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Narrative Trouble, or Hayden White's Desire for a Progressive Historiography Refigured by Judith Butler's Performativity Theory

María Inés La Greca

ABSTRACT

This paper poses the question of what possible desires expressed in *Metahistory* remain ungratified for Hayden White. In engaging the relationship between White's later writings on figural realism, middle-voice writing and the practical past, I claim that these more recent topics are concerned with thinking ways for a community to retrospectively appropriate a past for its own project of self-making. Moreover, they also deal with the unavoidably figurative nature of any attempt at historical interpretation as narrativization. In other words, the three topics discuss the poetics of history, the constitution of a link between past, present and future, as a critical shifting between discourse and agency.

Within this context, I want to suggest that these later issues are elaborations of something that was already present in *Metahistory* forty years ago: a desire for a progressive historiography, a writing of history that ironically accepts both the free *and conditioned* nature of our cultural discursive means for giving ourselves a past that still romantically seeks to transcend its own irony and to imagine a future to call our own. In pursuing this aim, I will claim that a performative theory of (historical) identity inspired by Judith Butler's work may well be where White's desire can best be heard.

WHAT do Hayden White's recent topics of figural realism, middle-voice writing and the practical past have in common? Is there, in them, some desire originally expressed in *Metahistory* that *still* remains ungratified? These later topics are all concerned with thinking ways for a community to retrospectively appropriate a past for its own project of self-making. They also deal with the unavoidably figurative nature of any attempt at historical interpretation as narrativization. The three topics all engage the poetics of history, the constitution of a link between past, present and future, as a critical shifting between discourse and agency. From this theoretical perspective, the present paper aims at showing that these issues are deeper elaborations of what forty years ago was already stated in *Metahistory*: a desire for a progressive historiography, a writing of history that, on the one hand, ironically accepts the free and conditioned nature of our cultural discursive means for giving ourselves a past, while, on the other hand, also seeks to transcend irony and to imagine a future to call our own. In pursuing this aim, I will claim that a performative theory of (historical) identity inspired by Judith Butler's work may well be the place where White's desire can be heard. But I will also claim that any attempt to think and write historical identity must acknowledge White's broad critique of narrative and of historical writing. This paper argues that discerning the elective affinities between Hayden White's narrative trouble in history and Judith Butler's gender trouble in feminism can provide the keys for pursuing a contemporary rethinking of the poetics of historical subjectivity.

I. FIGURAL REALISM, MIDDLE-VOICE WRITING
AND THE PRACTICAL PAST:
ON WHAT WHITE'S RECENT WRITINGS ARE ALL ABOUT

I claim that White's recent foci aim at rethinking historical writing *after* we have acknowledged the figurative nature of language, discourse and narration. After, in other words, the so-called linguistic or narrativist turn. These foci each represent different versions of the same proposal of thinking ways of using figurative language as a resource for writing history for practical reasons. The more general and enabling reason for doing so would be to acknowledge that the poetics of history involves the ways in which particular communities retrospectively appropriate a past for purposes of their own self-making.

But also after the linguistic turn or, to say it in more specific Whitean terms, the *tropological* turn, we understand that establishing that poetic link *through* narrativization necessarily implies a critical shifting between discourse and agency. In this use of the term *critical* I have in mind two senses: its meaning as ironic, self-critical, self-conscious, born from the realization that language is more than a simple medium for conveying a message; but I also intend *critical* as implying difficult, slippery, even dangerous. We should take its critical aspect as both positive and problematic, but we must also stress that this involves a shifting between discourse *and* agency. Hayden White has always focused, from my point of view, on what we *can* do with language, specifically narration as that artifact that unites discourse with history and *vice versa*. The highlighting of the figurative nature of every attempt to represent the past has always been a search for the possibilities of using narration to establish a link between past, present and future. And, at the same time, this realization has been a promotion of a critical recognition of our limits and constraints in doing so. This free and simultaneously conditioned agency towards language is a central component in grasping White's major insight regarding the troublesome relationship between narration and history that I am trying to present here. The way in which the figurative nature of language in historical writing at once enables and limits what we can understand and do through language is, from my point of view, the most significant realization that reading White's work offers to us: that is why I introduce the expression *narrative trouble*. And I think that this critical (in both senses, again) realization is presented clearly in *Metahistory*, cuts across all White's writings and is still present in his discussion of these more recent points of focus. So, in what follows, I would like to show the different features of this same idea in these foci and how they represent White's expression of a fundamental desire for putting that realization to work.

