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Hayden White and Conversational Pluralism

Verónica Tozzi

ABSTRACT

In 1973 Hayden White proposed a theory of historical work through a classification, which not only showed different ways to research and write history, but also explained why these differences are irreducible, and therefore pluralism is inevitable and controversial. The controversial pluralism that *Metahistory* bequeathed was not well received. It was interpreted, and still is in some sectors, as a celebration of ‘anything goes’ and an ‘attack’ on academic history. In this article I focus on two alternative and critical readings of White’s work, which I call ‘experiential foundationalism’ and ‘metahistorical conceptualism’. While criticizing aspects of these two reading strategies, I propose to reconsider these critical interventions by suggesting a reading of Whitean tropology in combination with figural realism and in the context of a ‘conversational pluralism’ oriented towards the emplotment and reconstruction of past controversies. I conclude by suggesting that to appreciate tropology in terms of a heuristic discipline helps us bring to light irreconcilable differences, but also enables us to refigure in a democratic and dialogic way ‘challenges’ to history arising from public representations of the ‘practical past’.

Understanding is always understanding *differently*.

Hans G. Gadamer (1989)

I. FROM ‘FOUNDATIONALISM’

TOWARD THE EXPERIENTIAL INQUIRY INTO EXPERIENCE

IN recent years, some theoretical historians have proclaimed that the linguistic turn, in history, headed by Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit in the 1960s and 1970s, is exhausted, that it was just a stage in the philosophy of history, and that, at the present time, we are going through a new twist they call “experience turn”.¹ The actual angle of this turn and the degree to which it overcomes the (supposed) flaws traditionally attributed to the linguistic turn are issues that merit a lengthy discussion and that cannot be exhausted in one article. We may, however, want to begin by distinguishing two trends in this “experience turn” by answering the question: what exactly is “vindicated” here: a commitment to a notion of pre-linguistic experience, which officiates as a basis for interpretive diversity; or, something like a historical, anthropological, social, or even biological inquiry of something as historical experi-

¹ On the turn to experience in cultural studies see J. W. Scott “The Evidence of Experience”, *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991): 773-797; S. Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History. Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); and *Reclaiming Identity. Realist Theory and the Predicament Postmodernism*, eds. P. Moya and M. Hames García (Berkeley Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000). More specifically dedicated to the “experience turn” in historical studies are F. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005) and M. Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on an Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

ence? The first approach, the so called ‘presence paradigm’, explicitly claims to be completely separate from the linguistic turn, accused of ‘reducing’ reality and factuality to text, speech, or language. Yet, in affirming this separation adherents to this turn end up reinstating a language-experience dualism that they explicitly declare to want to avoid.² According to a second track, that of ‘experiential foundationalism’, a certain ontological flattening exercised by ‘panlinguism’ strips the story of reference, hence, they propose, something between language and reality, that is ‘experience’, could presumably fulfill that role.³ Both of these self-proclaimed ‘turns’ towards experience, however, seem to have forgotten that the ‘experience’ they see as having replaced language in the concerns of both contemporary historiography and philosophy of history, was already very much a matter of reflection for some philosophers of history who, in the 1980s and 1990s, entertained a fruitful conversation with the linguistic turn and White in particular. Specifically, the nature and place of experience in the historiographical operation was an issue that inspired the work of both Paul Ricœur and David Carr on the relationship between narrative and history. Both philosophers located – via hermeneutics, phenomenology, and Heidegger – the rationale and last reference of narrative in the human experience of time. Despite their differences, they both argued that historical and literary narrative have their reference in the world of life (action and experience). Yet, while they succeeded in illuminating the ground of narrative, this ground turns out to be rather more pragmatic and performative, than they conceded, since *qua* referent it does not accomplish the role of a neutral empirical basis for deciding between alternative narratives. In addition, temporal experience does not allow to differentiate between literary and historical narrative, hence, maintaining the duality between experience and language is not of great help in reconstructing, or getting involved in historical controversies.

