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The Future of Philosophy of History from its Narrativist Past

Figuration, Middle Voice Writing and Performativity

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Abstract

Hayden White inaugurated narrativism in philosophy of history when he effected a productive displacement of earlier epistemological discussions around the relationship between narration and historical knowledge: White identified the problem of narrative in history with the problem of the use of figurative language in the representation of the past. Thus, he enabled a new way of thinking philosophy of history's object of study by paying attention to an aspect of historical practice he considered wrongly overlooked: the writing of history. His formal theory of the historical work needs no introduction. Instead, this paper aims at reclaiming the fundamental philosophical legacy White has left us in his latest work on middle voice writing.

First, I will frame White's thought as a response to what I call the paradoxical nature of historical narrative, as Louis Mink and Roland Barthes understand it. By presenting our narrativist past as White's ironical and liberating stance on historical narrative, I will show how he identified figuration as the paradoxical resource and constrain of historical writing. Secondly, I will elaborate on his latest inquiries into middle voice writing as pointing the way into the future of philosophy of history. Thus, I will claim that the notion of middle voice writing that White adopted from Roland Barthes should be read from the point of view of performativity theory in order to reassess the philosophical nature of historical writing now considered as the performative self-constitution of the historical subject.

Keywords

philosophy of history – narrativism – Hayden White – middle voice writing – figuration – performativity

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The Paradoxical Nature of Historical Narrative: Hayden White, between Louis Mink and Roland Barthes

Hayden White paid close attention to the debates around the representational claims of narrative discourse that took place in the second half of last century. A central issue was the question of narrative claiming to be an adequate way of representing reality. As we know, to produce a narrative discourse is not merely to present events in a chronological order. Narrative, even if it is chronologically arranged, organizes events to transform them into a whole with a beginning, middle, and end, thereby endowing them with a coherence that enables a retrospective intelligibility in the grasping of the complete structure of the story. For the most critical perspectives, this was the result of a "referential illusion", in the case of Roland Barthes, "an imaginary construction", for Louis Mink, or in White's own terms, the effect of a "narrative closure".

In my reading of White's own review of these debates, Mink and Barthes were two central figures.[1] Moreover, I think they represent the two poles of a tension we can find in narrative criticism, a tension that will reappear in White's and even in Ankersmit's work. But if Mink and Barthes can be thought of as representing two very different theoretical attitudes towards the issue of narrative, it is because they also have something in common: what they share is a paradoxical view on *historical* narrative. Mink and Barthes, from very different and utterly disconnected traditions – at least until Hayden White's work – arrived at the same realization over the *imaginary and conventional nature* of narrative structure. And this realization becomes philosophically challenging only when we face that particular kind of narrative that, as Mink says, *as historical* it claims to represent, through its form, part of the real complexity of the past, but *as narrative* it is a product of imaginative construction, which cannot defend its claim to truth by any accepted procedure of argument or authentication.[2]

1 On Mink's influence in White's thought, cf. H. Paul, *Hayden White* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 85–86. On Barthes' influence, cf. S. Bann, "History: Myth and Narrative: A Coda for Roland Barthes and Hayden White", en F. Ankersmit, E. Domanska, and H. Kellner eds, *Re-figuring Hayden White* (Standford: Standford University Press, 2009), 144–164. I developed my own argument regarding Mink's and Barthes' influences in White in 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).

2 L. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, ed. B. Fay, E. O. Golob and R. T. Vann (Ithaca and Londres: Cornell University Press, 1987), 199.

By considering history's claim to be a scientific discipline, Mink and Barthes made a thorough analysis of the notion of historical narrative and arrived at some similar conclusions. Mink aimed at defending the autonomy of historical studies and the fundamental role of narrative as a specific mode of comprehension he calls "configurational". According to Mink, the configurational working of narrative offers a particular kind of comprehension because it produces "a network of overlapping descriptions" where "the end is connected with the promise of the beginning as well as the beginning with the promise of the end, and the necessity of the backward references cancels out, so to speak, the contingency of the forward references."[3] Narrative form in historiography explains why historian's conclusions are seldom or never detachable, inasmuch as "not merely their validity but their meaning refers backward to the ordering of evidence in the total argument"; in other words, "they are *represented by the narrative order itself*".[4] Whether we are talking about a historian or an imaginative writer, Mink claims that the problems of constructing a coherent narrative account are not just technical problems because narrative is a primary and irreducible form of human comprehension, an article in the constitution of common sense.[5]

However, along with this defense, Mink was also evincing some conceptual discomfort, some dilemmas that the very notion of a *historical* narrative entails: this fundamental cognitive instrument is the same one that fiction uses to make up its imaginary realities. Mink showed how our distinction between fictional and historical narrative is grounded in an implicit belief that, when made explicit, could be hard to accept by the sophisticated theorist: that *historical actuality itself* has narrative form, which the historian does not invent but discovers or attempts to discover. For Mink, it is because of this presupposition that historians have not been inclined to value literary skill or have dismissed the comparison of the historian with the novelist: it is this implicit belief that gives the force of self-evidence to the difference between history and fiction. Thus, according to Mink, we have two presuppositions that frame our beliefs over historiography: on the one hand, that historical narrative differs from fictional narrative as long as there is "something which makes it true or false even though we have no access to that something except through historical reconstruction from present evidence;"[6] and, on the other, that the real referent of historiography is an untold story the historian has to discover. But

3 Ibid., 57–58.
4 Ibid., 79.
5 Ibid., 186.
6 Ibid., 184.

the problem remains: the former distinction is based on the implicit acceptance of the later belief.