From *figural realism* I would like to recall that White uses Auerbach's figure-fulfillment model to explain the writing of history as a promise – impossible to fulfill – of the fulfillment of a realist representation of reality. This model permits White to state that a community retrospectively appropriates a past for its own project of self-making by seeing itself as the fulfillment of the promise of an earlier time. White takes figural causation as a distinctively historical mode of causation that is neither determinate nor points to a teleological end. He sees it as a *per-formance*, the kind of action that morally responsible people are capable of, as in the case of a promise.

Although a promise must have been made to be fulfilled, and we can retrospectively infer the making of a promise from its fulfillment, we cannot infer its fulfillment prospectively from the promise being made. And so it is with a historical event:

A given historical event can be viewed as the fulfillment of an earlier and apparently utterly unconnected event when agents responsible of the occurrence of the later event link it “genealogically” to the earlier one.¹

This linkage is established from the point in time experienced as present to a past, not from the past to the present as in genetic relationships. This linkage is an aesthetic one because it

places the principal weight of meaning on the act of retrospective appropriation of an earlier event by the treatment of it as a figure of a later one. It is not a matter of factuality; the facts of the earlier event remain the same even after appropriation. What has changed is the relationship that agents of a later time establish with the earlier event as an element in their own past – a past on the basis of which a specific present is defined.²

Historical events are not, then, caused by earlier ones nor determined by them, and nor are they predictable on any grounds of teleology as realization of earlier potentialities but – as with a rhetorical figure – the later fulfills the earlier by repeating the elements thereof with a difference. As *historical*, an event remains open to retrospective appropriation by any later group that may choose it as a legitimating prototype and an element of its genealogy.

White also borrows from Auerbach’s literary history the idea that nineteenth-century Western historicism was the discovery that human life and society find whatever meaning they may not in a metaphysical or transcendental beyond but in history. And this is why the history of realist representation can never get to an end or closure, or find an absolute origin. The promise to represent reality realistically is impossible to fulfill: the goal of realism revealed itself as a myth at the same time as it showed itself to be the ever-renewed promise of fulfillment.

Figural realism, then, deals with the impossibility of a definitive realistic representation of reality while, at the same time, permitting a consideration of how history is written from a community’s present in order for that community to think itself as the fulfillment of an earlier time. But White stresses that this seeing itself *as if* a fulfillment of an earlier promise entails a decision by responsible agents. This means that writing a history as a link between our present and a chosen past involves writing *ourselves*. This historical self-making takes us to *middle-voice writing*.

The idea of modernist writing comes to White again through Auerbach, but when he reads it as equivalent to middle-voice writing he is working with Roland Barthes’ notion.³ White presents this view of writing when he argues for a way of thinking the writing of history after the tropological turn. And I am referring here to White’s criticism of the traditional oppositional definitions of history versus fiction, history

¹ H. White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 89.

² White, *Figural Realism*, 90.