Ricœur’s work has been taken up again and again, but I am particularly interested in the recovery recently conducted by Jonas Grethlein, given his aim to redefine the referentiality of narrative in terms of the old notion of “re-experiencing”.⁴ While history has to do with experience, for Grethlein what the historian does is to re-experience the past. And by re-experiencing he does not mean a psychological process, but the use of devices or resources such as introspection, declamations and the named “side-shadowing”,⁵ which allow re-experiencing the past not just as it was (or as it was not), but as it was experienced by historical agents, i.e., in its temporary opening in relation to the future.⁶ Then, he introduces the notion of “narrative reference” in analogy to Paul Ricœur’s notion of “metaphorical reference”, according to

² H. U. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) and “Presence Achieved in Language (With Special Attention Given to the Presence of the Past)”, *History and Theory*, 45, 3 (2006): 317-327; see also M. Bentley, “Past and ‘Presence’: revisiting historical ontology”, *History and Theory*, 45, 3 (2006): 349-361.

³ J. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience”, *The American Historical Review*, 92, 4 (1987): 879-907.

⁴ J. Grethlein, “Experientiality and ‘Narrative Reference’, With Thanks to Thucydides”, *History and Theory*, 49 (October 2010): 315-335.

⁵ *Sideshadowing* is a term invented by the literary theorist Gary Saul Morson. It refers to the technique of making external comments to the main narrative, suggesting to the reader that there could be more things happening or possibly more narratives, i.e., the story is not a closed system.

⁶ “The reference to experientiality relies largely on fictive elements, but the fictionalization is not arbitrary; indeed, it can be subjected to a critical method”, Grethlein, “Experientiality”, 328.

which metaphor derives its meaning from a failure of literal meaning, and, in parallel, it occurs or generates a second order of reference derived from the suspension of literal reference.⁷ Narrative reference, thanks to re-experiencing techniques, enables a second-order reference, the past is given to us as ‘as if’, what is recreated is not the same as words or deeds but the experience of an opening. Unfortunately, we cannot consider that *the past given to us as ‘as if’*, means, in Grethlein’s sense, having recovered an independent referent from language, because that which has been produced is an artifice to trigger the effect of the ‘as if we were the agents from the past’. By the same token, when producing, reading, or discussing historical interpretations or narratives, questions go towards which resources and devices were used, arranged, circumvented, served, exaggerated. In no case we will be reviewing the experience itself to weigh the relevance or correctness of the selected resources.

To overcome this dualism we need to revisit the reflections of Paul Ricœur and David Carr on the notion of “narrative experience”. As scholars of both authors may recall, their inquiries were not directed to meet a pre-linguistic notion of experience that language supposedly mirrors. By sharing the same theoretical background derived from the analytical theory of action and Husserl’s phenomenology of experience (specifically Heidegger’s reappropriation of it), they insisted on the being ‘made’ of human experience of the past, either pre-theoretically or pre-critically (not pre-linguistically). The crucial difference between the two narrativists was whether the constitution of experience, either pre-theoretically or pragmatically, was narrative or not. For Carr, experience and action (ultimately life itself) are narrative prior to any expression in history and literature; while for Ricœur, the structure of experience and action induces the narrative that needs to be told. The poetic act rises from the background of life (which is not narrative but it asks to be told) to reach its full meaning (narrative) in the act of reading (to follow, refigure the story).⁸ While Carr and Ricœur’s connected their reflections on (historical) narrative to action and experience, neither of them took advantages of the insight in order to avoid the return to foundationalist expectations. That was the route followed by pragmatism when it reflected upon the role of experience in life, politics, and science.⁹

As R. J. Bernstein has argued, these early considerations successfully avoided the body-mind dualism, or what he called “the Cartesian anxiety” of the search for an independent experience or reality as the ground for knowledge.¹⁰ Furthermore, they offered a very interesting approach to the relationship between language and experience, which classical pragmatists such as George Herbert Mead would develop on into a theory of experience as the behavior of an organism in the environment, which, in a Wittgensteinian spirit, implied that language is action, meaning is use, and use is nothing but effective behaviors repeated over time. For pragmatism, there is no linguistic determinism, only contingency, because the meaning is the rule ‘ac-

⁷ See P. Ricœur, *Le métaphore vive* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), 273-321, quoted in Grethlein, “Experientiality”, 329.