Roland Barthes, as one of the most critical thinkers of narrative from structuralism and post-structuralism, claimed that the seeming objectivity of historical narrative, where events seem to be "telling themselves", was the result of a *referential illusion*: far from being adequate, or even neutral, historical narrative was a particular discursive mode defined by a certain number of exclusions and restrictive conditions. He argued that narrative effects a conflation of logic and temporality, given that the spring of narrative activity is in the confusion of consecution and consequence, where what comes *later* is read in the narrative as *caused*. Narrative would be a systematic application of the logical error *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* – which reminds us of Mink's analysis of how retrospective references cancel out the contingency of the forward references. But in a critical vein Barthes claims:

> Hence, we arrive at that paradox which governs the entire pertinence of historical discourse (in relation to other types of discourse): fact never has any but a linguistic existence (as the term of discourse), yet everything happens as if this linguistic existence were merely a pure and simple "copy" of *another* existence, situated in an extra-structural field, the "real". This discourse is doubtless the only one in which the referent is addressed as external to the discourse, though without it ever being possible to reach it outside this discourse.[7]

Barthes claimed that while historical narrative claims to be a realist discourse, it also involves a production of meaning that is concealed. And he concluded that because of this concealment of its linguistic meaning-making procedures historical narrative was ideological: because it was just as dependent on the imaginary as fictions and myths.

Both Mink and Barthes arrived, thus, at the conclusion that narrative structure was imaginary, a conventional and contingent way of producing meaning in the representation of historical reality. So, if it is not natural or even neutral, it is not a *necessary* form for historical representation, neither in a logical nor in an ontological sense. Nevertheless, they inferred completely different theoretical consequences from this same realization: for Mink, although the philosophical analysis of narrative form puts into question our common-sense belief in the difference between history and fiction, he claims that we must

7 R. Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. R. Howard, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 138.

revise this distinction, without abrogating it. So primary is narrative form for historical comprehension, and so culturally rooted is the idea that history is true in a sense that fiction is not, that "we cannot forget what we have learned", Mink says.[8] In a completely opposite vein, Barthes claimed that the end of narrative historiography was near, or it should be, if history still pretended to be a science instead of an ideological elaboration.

Although Mink and Barthes differed over the value of narrative form for historiography, they were equally fascinated with narrative's effectiveness in producing intelligibility, its capacity to create meaning, its usefulness for presenting a set of occurrences as a coherent process: this is a fundamental feature of Mink's dilemmas and Barthes' demystification of historical narrative. The criticism that led, according to Barthes, to the impeachment of historical narrative for being imaginary – a contingent and ideological naturalization of a way of representing history – led, according to Mink, to the acknowledgement of the fundamental cultural role of that common sense naturalization in understanding ourselves as historical beings. Hence, the same kind of criticism that reveals narrative to be not transparent or neutral, reveals its practical necessity: how culturally fundamental narrative is, how effective and rooted in our way of thinking historical reality.

In what follows, I suggest that we revisit White's major insights on historical writing as provoked by this productive tension between criticism *and* fascination over narrative. In so doing, we may ask ourselves: should we, like Barthes, reject narrative history completely? Or, as Mink claimed, we cannot forget what we have learned?

The Narrativist Past: From Historical Narrative to Figuration

Although Barthes had a lasting influence on White's thinking, his theory of the historical work presented in *Metahistory* seems to be closer to Mink's analysis of historiography:[9] it was a critical yet *affirmative* stand towards historical narrative. Just like Mink, White acknowledges the imaginary and conventional nature of narrative structure in historiography without this acknowledgement entailing a desire to expunge narrative from historical writing. Instead, it represents the task of revising our epistemological presuppositions regarding historical knowledge. Mink and White see narration in history as having a certain

8 Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 203.

9 H. White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

inevitability and they face this double and paradoxical character of historical narrative – being both cognitive and imaginary – in an ironical way, by which I mean a self-critical way. To ironically accept narrative for historiography means to have first critically distanced ourselves from the apparently transparent aspects of narrative and to acknowledge that it does not mirror the past.

This ironical point of view is nevertheless an acceptance of narrative in history and, up to this point, Mink and White can be read as saying the same thing. But if *Metahistory* was the foundational gesture of narrativism, it was because White went further than Mink: through his questioning of historical narrative's claims to merely represent the past, White offered us a theory of the historical narrative as *historical writing*.[10] By rejecting the presupposition of narrative as a transparent medium of representation, White was rejecting a deeper presupposition: that of language itself as a transparent medium through which we could "see" the past. And in so doing, he was able to show how narrative was constitutive of the meaning of the past by being the very form – but not an empty one – of historical writing. If narrative was understood as constitutive of the past it was because White identified the *poetic* or *figurative* workings of language in the representation of historical reality.