³ R. Barthes, “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?,” *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, eds. R. Macksey and E. Donato (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 134-145.

versus literature, realist versus imaginative discourse, facts versus figuration, and so on. White's fundamental claim regarding the figurative nature of historical writing as narrativization revealed that the supposed referent of a historical discourse undergoes a poetic processing to become a historical object, the subject of a specific kind of discourse. After White (and Barthes, for that matter), it is no longer possible to claim that the subject of historical discourse is a straightforward copy of an extra-discursive entity. Where that tackled our presuppositions regarding the relationship between discourse and referent, middle-voice writing in turn reveals that there is no subject (as a psychological entity) or *author* already given when we write history. Barthes's middle-voice writing presents writing as an action where the subject, the *I*, is interior to the action, not exterior to it – an action over an object that also affects the subject. Building on Barthes' notion, White claims:

The middle voice, if anything, is doubly active, at once productive of an effect on an object (for example, language) and constitutive of a particular kind of agent (namely, the writer) by means of an action (specifically, writing).⁴

White reads middle-voice writing as a perfect example of a performative speech act. Again, then, as a promise. He also stresses how the middle voice in Greek was especially used “to indicate those actions informed by a heightened moral consciousness on the part of the subject performing them”.⁵ Here, following White, we understand that writing history cannot be external to the subject writing. And we realize that this was also a claim made by *Metahistory* where White traced the epistemological wagers, the ethical and aesthetic commitments of historians, in his reading of historical works.

Figural realism and middle-voice writing reveal the close link between historical writing and agency. But this is not new. The link between agency and narration runs throughout White's oeuvre. “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” is more than an example: this article can be seen as the strongest argument presented by White to defend the idea that whenever we narrate there are moralizing effects because in doing so we are staging the drama of the conflict between desire and the law.⁶ Thinking the representation of reality as a promise for a community's self-making and viewing the performative nature of middle-voice writing as a consciousness of action by morally responsible agents both point toward the intimate connection between narration and agency. White has repeatedly noted that narrativization involves the problem of action – whether that action is considered to be possible or impossible, or seen as a good thing or a bad thing – because narrative discourse in itself *raises the question of agency*. Moreover, simply by virtue of its allowing us to posit the question of the *possibility* of action, White considers narrative discourse to be positive: by enabling us to ask whether action is possible or not, it answers affirmatively the question of *whether it is possible to ask if action is possible?*⁷

⁴ H. White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957-2007*, ed. R. Doran (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 257.

⁵ White, *The Fiction of Narrative*, 261.

⁶ H. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 12.

⁷ H. White, “Historical Discourse and Literary Writing”, *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate*, ed. K. Korhonen (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), 30.

Here, with this question, we also slide over to the issue of the *practical past*. In “El pasado práctico”, White presents a condensed version of his history of Western historiography.⁸ I cannot do justice to his history here, but it is important to note that he once again takes up the challenge of showing how historiography – when it pretended to be a scientific and professional discipline – defined itself in terms of an opposition to rhetoric, ostensibly repressing its figurative, poetic and literary character as a practice of writing. Repressing or denying, that is, exactly those aspects which *Metahistory* intended to be acknowledged by academic historians. Forty years later we can discern a pessimistic tone in White’s proposal for getting rid of the “historical” past and turning attention to the “practical” past instead. He now adopts this distinction made by Michael Oakeshott to differentiate between how professional historians study the past and how common people and those working in other disciplines recall and attempt to use “the past” as a basis for making judgments and taking decisions in life. Under the label of “the historical past”, White refers to the scientific study of the past as an end in itself and for its own sake, a past that teaches no lessons of present interest, a strictly impersonal and neutral object, built by historians, that only exists in books and academic essays. Distinct from this, White speaks of the “practical past”, those notions of the past that people hold in everyday life, to which they appeal, at will or not, for ideas that can help with practical problems in present situations – in anything from personal matters to grand political programs. For White, then, this practical past is the sphere of memory, dream and desire, and it is also the sphere to appeal to in problem-solving as well as for creating tactics and strategies for negotiating personal and collective life. He makes clear that at stake are not two different ontological or epistemic pasts but, rather, two different kinds of intentions that motivate questions concerning the past. To the extent that the historical past is a theoretical construction and an end in itself, it is, according to White, of little or no value for understanding and acting on the present or foreseeing the future. Instead, White claims interest in the practical past to be far more relevant here since that is what we draw on when we need to answer the question “What should we do?”. In this, the historical past cannot help. At best, it can provide an account of what other people, in different times, places and circumstances have done. But this information offers no justification for inferring what we, in our situation, in our time and our place, should do.⁹

So far, I have here engaged with White’s latest foci of attention and claimed that they are profoundly interrelated. But I have pointed out that White’s elaboration of the practical past is pessimistic in tone. I think that this is so because it reflects his long-ungratified desire for a different kind of historical writing. In what follows, I will support this claim with White’s own words.