⁸ D. Carr, *Time, Narrative and History* (Bloomington Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), and P. Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁹ R. J. Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutic, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

¹⁰ G. H. Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 35. See also V. Tozzi, “Pragmatist Contributions to a New Philosophy of History”, *Pragmatism Today*, 3 (2012): 121-131.

tually' followed in the concrete linguistic behavior. Without linguistic behavior there is no rule, no meaning. There is no language outside language exchanges (speech acts) themselves. It is a pending task to deepen this inquiry, but the important thing is that both programs are not inconsistent with the idea of reference. For George H. Mead, reference of language occurs in the readjustment of the emergent with the environment, and for Wittgensteinians, as noted by Elizabeth Anscombe, in human affairs, reference is performative-ness and self-reference.¹¹ Therefore, plurality, conflict, and negotiation will be the currency to rearticulate or reset the system, there is nothing out of this exchange to tell us which interpretation is the most 'adequate' or 'similar' to a reality or an experience prior to, and outside of some interpretive dispute. Theory of history in general, and White's philosophy of history in particular, have everything to gain from entertaining a deeper and more continuous dialogue with pragmatism. In particular, seen from a pragmatist perspective White's approach could be best appreciated as one more step beyond the objectivism vs relativism dilemma.

Such, in fact, it is the case with American philosopher of history Paul Roth who, well familiarized with the discussions in the New Philosophy of Science, has revisited traditional questions about whether such notions as "pre-linguistic experience" or "independent past of our constructions" may have some normative and prescriptive function on our theoretical constructs. In a recent article, Roth puts in dialogue the now classic works of Arthur Danto, Louis Mink and Mead on the inutility (no 'use') of the belief in a fixed past as referent of historical interpretation, with the later work of Ian Hacking to conclude that the "historical constitution" of events just means, "that what events can be said to exist depends on the stock of descriptions or categories available. [Thus] when the stock changes, by addition or deletion, the extant events at a time do as well".¹²

This means that talking about the past as constituted by historical research rather than discovered (or waiting to be discovered like a hidden treasure) is to assume "[...] the priority of classification over perception in the order of understanding".¹³ As Roth concludes:

Because nothing a priori anchors practices of classification, no sense can be attached to claims that some single structure must or does determine what events take place in human history. A plurality of past results because constituting a past depends to some degree on socially mediated negotiations of a fit between descriptions and experience.¹⁴

In the company of Hacking and Roth, there are no things (past or not past) outside research practices, or outside of interpretative disputes. To which we may also add, that there are no qualifying structures waiting for some content to fill them.

¹¹ See E. Anscombe, "The Question of Linguistic Idealism", E. Anscombe, *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1981), vol 1, 112-134, "On the Source of Authority of the State", *Ratio*, 20 (1978a): 1-28, "Rules, Rights, and Promises", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 3 (1978b): 318-323, D. Bloor, *Wittgenstein, Rules, and Institutions*, (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), and M. Kusch, *A Skeptical Guide to Meaning and Rules: Defending Kripke's Wittgenstein*, (Chesham: Acumen & McGill-Queen's, 2006).

¹² P. Roth, "The Pasts", *History and Theory*, 51 (October 2012): 339. It is necessary to add, that along with Roth, also Keith Jenkins and Frank Ankersmit have entertained a fruitful dialogue with Rorty's neopragmatism.

¹³ Roth, "The Pasts", 339.

¹⁴ Roth, "The Pasts", 339.