White, then, gave us something more than a mere ironical acceptance of historical narrative: he allowed us to study it with a specific point of view on language he called *tropology*. By rejecting the idea of language as a mirror of reality, White simultaneously revealed the figurative nature of historical writing: its poetic function, its processes of meaning-making, its ways of constituting any historical referent. Regretfully, this was read by historians, philosophers, and other critics as a serious threat to historiography's cognitive aims.[11] But there were also more insightful readings which understood the more fundamental drive in White's tropological perspective: its liberating spirit, its challenge to historians to free themselves from the restrictive relationship they seemed to have with their own poetic capacities, their own

10 White finally brought into philosophy of history what Mink presented as a necessary task for the future of the discipline: a classification of plot structures to understand narrative form ordering relations between events. Cf. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 198.

11 Some early criticism *Metahistory* received can be found in E. Golob's, M. Mandelbaum's and P. Pomper's contributions to the special issue "Metahistory: Six Critique", in *History and Theory*, Vol. 19, No. 4, (1980). But the more simplistic reading of White's work has been Arthur Marwick's one. Cf. Marwick, A.,(1995): "Two Approaches to Historical Study: The Metaphysical (Including 'Postmodernism') and the Historical", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 30 (1995), 5–35.

practice as writers.[12] Because to assume, as White did, a tropological conception of historical writing means to recognize the figurative strategies at hand in the very use of ordinary language and to promote narrative historical writing at the same time we are acknowledging its imaginary and conventional nature. And this was exactly *Metahistory*'s aim. That is why it is an ironical *and yet empowering* acceptance of narrative for historical representation what lay at the heart of narrativism: White pretended to ironically transcend the irony he claimed historiography has fallen into in twentieth century and argued that historians should acknowledge their *poïesis* to use these figurative resources in order to self-critically pursue their cognitive, but also ethical and aesthetic aims.

As another relevant figure of the narrativist debate, Frank Ankersmit initially endorsed White's perspective.[13] Instead of falling into the limited interpretation of White's work, Ankersmit grasped the more interesting and fruitful reading of his attempt to free historians from their positivist naïvety of confusing their tropological encodations of the past with the past itself. This naïve intuition customarily cherished by the historical discipline, explains Ankersmit, had an imprisoning effect for twentieth century historians, which amounted to a negative constraint on their figurative abilities – of which their great nineteenth century predecessors did not know.[14] Here is the core of what I am trying to reclaim as White's and narrativist philosophy of history's insight we should choose to inherit for the future: the empowering appeal to historians as writers that both White and Ankersmit clearly stated, while at the same time being ironically self-aware of language as a non-transparent medium or mirror

12 Cf. H. Kellner, "A Bedrock of Order: Hayden White's Linguistic Humanism", *History and Theory*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1980), 1–29; F. Ankersmit, "The Dilemma of Contemporary Anglo-Saxon Philosophy of History", *History and Theory*, 25 (1986), 1–27; and F. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). In the recent years, White contribution to philosophy of history has been widely acknowledged and celebrated. I have already quoted Ankersmit, Domanska and Kellner, *Re-figuring Hayden White*, 2009 and Paul, *Hayden White*, 2011. See also W. Kansteiner, "Success, Truth and Modernism in Holocaust Historiography: Reading Saul Friedländer Thirty Five Years After the Publication of Metahistory", *History and Theory*, 47 (2009), 25–53; V. Tozzi, *La historia según la nueva filosofía de la historia* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2009); R. Doran, "Editor's Introduction: Humanism, Formalism and the Discourse of History", in H. White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010); and R. Doran ed., *Philosophy of History After Hayden White* (London-New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

13 Ankersmit, "The Dilemma of Contemporary Anglo-Saxon Philosophy of History", 1–27.

14 Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 255.

of historical reality. I will claim that this realization is still a productive one for thinking historical writing, although it must be updated for our theoretical present context.

For this task, we must bear in mind an important claim White made on figuration and historical writing. He stated that tropology "assumes that figuration cannot be avoided in discourse," but that far from implying linguistic determinism it "seeks to provide the knowledge necessary for a free choice among different strategies of figuration."[15] This refusal of White of equating tropology to linguistic determinism attests to how the phantom of language as a prison-house haunted narrativist philosophy of history's debates. It seems that the threat of language as a way of *misrepresenting* history lay beside its promise of being our only way of understanding the past. Thus, the productive tension we found in Mink and Barthes reappears: those fascinating poetic powers of narrative *and* figurative language cannot simply be thought of *as just* a tool.