II. AN UNFULFILLED DESIRE FOR A PROGRESSIVE HISTORIOGRAPHY

I have described how *figural realism* attends to the never-ending dynamics of historical writing as a necessary rewriting of history in the attempt to fulfill a promise of

⁸ H. White, “El pasado práctico”, *Hayden White, la escritura del pasado y el futuro de la historiografía*, ed. V. Tozzi and N. Lavagnino (Sáenz Peña: EDUNTREF, 2012), 19-39.

⁹ White, “El pasado práctico”, 26.

realistic representation of reality understood as historical; how *middle-voice writing* focuses on the writing of history as the self-constitution of the agent responsible for the act of writing; and finally, how the introduction of *the practical past* is motivated by its usefulness in helping us act in our particular present towards a desired future – a function that White claims that historiography cannot serve. Consideration of all three of these topics together reveals what I have presented as an ungratified desire in White’s work ever since *Metahistory*: figural realism, middle-voice writing and the practical past all involve a search for ways of promoting a *progressive historiography*. I discovered this name that I want to give to White’s desire in an interview conducted by Ewa Domanska, published in 2008. In that interview, White claims that

progressive history is concerned with the present as much as with the past and with mediating between these two, so an interest in the way that a present is related to a past poses a historiographical problem quite different from that stemming from an interest in “what happened” in some local domain in the past.¹⁰

Domanska asks him if this is a radical presentist position, to which White replies “no”. He claims instead that he is historicizing history learning itself, and that “this is what most historians do not do”. Historians, says White, “do not realize that ‘history’ is not only *about* change but is itself – whether understood as a process or as accounts of a process – constantly changing; they do not historicize their own operations”. When Domanska objects that this is what history of historiography is about, White denies this too, since what he means by historicizing history involves approaching historiography

as a discourse in which certain objects and processes in the past are “worked up” by description in order to serve as a properly “historical” kind of object – to which they – historians – can then bring their thoughts and reflection.¹¹

In other words, then, it involves recognizing, exactly *that element of construction in the creation of historical objects* that White tried to analyze in *Metahistory*.

I would also go further and argue that this claim to historicize history’s operations has always also had a practical motive – it has contained a desire to promote something that in this interview receives the name of *progressive history*. This is the desire that White’s recent thoughts on the practical past reveal in their pessimism regarding the possibility of historiography ever successfully taking up this task. In fact, the next part of the interview then focuses on the issue of the practical past as opposed to the historical past and it is in that context that White defines his idea of a “progressive history”:

By progressive history, I mean a history that it is born of a concern for the future, the future of one’s own family, of one’s own community, of the human species, of the earth and nature, a history that goes to the past in order to find intimations of resources, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual, that might be useful for dealing with these concerns.¹²

White quotes Laplanche’s idea that our efforts to come to terms with the past destabilize the lived present, thereby transforming the future into an ominous threat

¹⁰ E. Domanska, “A Conversation with Hayden White”, *Rethinking History*, 12, 1 (2008): 16.

¹¹ Domanska, “A Conversation with Hayden White”, 16.

¹² Domanska, “A Conversation with Hayden White”, 18-19.

rather than the opportunity for creative action that it might possibly be. He goes on to say that

for us moderns, religion and metaphysics offer no prospects of enlightenment of our “situation”, we have only the past as a resource for coming to terms with a present that might have been otherwise.

