process of distortion is called *anamorphosis*. Holbein’s painting demonstrates the realization of seeing things from a dif-

ferent or unexpected perspective. *The Ambassadors* makes visible something that is annihilated and was invisible for the viewer.

Virilio calls the point of view distortion the productive unconscious of the sight (Virilio 1988:111–113), a collapse of the forms of the established order. Therefore, the act of seeing is to be replaced by a regressive perceptual state: the viewer projects his/her ideas on the sight. This phenomenon corresponds to the optical unconscious, which gives way to the point of *anamorphosis*; from a changed position the viewer realizes that there is something strange in the picture, and thus s/he realizes another nature of the object.

Lacan gives an example to explain the non-cylindrical *anamorphosis*. He supposes that there is a portrait on a piece of paper that he is showing the audience of his lecture. He argues that the viewer sees the blackboard in an oblique position in relation to that sheet of paper. He describes the process of *anamorphosis* by the distortion of the geometrical perspective:

Suppose that, by means of a series of ideal threads or lines, I reproduce on the oblique surface each point of the image drawn on my sheet of paper. You can easily imagine what the result would be — you would obtain a figure enlarged and distorted according to the lines of what may be called a perspective. One supposes that — if I take away that which has helped the construction, namely, the image placed in my own visual field — the impression I will retain, while remaining in that place, will be more or less the same. At least, I will recognize the general outline of the image — at best, I will have an identical impression. (Lacan 1988: 85)

Accordingly, the process of historical explanation does not correspond to the conventions of the visible, empirical documentary view of historical studies. White's interpretation of historical facts is presented in a narrative form constructed from metaphorical structure, plot and arguments that carry ideological implications. In this sense, the historical text is arbitrary and figuratively produced. White's investigation of the historical text is more than the aesthetic text analysis provided by New Criticism. White's interpretation of the historical text goes beyond the assumptions of New Criticism. The central aim of that reading strategy had been to focus on the autonomy of the literary text. Thus, the approach restricts the spectrum of investigation to the formalist aspects of the text and its interpretative techniques, leaving many questions unanswered about the content of the form. White, by con-

trast, supposes that the meaning is not something out there but in the unconscious of the text.

White's critique of the historical text, as Dominick LaCapra argues, works against the positivism of historical studies and the "unself-conscious employment of traditional narrative in the writing of history" (LaCapra 1983: 74). Essentially, history had been part of literature as a form of epic, but the separation of the two modes became institutionalized toward the end of the eighteenth century (Gossman 1990: 227). Before that separation, history writing had been considered to be an art of presentation rather than a scientific inquiry, as in the Renaissance. Then, due to the ideas of the Enlightenment, literature started to be associated with poetic and figurative writing. Thus, as Lionel Gossman claims, the literary work of art became different from the other products of labour corresponding to the Age of Industrial Revolution and Capitalism. Moreover, the literary text acquired a magical or fetishized characteristic, and "the real was separated from the ideal, poetry from prose," corresponding to the doctrine of positivism (1990: 228–229). Most recently, literature has shifted away from its rhetorical function, leaving it to historiography. The comprehension of history as art exists "in the shadow of the scientific ideal" (LaCapra 1983: 74) of conventional historiography. Thus, the disciplinization of historical studies entailed regulation by subordinating the historical text to the categories of the *beautiful* and suppressing the *sublime* elements (White 1987: 62–63). Thus, the question arises what do we mean by poetic logic of history?

### Poetic Logic of History

The analysis of the figurative language-use in a given historical discourse provides a way for characterizing "the instrumental, pragmatic, or conative dimensions of it" (White 1975: 53). Consequently, as White argues, figures of speech are the very marrow of the historian's individual style and their lack can destroy "much of its impact as an explanation in the form of idiographic description" (1975: 53). Historical imagination operates on a different level than the sheer judicious employment of the rules of evidence. It is present in the conscious effort, which is close to the New Historicist approach of Stephen Greenblatt and others, "to enter into the minds or consciousness of human agents long dead" and reaching objectivity by seeing things from their point of views (White 1987: 66–7). Thus, as White claims,

there is an essentially poetic element in every historical text, which element appears in prose discourse as rhetoric (White 1975: 65). In this sense, the historian's craft has an artistic component with *the power of constructive imagination* (1975: 65). The figurative elements of historical imagination are the foundation of White's poetic logic of history, which goes back to Vico's *The New Science* (1961).