This paradoxical anxiety towards language and narrative seems to finally have caught up with our founding fathers in their latest writings. Both White and Ankersmit appear to have lost faith in that liberating conception of historical writing and show some distrust of that linguistic structure that launched the whole debate: narrative. It seems that White and Ankersmit feel a need to transcend their own theoretical positions, to liberate themselves from their previous ironical stance. In White's investigations into the idea of the *modernist event*, we find a partial rejection of traditional narrative and a search for a new way of writing he understands as *middle voice writing*, following a notion presented by Roland Barthes.[16] Presenting this notion as an answer to the theoretical and ethical challenge of thinking how to adequately represent traumatic events like the Holocaust, White's own ironical acceptance of narrative history seems to be in need of being surpassed in order to find new ways of historical representation that avoid the main feature of traditional narrative: its closure effect, now seen as producing an ethically dubious domesticating effect on modernist events. On his part, in *Sublime Historical Experience* Ankersmit goes even further than White by claiming that we ought to get rid of narrativism's *linguicism* and investigate a connection with the past that is not mediated at all by language: the sublime historical experiences that, according to him, have made historical consciousness possible by disrupting our whole representational schemes. Forty years after, we seem to have new questions over the paradoxical nature of historical narrative casting doubts on narrativism's

15 H. White, *Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 17.

16 Cf. H. White, "The Modernist Event", in *Figural Realism*, 66–86.

founding irony because, for White, conventional narrative may not be ethically suited to the representation of twentieth-century trauma-history; and, for Ankersmit, because it is seen as the central concern of a linguistic framework we should overcome completely. Now our question is: what is left of White's liberating stance on figuration and historical writing?

From Figuration, through Middle Voice Writing, towards Performativity: Hayden White and the Future of Philosophy of History

White's legacy is a new challenge for us: that of re-assessing the paradoxical task of historical writing. To do so, I will elaborate on White's use of Barthes' idea of middle voice writing with which he tried to give an answer to the theoretical and ethical questions concerning the representation of major historical events of the twentieth century. But now, I believe, it is no longer a matter of thinking how we, as subjects, can know the past, as an object. I agree with Ankersmit when he claims that with White's use of the idea of middle voice writing we can overcome the *oppositional difference between subject and object in historical writing*.[17] The distinction between subject/historian and object/past dissolves when we understand that historical writing as middle voice writing is not just about figuratively constituting the past as the subject of our writing, but it is also about *constituting ourselves as historical subjects in writing*. The double meaning of *subject* is enlightening: to write *history* is to write *ourselves* because the subject-writer of writing is at the same time its subject–theme: us, historical and linguistic beings.[18]

In what follows, I would like to show that thinking in terms of middle voice writing may allow us to move forward from the narrativist debate in philosophy of history. My argument proceeds in three steps: first, I will show that, although related to modernist style, middle voice writing is not a rejection of White's original stance towards historical writing but rather a radicalization of his empowering and ironical appeal to historians. Secondly, I will claim that we can find in performativity theory one promising way of re-thinking the relationship between discourse, agency and historical identity that middle

17 Cfr. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 256–257.

18 This may also explain White's most recent concerns on thinking in terms of the "practical past" rather than the "historical past". Cf. H. White, "El pasado práctico", in V. Tozzi y N. Lavagnino (eds), *Hayden White, la escritura del pasado y el futuro de la histroriografía* (Sáenz Peña: EDUNTREF, 2012), 19–39.

voice writing refigures. To sustain this claim I will present a re-reading of some of White's major insights in narrative discourse that enables an illuminating comparison with Austin's speech act theory. However, I will finally claim that my reading of White's writing on middle voice finds in Judith Butler's inquiry into performativity, rather than in Austin's perspective, an interesting turn: one that can help us think the relationship between historical writing and the *self-constitution* of the historical subject.

1 *From Figuration to Middle Voice Writing*

If at the end of his prolific thinking White finds himself again under the influence of Barthes it is not because he is retreating from his liberating stance on figuration in historical writing, neither because he finally agrees with his rejection of narrative for history.[19] Instead, White discovers in Barthes' analysis of modernist writers such as Woolf and Proust a new conception of writing as middle voice. In "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation", White presents middle voice writing as a radicalization of his appeal to historians from *Metahistory* on.[20] Modernist and middle voice writing are thought together because White is arguing for a new way of thinking the relationship between the subject of writing and his writing, a relationship different from the one presupposed by nineteenth century realism:

> this difference indicates a new and distinctive way of imagining, describing, and conceptualizing the relationships obtaining between agents and acts, subjects and objects, a statement and its referent, between the literal and the figurative levels of speech, and indeed, therefore, factual and

19 Gabrielle Spiegel has recently raised questions over White's reflection on middle voice writing in the context of the discussions over the representation of the Holocaust and claimed that, for those familiar with his work, it almost seems to be a retreat from his earlier stance on figuration. Cf. G. M. Spiegel, "Rhetorical Theory/Theoretical Rhetoric: Some Ambiguities in the Reception of Hayden White's Work", in Doran, *Philosophy of History After Hayden White*, 179. She connects this claim with a mapping of some ambiguities in White's complete work and its reception regarding the status of tropes or his eclectic use of different theoretical resources. Nevertheless, my aim is to contribute to move the narrativist debate forward. Thus, I think that by shifting the focus out of the question of the status of tropes and into a performative re-interpretation of White's claims over discourse and narrative we may be able to assert a connection between figuration and middle voice writing regarding the agency of the subject – writer of history, a connection not developed by him but born from White's own insight on middle voice that my research attempts to explore.