The present, says White, is a problem not because “it is becoming past before our eyes” but “because it is being displaced by a future that presses down upon us like a tidal wave or suddenly shakes us like an earthquake”. Here is where White aims at the fundamental link between past, present and future that a historical writing engaged with its present situation should be interested in establishing. This drive would thus define a progressive historiography. According to White, this way of historical writing would acknowledge that:

We study the past not in order to find out what really happened there or to provide a genealogy of and thereby a legitimacy for the present, but to find out what it takes to face a future we should like to inherit rather than one that we have been forced to endure.¹³

A progressive historiography, finally, would be “utopian”, but modernist rather than modern, says White, inasmuch as it uses the past to imagine a future rather than to distract us from facing it.

III. FORTY YEARS AFTER METAHISTORY: NARRATIVE AND GENDER TROUBLES, OR THE REWRITING OF HISTORICAL IDENTITY

This notion of a progressive history permits me to present the elective affinity between Hayden White’s work on historiography and Judith Butler’s work on gender studies. Both of them have tried to reassess, from within an ongoing discursive practice, a fundamental category that is presupposed and necessarily left unquestioned in order to secure that particular practice’s self-definition: narrative in history, gender in feminism. Importantly, White’s narrative trouble and Butler’s gender trouble have both been born from a desire to rethink their respective disciplinary practices in order to improve them. Yet the questioning and criticism they have offered has, in part, been received as a menace to the existence of those practices. In White’s case the desire for a progressive historiography is, I think, taken to its extreme in his recent advocacy of a focus on the practical past that leaves us free to ignore the historical past – and thus perhaps to ignore historians too. To me, this radicalization of White’s claims highlights the changes in the debate concerning narrative and history over the last forty years within, and indeed also outside, the philosophy of history. As White’s contention of narrative trouble has become even more urgent than before, I believe that Butler’s performativity theory can serve as a paradigm for what still centrally demands our attention in debates regarding narrative, history, discourse and agency.

I take inspiration for my arguments from Verónica Tozzi’s *La historia según la nueva filosofía de la historia* as well as Nancy Partner’s contribution to the volume *Refig-*

¹³ Domanska, “A Conversation with Hayden White”, 49.

uring Hayden White.¹⁴ Both Tozzi and Partner work within a Whitean theoretical framework and argue that his theoretical usefulness is far from over. Tozzi reflects on the rewriting of identities as a rewriting of histories and argues for the possibility of a historiography committed to its linguistic resources; I especially agree with Tozzi's insight regarding the interactive dynamics between social classifications and the narratives they are embedded in. Partner wonders about the post-postmodern life of narrative theory and states that a) *narrative* is a category so present in contemporary academic and non-academic discourses that we must pay attention to its post-linguistic turn persistence; and b) that the question posed by White regarding narrative's value for the representation of reality needs to be asked again, in this situation where it is being used to explain almost anything and, fundamentally, to secure identity coherence in collective and individual life. Partner presents the example of narrative being used to save post-Cold War national fissures and its latest relevance in psychological research as interesting data on how "the psychic work narrative does at the core of personal identity [...] anchors the persuasive force of narrative in the public sphere".¹⁵ For me, the interesting fact is not only that Tozzi and Partner are both working on narrative and history from a post-linguistic-turn critical stance, but also that both of them find in the persistent uses of historical narrative, whether academic or not, a *new practical scenario* where the problems of narratives of identity and identity as historical demand our theoretical attention. It is this diagnosis of the persistent practical problem of narrating identity as historical that, in my opinion, points in the direction of performativity theory of identity, as in Butler's work. Moreover, I want to claim that the affinity between White and Butler sheds new light on the topics discussed earlier.

The connection between Butler and White's recent writings involves, I would claim, the *performative* nature of figuration in the narrative writing of history. Or, we could also say, the *figurative* nature of performativity for gender identity.¹⁶ Let me present this idea in the form of a question: Is not what White tells us of figuration in historical writing much the same as what Butler tells us of the performative nature of gender? Are not figuration and performativity both undetachable features of the critical shifting between discourse and agency, between history and identity? Of exactly that which at once enables and constrains us to have a history or a gender?