II. METAHISTORICAL CONCEPTUALISM

A second area of major impact has been on the critical trend that has arisen against the apparent rigidity of White's conception of narrative. Several scholars have focused less on the reference issue than on the relationship between narrative and temporality, and offered counter-arguments to White's tropology with classifications that pay attention not so much to the discursive or linguistic resources that constitute representations of the past, but to the experience of temporality. Mark S. Phillips and François Hartog, for example, have inquired into the alleged "double nature" of historical temporality – conceptual and experiential – as well as on the plural and even conflictual character of different experienced or recorded temporalities, in order to recover the plurality of experiences that leads to a plurality of stories that measure time differently. While recognizing the importance of the former's exploration of the notion of "historical distance" as invoked by historians and philosophers, I will focus here on Hartog's reflections on "regimes of historicity".

"In a restricted sense", Hartog writes,

how does a society consider its past? How does a society deal it? In a broader sense, the regime of historicity designates 'the method of self-awareness' in a human community [...] an instrument for comparing different types of history, but also and even primarily, I would now add, highlights methods of relating to time: forms of experiencing time, here and elsewhere, today and yesterday.¹⁵

Time, Hartog further suggests, sometimes is a content, sometimes is an actor, and the human experience of time, as Ricoeur had already pointed out, is what Heidegger identified as "intratemporariness", with all its rich instrumental or conceptual vocabulary: "we have time", "we are on time", "time is running out", "we lost time", "we wasted our time", all expressions that Ricoeur located in the world of practical pre-understanding. Now, if we pay attention to Hartog and Ricoeur's accounts, we will be involved in the enactment or operation (whatever you call it) of basic the pentad of actor, agent, cause, reason, and purpose that Kenneth Burke identified in *A Grammar of Motives* and White in *Metahistory* recovered to differentiate the various ways of prefiguring the historical field.¹⁶ Time, in "regimes of historicity", may be agency, actor, or scene. It is just the implementation of the basic pentad in narrative configuration of temporality itself, which White undoubtedly got from Burke's work.

Similarly, in the context of analyzing what specific configuration of resources is used in a historical work to mediate between the historian, his audience and other interpretations, we could say that both Ricoeur and Carr would recognize that the basic pentad was used in communal language well before it was in history and literature (two late products in the history of human culture). We can finally see how the inquiry into the experience of time and its relation to narrative configuration puts Carr, White, and Ricoeur closer to one another than they would have them-

¹⁵ F. Hartog, "La temporalización del tiempo: un largo recorrido", ed. A. Jacques, *Los relatos del tiempo*, (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 2011), 13-33 (my translation).

¹⁶ K. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945); H. White, *Metahistory, The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 14-15.

selves imagined.¹⁷ In fact, of late, there has emerged even another area of shared interest among them. Over the past few years White has been taken to comment on the relation between popular (or communal) and academic history, by appealing to Oakeshott's distinction between the "practical" and the "historical" past. As White understands this distinction:

The practical past is made up of all those memories, illusions, bits of vagrant information, attitudes and values which the individual or the group summons up as best they can to justify, dignify, excuse, alibi or make a case for actions to be taken in the prosecution of a life project.¹⁸

On the other hand, "the historical past [is] that past which [can] be studied scientifically, disinterestedly, as an end in itself and 'for its own sake'".¹⁹ White, of course, adds that these "two kinds of past are rather more ideal typifications than descriptions of actual points of view or ideologies".²⁰ But the distinction is more to emphasize their separation and even controversial status, rather than capturing their continuities.