20 White, *Figural Realism*, 27–42.

> fictional discourse. What modernism envisions, according to Barthes' account, is nothing less than an order of experience beyond (or prior to) that expressed in the kinds of opposition we are forced to draw (between agency and patiency, subjectivity and objectivity, literalness and figurativeness, fact and fiction, history and myth, and so forth) in any version of realism.[21]

White adds that this does not imply that such oppositions cannot be used to represent some real relationships, but that "the relationships between the entities designated by the polar terms may not be oppositional ones in some experiences of the world."[22] Thus, through the notion of the modernist event White argued in favor of modernist style as the most ethically and aesthetically attuned way of figuring twentieth century's most traumatic events. Nevertheless, I think that with Barthes' middle voice writing he is aiming deeper: the issue under discussion is *how should we think the relationship between historical writing and figuration once we have already undergone the narrativist debate*.

Before clarifying this claim, I will present Barthes' notion. When he wonders about the intransitive sense that the verb "to write" has acquired in twentieth century, he is trying to discover since when, and why, we can think of the action of *just* writing, as different from writing *something*.[23] With modernist writers in mind, Barthes claims that it is not a matter of the verb "to write" as being a transitive or an intransitive verb, but a matter of thinking writing as the Greek notion of middle voice. This notion entails a relationship between the subject of the action and the action itself by which, by acting, the subject affects itself, remains inside the action, whether the ongoing process entails an object or not. Barthes sees the middle voice as a distinct way of relating the agent to its action: it is not a mere activity (active voice) or passivity (passive voice) but a modality of action in which the subject affects itself, regardless of an object being involved in the action or not. In the middle voice writing, Barthes claims, the subject constitutes itself contemporaneously to his writings, effecting himself and affecting himself through writing. Barthes claims to be working from the point of view of linguistic anthropology that states that language is never a simple useful or decorative instrument of thought, inasmuch as man does

21 White, *Figural Realism*, 39.

22 Ibid., 39.

23 R. Barthes, "To Write: An Instransitive Verb?", in R. Macksey and E. Donato (eds.), *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 134–145.

not preexist language.[24] Moreover, he ends his text by stating that modernist literature was trying to institute a new position of the agent of writing *within* writing itself.

In "Writing in the Middle Voice", White emphasizes that middle voice does not exclude transitivity for Barthes: as a kind of dual action on an object and on oneself, it is *metatransitive.* Moreover, if anything, says White, middle voice 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)."[25] White follows Barthes in his claim that it is only *in* writing and *by* writing that the writer can be said to exist at all: the "writer" is what exists in the interior of the activity of "writing". White adds that middle voice in Greek was used specially "to indicate those actions informed by a heightened moral consciousness on the part of the subject performing them."[26] Thus, he presents Barthes' distinction between active voice and middle voice as the difference between two kinds of consciousness on the part of the subject involved in the action and the force of involvement of the subject in the action:

> It is not a matter of doing something, on the one side, and having something done to one, on the other. It is a matter of distinguishing between two kinds of transitivity, one in which either the subject or the object remains outside the action and one in which the distinction between subject and object is obliterated. For Barthes, writing in the middle voice is creative and liberating insofar as it places the writer-agent *within* the writing process and reveals the constitution of the subject-of-writing as the latent principle, aim, and purpose of all writing. Indeed, for Barthes, writing in the middle voice is a perfect example of the kind of "speech act" that J. L. Austin called "performative". For just as much as "promising" or "swearing an oath" or "judging" have the force both of the active and of the middle voice, inasmuch as in doing them one not only acts on the world but also changes one's own relationship to it, so too modernist writing both acts on something (language, above all) and transforms the writing subject's relationship to the world.[27]

24 Barthes, "To Write: An Instransitive Verb?", 135.

25 White, *The Fiction of Narrative*, 257.

26 Ibid., 261.

27 Ibid., 257.

At the beginning of this paragraph I claimed that with Barthes' middle voice White was trying to re-think the relationship between historical writing and figuration once we have undergone the narrativist debate. He also considered middle voice as a way of revising the polar oppositions we are force to draw in *any* version of realism. Now, isn't this revision of polar oppositions regarding historical writing exactly that task of revising without abrogating our common sense distinction between history and fiction that Mink bequeathed to White? Only the brilliant mind of White could end up in a position where the tension between Mink's and Barthes' different conclusions over historical narrative is productively refigured. Middle voice writing shows us that we cannot forget what we have learned: that writing is our undeniable resource for ever comprehending history. And, at the same time, we can understand that drive White and Ankersmit seem to feel towards transcending our narrativist past through new ways of imagining our historical condition: inasmuch as we are, as the subjects of writing that remain interior to our writing, constituting ourselves as historical beings in writing our history. We are the agents and objects of our historicity.

Hayden White's appeal to historians, then, is and is not the same forty years after *Metahistory*: as Ankersmit showed, it is the same empowering appeal to explore our poetic abilities to grasp historical reality;[28] but, on the other hand, that historical reality to grasp is not an object distinct from us anymore: it is our own historicity performed in writing. Thus, White has left us in need of some theory that philosophically crosses discursivity, historicity and agency to think about our historical self-constitution through writing. In this sense, I feel close to Ankersmit's recent concerns about how a community relates to its own past, although I disagree with his claim that this question begs for an anti-linguistic answer. I think that it demands that we think how we give ourselves a history without *being able* to forget what we have learnt: that figuration in writing is unavoidable, that it is both our limit and our resource, as we describe ourselves as linguistic beings in time.