I already claimed that White's desire for a progressive historiography invited a *historicizing* of history's operations and is now manifested in his appeal to think the past with a *practical* intention. Such a progressive historiography would thus take seriously the anti-foundationalist and anti-teleological claim that the goal of any final, realistic representation is impossible *insofar as we conceive of reality as historical*. This modernist historicist realization does not, however, imply the end of historical

¹⁴ V. Tozzi, *La historia según la nueva filosofía de la historia* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2009); N. Partner, "Narrative Persistence, The Post-Postmodern Life of Narrative Theory", *Re-figuring Hayden White*, eds. F. Ankersmit, E. Domanska and H. Kellner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 81-104.

¹⁵ Partner, "Narrative Persistence", 100.

¹⁶ This article presents some lines of my research on a performative reading of White's major insight in light of Butler's theory for thinking the constitution of historical identities. The conclusions of the first part of my research have been presented in my doctoral dissertation: M. I. La Greca, "Historia, figuración y performatividad: Crítica y persistencia de la narración en la Nueva Filosofía de la Historia" (Universidad de Buenos Aires, Ph. D. dissertation, 2013).

writing but, quite to the contrary, its perpetual rewriting. And, if such continuous rewriting is the rewriting of a community's identity perceived as historical, a progressive historiography should also take seriously the *historical nature* of the identity being re-written. What needs to be considered, then, is what it implies to claim that identity is historical in the anti-foundationalist and anti-teleological sense of middle-voice writing, figural realism and the interest in the practical past. It is precisely for this task that I take Judith Butler's work on gender performativity to be a promising theoretical tool.

As is well known, it was tropology that – since *Metahistory* – largely came to define the perspective on language that enabled White to posit a poetics of history seeking to identify a series of historiographical styles. It should be noted, however, that White later attributed his use of the notion of style to Foucault – as describing “a certain constant manner of language use by which both to represent the world and endow it with meaning”.¹⁷ It was similarly from a Foucauldian perspective that Butler attempted to rethink gender or, more specifically, *gendered bodies*, through the notion of style. She was interested in viewing gender in this way because “styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities”. In considering gender as a *bodily style*, she approaches it as an “act”, both intentional and performative, in which “‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning”.¹⁸

Butler presents the socio-historically constructed nature of gender in both a productive and critical sense: as generative of the very notion of *gender* and its contingent contents *and* as the production of subjectivity through ideal norms that the subject of gender is forced to reiterate and by which it is constrained. According to Butler:

Because there is neither an “essence” that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness. The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions alternately embodied and deflected under duress.¹⁹

This critical perspective enables Butler to claim that what we understand as “natural sex”, “real woman” or other prevalent and compelling social fictions are produced by the sedimentation of gender norms. Over time, this sedimentation produces a set of corporeal styles that, in reified form, “appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another”.²⁰ As a feminist theorist, Butler directs her critique at the idea of heterosexuality understood as compulsive heteronormativity. She argues that these styles are enacted and produce the coherent

¹⁷ H. White, “An Old Question Raised Again: Is Historiography Art or Science? (Response to Iggers)”, *Rethinking History*, 4, 3 (2000): 395.

¹⁸ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 190. This book was originally published in 1990 in the Routledge series “Thinking Gender”, ed. Linda J. Nicholson.

¹⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 190.

²⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

gendered subjects who pose as their originators, themselves presupposing a coherent subjectivity as the *cause* of the style. And it is this presupposition that she hopes to dismantle, claiming instead that the coherent subject is the *effect* of such styles, or, in other words, that gender is performative. To understand why Butler claims that gender is performative, we should pay attention to her description of gender as an act:

In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and a reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.²¹

Butler points out that although these significations are enacted by individual bodies – in their becoming stylized into gender modes – this “action” is a public action. Thinking gender as produced in a binary-normative framework, Butler considers that performance as effected with the strategic aim of keeping gender within this binary frame, “an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject”.²² Gender should not, then, be understood as a stable identity or *locus* of agency from which various acts follow. Rather, continues Butler, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*:

The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.²³

Butler describes this as an illusion of a gendered self because it is revealed as a constructed identity, a *performative accomplishment* that the mundane social audience – including the actors themselves – comes to believe and to perform “in the mode of believe”. Butler aims at showing that gender norms, because of their ideal nature, are impossible to internalize, impossible to embody. Hence, she concludes, the gendered self is structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which “in their occasional discontinuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this ‘ground’”.²⁴

This idea can be paraphrased in Barthes’ words: it would be a referential illusion to give an account of gender subjectivity not because that subjectivity is illusory but because *what is illusory is to naturalize it* – that is, to believe that there is something like a *true* gender prior to those reiterated acts and normative conventions. This would amount to believing that there is an essential ground of gender that precedes any gender norm, which in turn would then be thought of as its discursive expression or description. However, as Butler shows, this illusory naturalization works in favor of the legitimation of the heterosexual binarism her feminist critique seeks to undermine.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler criticizes an expressive model of gender, a model that understands gender as an expression of a pre-constituted self, prior to any action by the subject. Instead, she argues, gender is performative and gender attributes “effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal”:

²¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

²³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

²² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

²⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

The distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial. If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.²⁵

Let me stop here for a moment and ask again: is not Butler claiming for gender what White has claimed for historical narrative? Let me borrow her formulation and apply it to historical narrative: *there would be no true or false, real or distorted historical narratives, and the postulation of a true historical narrative would be revealed as a regulatory fiction.* A naïve approach to historical narrative conceals, as Louis Mink and Roland Barthes taught White,²⁶ that our belief in something being a true story, a true narrative, as radically opposed to fiction, results from the sustained social *narrative* performances through which our Western common sense is structured by this very distinction.²⁷ By assuming White's tropological perspective it became possible to acknowledge the figurative production of any historical meaning *as narrative meaning* by the historical text even when that text presents itself as a realist discourse focused on its referential function.²⁸ The idea that historical discourse could be adequately assessed in terms of referentiality alone has been vigorously criticized by White.

Although I can do so only in an inevitably schematic fashion, I want to end by presenting the elective affinities I see as existing between White and Butler as well as their possible utility for rethinking the writing of history. Where White conceives of narrative in history as an "element of construction", a poetic doing, so Butler conceives of gender. I would further claim that as White envisioned a *poetics of history* as revealing, through the study of historiographical styles, the prefigurative-narrativizing constitution of the supposed historical referent by its discursive processing (*emplotment*), Butler has envisioned a *poetics of gender subjectivity* as revealing, through the study of bodily styles, the performative-normative constitution of any supposed *real gender*.²⁹ Performativity, according to Butler, is in itself a temporal, contingent and historical process. Viewing gender as performative amounts to historicizing it, to

²⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 193.

²⁶ For a more detailed discussion of Mink and Barthes as key influences in White's critique of historical narrative, see La Greca, "Historia, figuración y performatividad".

²⁷ L. Mink, "Narrative Form as Cognitive Instrument", *Historical Understanding*, eds. B. Fay, E. O. Golob and R. T. Vann (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 203.

²⁸ R. Barthes, "El discurso de la historia", *El susurro del lenguaje: Más allá de la palabra y la escritura* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1987), 163-177.