Vico's three language types correspond to the three sequences of world history that he differentiated. According to Vico, the first and original language of humanity was poetic, and this finally shifted to the scientific one. Thus, primitive men "by their nature were poets who spoke in poetic characters" (Vico 1961:5). The controlling methodological assumption of Vico's science of humanity is the cyclic rhythmic repetitions of history. Vico's theory somehow stabilizes time by asserting that there are no real novelties in it. He illustrates a meaningful pattern by marking the phases in which everything recurs. A cycle is a sequence of three ages: religious, heroic, and human, which are the age of gods, the age of heroes and the age of men, respectively. Though details may vary from one cycle to another, the essential character of each age is repeated in every cycle, and every cycle ends only to begin (1961: 454). The connecting point among the three ages of a cycle is *language*. Language defines *conscienza*, corresponding to historical consciousness, while the pursuit of *scienza* is philosophy (Fisch 1961: xxxv). According to Vico, this science was not an *a priori* category but a result of disciplinalization.

Thus, poetic metaphysics (that is, poetry) was divided into its subordinate sciences, each sharing the poetic nature just like the history of ideas (Vico 1961: 82). Consequently, the history of ideas was part of poetry and was governed by poetic logic. Verbal images assumed a crucial role in his philosophic reflections by developing a new method for the study of human culture. For Vico, the truth (*verum*) and its imitation or image (*factum*) are interchangeable terms. He provides a simile by describing divine truth as a solid representation of things and human truth as a picture (Pompa 1982: 51). Consequently, the history of ideas was part of poetry and was governed by poetic logic. In this sense, Vico's approach was close to interdisciplinary thinking insofar as it revealed in what ways discourse can constitute culture (Stone 1997: xxii).

Vico's poetic logic of universal history served as a stimulus for White's system of tropology. The metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony as

trope patterns are the tools the historian can use to emplot his sources; moreover, they carry ideological implications by having a prefigurative and projecting function in constructing the discourse of history (White 1978: 12). This tropical element in discourse is the “shadow from which all realistic discourse tries to flee” (1978: 2). According to White, the word *tropic* comes from *tropikos*, *tropos*, which had the meaning of *turn* or *way* in Greek. It was transmitted into modern Indo-European languages by way of *tropus*, which corresponded to *metaphor* or *figure of speech* in Classical Latin but became a notion of *mood* or *measure* of music theory in Late Latin. The word *trope* in Modern English started to be used together with *style* (1978: 2).

The four master tropes, originating in Vico’s work, are the basis of signification that constitutes discourses and give rise “to other discursive levels” which are the emplotment, explanation and ideological implication. The repeated patterns of history are constructed by metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche, which can be connected to one another “cyclically as beginning, middle, end and as identity, difference, higher identity” with irony as a trope-killer at the end of an era (LaCapra 1983: 77). Accordingly, White’s *Tropics of Discourse* tells the story or history of the tropes by providing a metalanguage for the *Metahistory*. Tropology became the foundation of his discourse theory originating in Vico’s definition of tropes as “those figures of speech that turn a word from its proper and narrative meaning to an improper and strange one which Terence in Latin calls the inversion of words (*verba inversa*)” (Vico, 1996: 137).

This paper has tried to highlight the connecting points of literature and history by investigating Hayden White’s metahistorical theory and tropology, which originate in Vico’s poetic logic of history. Metahistorical thinking seems to convert the Aristotelian doctrine that poetry is more philosophical than historiography. Discourse theory is the foundation of White’s theory on historical explanation with ideological implications. Essentially, there is a poetic element in historical texts that appears in the prose discourse as rhetoric. Consequently, if the poetic logic of history gives the form for the historical text then it also has a crucial impact on its content; thus, the historian’s craft belongs to the field of art.

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