I believe that through middle voice writing White's appeal to historians is now displaced to the realm of performativity as a theory of agency. We can see a welcoming sign from White to this interpretation in his remark, previously quoted, over middle voice as an example of the performative speech act. Reading middle voice as performative may enable us to account for the following features of it as a point of view on the *agency* of the *subject-writer*: 1) That its action, even if it is linguistic and aims at description, is also performative; 2) that because it involves action *through* language it is, at the same

28 Cf. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 257–261.

time, limited and enabled by linguistic conventions; 3) that it involves the subject *self-constitution* in and through its linguistic performance; and because what is said from 1 to 3 aims at considering language *not* as a mere instrument of the agent, we have a final feature: 4) there is no subject-writer already *given* before its writing.

Pursuing a deeper elaboration of middle voice writing to understand the subject-writer agency may entail a performative interpretation of White's insight on figuration in historical writing. The next paragraph elaborates on this interpretation.

2 *Historical Writing as Performative Figuration*

I believe that the features of middle voice writing that I have just pointed out are close to fundamental features of Butler's performativity theory of gender identity. But White himself, as I showed, linked middle voice with J. L. Austin's original theory of the speech act. For this reason, I think it is illuminating to first try to clarify White's own claim. If, as I have suggested, with his last writings on middle voice White did not retreat from his original stance on figuration in historical writing, can we find some similarities between his and Austin's perspective?

In *How To Do Things with Words* Austin aimed at thinking ordinary language's aspects that question what he called "the descriptive fallacy": the belief that language's sole function is to describe what is real.[29] He explored language uses that do not aim at describing states of affairs but, instead, at performing an action and he offered his well-known distinction between two kinds of language use: a constative use and a performative one. Performative speech acts would be those in which the speaker's actions require the utterance of certain words to be performed and they presuppose some conventional procedures or institutional situations to achieve their aims or, as Austin prefers it, to be felicitous. But along his lectures Austin abandoned the search for criteria to distinguish between constative and performative speech acts and finally claimed that we should rather elucidate the total speech situation in its triple dimensionality: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary.[30]

We may consider Austin's point of view on ordinary language as an illuminating way of reading White's own point of view on historiography if we remember Roman Jakobson's influence in White's more comprehensive way of thinking about discourse. In "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary

29 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Second Edition, J. O. Urmson and M. Sbisa eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

30 Ibid., 148.

Historical Theory," White claimed to be adopting Jakobson's functional theory of communication as a "performance model of discourse".[31] He thus stated that, when we set up to assess a given historical discourse, its referential features – without being denied some relevance – must be thought in their relation to other functions that can be perform at the same time in every communication act (among them, Jakobson considered the emotional, conative, metalinguistic, phatic and poetic functions). With Jakobson's influence in mind, we can compare how White criticized the focus on the referential function as the only relevant or privileged language function in a similar manner as Austin criticized the reduction of language use to its descriptive function. They had a similar point of departure: they were engaging the phenomenon of linguistic communication, speech or discourse as ordinary language to show how its use and functions exceeded the consideration of description as its ultimate aim. Thus, both of them highlighted non-referential or non-descriptive features of language use. While White took from Jakobson the idea that referentiality is interrelated with the simultaneous performance of other communicational functions in every speech act, Austin criticized the descriptive fallacy as a philosophical one-sided point of view on language. At the same time, White and Austin showed the limits of truth-value considerations to fully comprehend the use of language by exploring features of discourse for which it was irrelevant to ask whether what is said is true or false, without rejecting the relevance of such question for other aspects. In Austin's case, this was shown by his distinction between truth conditions and felicity conditions; in White's case, by the distinction between considerations of the truth-value of statements of facts and emplotment as a figurative operation. Moreover, both of them argued about the complexity of distinguishing clearly between language dimensions: for White, regarding the distinction between the informational and the interpretative dimensions of discourse, the referential and the emotional, conative, metalinguistic, or poetic functions; for Austin, regarding what was considered constative as against the performative language uses, that later turned into the threefold dimensionality of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary features in every speech act understood as a total situation.

Austin and White also stressed the dimension of language "effects" or its conative features: as Austin elaborated on the perlocutionary dimension of speech acts, White not only stressed the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of historical narratives, but also claimed that emplotment produces its explanation effect because it refamiliarizes us to the historical record by charging it

31 H. White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 39–42.

with emotional valences.[32] Regarding the illocutionary aspects, Austin took speech act *force* as a fundamental aspect of language that cannot be reduced to, nor confounded with, truth-value considerations. Moreover, this aspect refers to the conventional nature of language as every speech act's condition of possibility. This is also a feature of historical discourse repeatedly addressed by White in his claim that narrativization is fundamentally the processing of chronologically ordered events into a specific story-form by means of a plot-structure available to the historian in virtue of his cultural endowment.[33]