²⁹ I should emphasize that the proposal to read Butler's gender theory as pointing towards a *poetics of subjectivity* is mine. I had the opportunity to work on this issue with Professor Butler's support and thanks to a Fulbright-Argentina Ministry of Education Grant, and she has pointed out to me that she would not claim that gender is necessarily poetic, or at least that it should be considered in terms of a praxis, or even a kind of phronesis. My own research aims at assessing how the poetics of history in White's theory can be rethought as a *poetics of historical subjectivity* through a performativity approach.

revealing it as a cultural, contingent construction that rejects any claim of an eternal essence of the feminine or the masculine, or, indeed, any ontological or epistemic ground. The historically constructed nature of gender is, at the same time, its *performative nature* as both *always already constituted* by the compulsory reiteration of norms that stylize a body, on one hand, and *unstable and open*, on the other, since Butler holds that because there is no *real, true* or *essential* gender prior to its discursive-performative constitution, normative reiteration is at the same time a compulsory construction according to ideal norms that no-one can ever fully achieve or fulfill. In other words, gender performativity understood as a reiterative process that is open in its effects, always allowing for the possibility of failure, is a particular way of assuming the historical nature of the subject of gender, of the gender identity we may try to account for: it is to understand gender identity as contingent, non-foundational, non-essential, not 'given' to the reiterative process by which gender is performed – exactly in the same way that the subject of writing is not 'given' to his or her own writing as, according to White, was the case if we consider historical writing as operating in the middle voice and recognize the ever-renewed promise, impossible to fulfill, of any realist representation of historical reality.

Moreover, as narrative and history are connected by inherited conventions to which we appeal in order to produce new meanings, so it is with identity and gender. And yet we cannot do without these constructions that make us, whether we are talking of the inherited narrations of our past or the norms of gender that we are forced to reiterate and by which we have become gendered subjects. Also, as narrativization in White is conventional and normative, so it is with genderization. Both seem to play the role that prefiguration plays in historical discourse: they are at once inevitable and optional, constrained and free, *poetic*, because there are no objective, essential or foundational grounds for deciding what meanings are to be assigned. Yet they are simultaneously full of, or even over-determined by, the inherited meanings of the emplotment or the gender conventions that make meaning possible. As White has historicized history, Butler has historicized gender. When seen as figurative, narrative and gender both involve performativity because they necessarily involve agency. In fact, let me suggest a final parallelism.

Just as White shows us that *narrativization* makes the question of agency possible by providing an interpretation of *a series of occurrences* as a story of a certain kind, so Butler show us that *gender* makes agency *as subjects* possible by providing an interpretation of *a body's possibilities* as a body of a certain kind. This parallelism sums up the aim of my joint reading of White and Butler. I believe that thinking the way in which narrativization and gender relate to enabling agency and meaning-endowment can be further developed through the idea of middle-voice writing as pointing toward a theory of the critical shifting between agency and discourse.

I would like to extend this claim of affinity even further and say that figuration and performativity may well be two sides of one and the same insight onto identity as historical: they both deal with discourse and history, with the double nature of our constrained and free action, with the burden of the past on our agency – that is at once also the only means toward the imagining of some future. Identity and performativity shift talk of narrative and figuration to the sphere of the practical. Any discussion concerning them is then unavoidably tied to practical questions regarding how we

can imagine a future *to choose* rather than to endure – just as a progressive historiography would advocate. Historicization, figuration and performativity all point at an identity without foundations, without a permanent anchoring of meaning, and yet it is this that brings agency to the fore. Because it is by keeping sight of the search for a better future that questions of agency in the present are made meaningful, albeit always in a historically contingent way, it is on the basis of the past as a burden *and* a resource that we can attempt to imagine such a future. Butler also sees the task of a critical theory of gender identity as a utopian one, as “a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure”.³⁰ So perhaps White’s pessimism over the historical past could be read optimistically as leading the way to a present in need of a theory of narrative in its figurative and performative role for identity writing and constitution, perhaps even in need of a new *poetics of historical subjectivity*. Just maybe it will be here that White’s most fundamental desire refigures itself as a renewed promise for us to fulfill.

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³⁰ J. Butler, *Cuerpos que importan: Sobre los límites materiales y discursivos del “sexo”* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2005), 338.

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