Here we may find a plausible reading of the figurative operations in historical writing as performative in Austin's sense: by taking the literary conventions to which the historian appeals as accepted conventional procedures that contribute to the felicitous performance of historical narratives; in other words, *authorized* interpretation of past events. Literary conventions are, on the one hand, poetic or figurative, while at the same time being resources at hand to historians in their ordinary use of language, on the other. White himself makes this performative reading plausible when stating that by sharing these conventions with his audience the historian can explain historical events by refamiliarizing them, given that he shares with his audience general notions of the ways which significant human situations must obtain by virtue of his or her participation in the specific processes of meaning endowment of his or her literary cultural tradition. The historian's claim to realistically represent the past would then be sustained in the narrative processing of historical events as *a performative condition of possibility* for any question regarding the truth of the *facts* that the historical narration establishes. Moreover, this could enable us to understand White's claim in *Metahistory* that prefiguration is a precognitive and precritical act, or we can say now, a *performative* act by which the historical field is constituted by the historian's use of language and its tropological possibilities. We could even think that the prefix "*pre*" in White's claim of *pre-figuration* in historical writing, understood now as a performative act of meaning-endowment of the historical record, could be recast as a *performative figuration.*

As I showed before, White called *figuration* language's inevitable capacity of creating meaning. By assuming a liberating ironic stance on historical writing, he understood narrativization as figurative: as the production of meaning in historical discourse through the endowment of events with a specific plot-meaning whose poetic powers, but also its constraints, we must confront in

32 Cf. H. White, *Tropics of discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 91.

33 Ibid., 88.

representing past reality. If we consider figuration in historical writing as performative, it will entail that historians constitute their subject-theme as a narrative one by its very description. And maybe seeing middle voice writing too *as* performative would allow us to rethink Mink's, Barthes' and even White's fascination with narrative: when we think of writing our historical identity, narrative proves to be the most powerful and persistent tool at hand.[34] White's claim of the prefigurative nature of every historical text can be thus redefined as the *performative constitution of any historical object by being narratively processed by discourse.* But not only *of* the object: *what is constituted by narrative discourse is the object's historicity.*[35] Now, if we are thinking historical writing as middle voice, we should ask: what does this performative reading of figuration imply when the subject-object distinction reveals itself as misleading because the object of historical writing is *our own* historical identity?

By reading White's fundamental claim through the light of Austin's theory we are stressing the pragmatic aspects of historical writing. It was White himself who equated middle voice writing to a performative speech act, in Austin's sense. But I believe that middle voice writing can exemplify the performative in a more interesting sense: to the extent that it presents us with a different point of view on the relationship between the subject-writer and its writing. What I will try to show is that middle voice writing aims deeper than merely claiming that the historian as subject-writer is performing an action by writing: it is also affecting and effecting itself inasmuch as there is, according to Barthes' notion, "no subject prior to its writing" but a subject contemporaneously constituted through its writings. This last claim – that White also made his own – gestures, in my opinion, towards the performativity not only of the speech act, as it would be thought if we remain in Austin's theory realm, but *of the subject-writer itself.* For this reason, the final paragraph of this paper aims at suggesting how this fundamental insight of middle voice writing can be elaborated through Butler's version of performativity.

3 *Writing in the Middle Voice: The Performativity of the Historical Subject*

What makes Butler's performativity theory an interesting point of view for the philosophical discussion on historical writing is that she finds in a critical rethinking of feminist criticism the same challenges that a point of view on

34 I agree with Nancy Partner's balance regarding the post-postmodern scene in historical studies in N. Partner, "Narrative Persistence: The Post-Postmodern Life of Narrative Theory", in F. Ankersmit, E. Domanska and H. Kellner, *Re-figuring Hayden White*, 81–104.

35 Cf. White, *Figural Realism*, 2.

historical identity as middle voice writing has to face.[36] The first glimpse at a chance of a fruitful reading of middle voice writing through Butler's work can be found in her claim of a possibility of pursuing feminist criticism and politics without positing a pre-given notion of a subject. A second reason would be that for Butler this issue is intimately related to her point of view on language as "not an *exterior medium or instrument* into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self."[37] Both claims resound for us as close to Barthes' and White's idea of middle voice writing. Moreover, Butler is building from this critical stance a theory of agency as "a question on how signification and resignification work"[38] because she is also focusing on how discourse at once enables and constrains what we can say and do with it. For these reasons, I think that Butler's theory may allow us to elaborate on *all four* features I identified of middle voice writing as a point of view on the agency of the historical subject-writer.

Butler's main contribution to our issue would be her antifoundationalist stance on subjectivity presented in *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* Addressing critically other feminist positions, she claims:

> The foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken. My argument is that there need not be a "doer behind the deed," but that the "doer" is variably constructed in and through the deed.[39]

In the 1999 preface to her book, Butler claims that she was writing "in the tradition of immanent critique that seeks to provoke critical examination of the basic vocabulary of the movement of thought to which it belongs."[40] The aim of her polemical text was "to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized".[41] Butler argues that gender is performative not in the sense of an act, but rather as a ritual social drama, as a reiterative process: the action of gender, she claims, requires a

36 For the purpose of this paper I am only focusing in the presentation of Butler's theory in J. Butler, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (Nueva York & Londres: Routledge, 1990).

37 Ibid., 196.

38 Ibid., 197.

39 Ibid., 195.

40 Ibid., vii.

41 Ibid., viii.

performance that is repeated.[42] Against its description as a substantive or stable identity from which various acts would follow or the assumption of a gender as a singular act, she sees gender as "an identity tenously constituted in time", as an effect produced through the normative stylization of the body. For Butler, performativity relates discourse and action, and it involves social normative conventions. But against Austin's theory, she presents performativity as, on the one hand, not a *singular* act, but as a reiteration of acts, a repetitive temporal process whose sedimentated effects is the *appearance* of gender as a substantive identity; and on the other hand, the relationship of performance and norms for her is such that it always allows the possiblity of failure in a stronger (and more critical) sense than in Austin view, given the temporal nature of the performative reiterated acts and its lack of a substantial ground. Moreover, Butler understands the relationship between performativity as a repetitive process and its normative framework (masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality) as *iteration*: she is arguing that rather than positing the prior existence of a norm or convention as the condition of possibility of performativity, it is instead the forced reiteration of social norms that are impossible to act and embody what reinforces their power.

In *Gender Trouble*, she also argues that if we think the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification as performative rather than expressive, 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."[43] For our present purposes what is fundamental to grasp is that Butler was performing a double movement with her notion of gender as performative: she was presenting an internal critic of how feminist theory had understood gender or the category of *women*; while at the same time, she was elaborating a notion of gender performativity as a theory of agency. Her critical theoretical aim was intimately linked to her political engagement as a feminist intellectual, as it is shown in the following claim:

> 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

42 Ibid., 191.

43 Ibid., 193.

> for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.[44]

It is this aspect of her work that I propose to read as contributing to elaborating the concept of historical writing as middle voice. Butler allows us to think the link between discourse, agency and historicity as the *critical* self-constitution of the historical subject-writer: to read self-constitution as performative, as a theory on *writing-agency*, means to understand it as what Butler calls *iteration*. Performativity as iteration implies the production of subjectivity within a discursive-normative framework. It stresses the historical, contingent, non-essential or pre-given nature of gender identity, its *constituted status*. Butler claims that this reconceptualization of identity as an *effect* – that is, as *produced* or *generated* – "means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary".[45] Moreover, according to Butler this manifests the unnecessary binarism of free will and determinism in which feminist discourse on cultural construction was trapped: "Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible."[46] She also claims that through the perspective of gender as performative possibilites of agency foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed would open up. In this sense, she adds: "The culturally enmirred subject negotiates its constructions, even when those constructions are the very predicates of its own identity."[47]

As this last quote shows, Butler's notion of performativity involves the self-constitution of the performing subject, the constitution of its own identity. This self-constitution, this idea of a subject that negotiates its constructions as *the very predicates of its own identity* seems to me to grasp White's profound insight into what it means to write our history. Is not figuration the very predicate of the narrativist-informed historian's identity, what at the same time enables and constrains its agency as subject-writer?

I believe we should consider refiguring the inevitability of figuration in historical writing as *performative*. In so doing, we can promote historical writing as new meaning endowments of historical processes through *iteration* of conventional narrative forms. Understanding this notion as Butler does, we

44 Ibid., 193.

45 Ibid., 201.

46 Ibid., 201. I have worked on how Butler's theory can help us build, from White's work on, a theory of narrative that avoids the voluntarism-determinism dichotomy in La Greca, "Historia, figuración y performatividad".

47 Ibid., 195.

can acknowledge that repetition always holds the possibility of difference. In iterating conventional narrative forms, and in recognizing that this repetition always holds the possibility of the displacement of previous emplotments of the past, we may find an empowering framework for the contemporary problems of historical writing regarding issues of identity constitution – as we can find them, for example, in gender studies and in the difficulties of post-colonial and post-dictatorial societies to rewrite a national identity that comes to terms with a violent past. And it is exactly here where iteration as a theory of writing-agency points at the same time toward Butler's intimate bond between theoretical and political criticism, on the one hand, and towards White's reading of middle voice writing as involving a heightened moral consciousness on the part of the subject performing it, on the other. In other words, seeing historical writing as middle voice, performative and critically self-aware we can rethink what changes in our relationship to the world we can hope for in *and* through our writing. What would it take to engage in this critical writing of a previous normative constituted historical identity, an identity we may want to reflexively rewrite in the mode of a self-constitution and not merely reiterate as an extra-discursive copy of a given version of our past?

Leaving this question open, we can now comprehend that what had happened forty years after narrativism was born is that we have regained contact with the philosophical nature of *philosophy* of history. We understand now and again that to write history and to think philosophically our historicity are one and the same thing. In a structuralist-formalist vocabulary, this idea was already stated by *Metahistory*: we cannot distinguish clearly between history and philosophy of history. And now may be the moment to understand that what a *philosophy* of history has to reclaim is its interest in thinking the discursive and non-discursive way of being, the *performativity*, of the historical subject. Thus, the *poetics of history* today should not be understood as the discursive construction of the historical referent as an object separated from us called "the past", but as the discursive and non-discursive, the performative constitution of *us*, historical subjects. Historical writing would then be *the poetic realization of our historicity*: what we both discover and invent.