At last, with his reflections on the "practical past" White seems to have taken a belated but explicit bow towards the line of metahistorical inquiry initiated by Ricoeur and continued in the metahistorical conceptualism of Phillips and Hartog without falling into the experiential foundationalism of the "presence paradigm" and of the promoters of experience turn. Their legacy is neither the alleged contact with the pre-linguistic experience, nor something like an inquiry into the formal structures of experience, but a metahistorical research program on the diversity of experience, diversity of its conceptual and linguistic modeling or constitution. No need to appeal to any linguistic structure (independent of actual linguistic acts) or to invoke any dualism of language and experience. The proposal here is to re-run metahistorical tools to ponder the various ways of weighing time and expertise.²¹

III. CONVERSATIONAL PLURALISM AND THE DISSOLUTION OF THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN HISTORY AND META-HISTORY

While *Metahistory's* hard or visible core is based on the combination of some of Frye's plots, Mannheim's ideologies, and Pepper's explanatory modes, plus the re-

¹⁷ White, for example, has continued to consider Ricoeur and Carr's sophisticated accounts too general: "I am inclined to credit Carr's account of the authority of narrative representations of historical reality and even the view, which Carr shares with Lukács [...] that narrative is a distinct cognitive mode rather than *only* a form of discourse. But the notion that narrative explains events by 'configuring' them as a stories is still too general". H. White, "Storytelling: *Historical and Ideological*", *The Fiction of Narrative* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 282.

¹⁸ H. White "The Practical Past", *Historein*, 10 (2010), 16. In the talk-version of this article delivered at the Buenos Aires Conference "The Practical Past" in 2011, White expressed the idea in a closer way to Carr and Ricoeur: "It refers to those notions of the past which all of us carry around with us in our daily lives and which we draw upon, willy-nilly and as best we can, for information, ideas, models, and strategies for solving all the practical problems – from personal affairs to grand political programs – met with in whatever we conceive to be our present 'situation'. Quoted with permission of the author.

¹⁹ White, "The Practical", 16.

²⁰ White, "The Practical", 17.

²¹ For a more detailed study of these points see A. Kidd, "Kenneth Burke and Contemporary Philosophy of Science", *The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society*, 7, 2 (2011): 2-4; L. J. Prelli, "The Prospect of Invention in Rhetorical Studies of Science, Technology, and Medicine," *Poroi*, 9, 1 (2013): 1-10.

duction of all of that to Burke's four tropes theory, White has been read by many critics as proposing a structuralist theory of the historical work. We must recognize that White has never rejected this association, and his reading and use of structural theorists informs all of his writings. Could White have avoided such structuralistic fascination? Try to imagine an intellectual historian, theoretically alert, who in the 1950s comes across with the emergence and development of a highly sophisticated scientific program which promises, in Roman Jakobson's words, to give "the key to the laws that govern language and its relationship with other social institution," and you'll have the answer.²² The explanatory power of structural linguistics – with its a-historical and universalist pretensions – that contributed to the elucidation of historical consciousness was so influential that it led White and some of his sharpest readers (Ankersmit) to perceive some sort of affinity even with Kant's transcendentalism. However, in recent years, another line of interpretation has emerged. This alternative account pays more attention to the Vichian roots of White's theorizing and focuses on how White himself has read Erich Auerbach's work, *Mimesis and Figure*, first, in order to make more explicit how the study of literature and literary theory contribute to shine some light on the status of historical knowledge and, second, to highlight how White's notion of *figural realism* contributes to shine the relationship among various realistic but controversial interpretations.²³

The value of these readings and discussions resides in their asking what are the scope and consequences of metahistorical analysis in order to place White in the philosophical field of inquiry on the status of historical and metahistorical categories, thereby displacing more sterile and disciplinarian discussions of whether Whitean accounts attack historians or not, in favor of a broader discussion in which everyone is involved, and invited to join in. This interpretive change is valuable not so much for the plurality per se, but in terms of the possibility of continuing the discussion on, and exchange of new and unexpected interpretations. Epistemic, aesthetic and ethical combinations favored by specific tropes do not amount to a set of systematic, closed, and coherent structures as definitive characteristics of each historical interpretation. Historical interpretations, narratives, or texts are not closed and finished monads with essential features. On the contrary, tropological tools are useful to assess the preferences (tendencies) that each interpretation expresses in comparison to other alternatives.

The famous chart on page 29 of *Metahistory* is not an algorithm for the reconstruction of the logical structure of historical interpretations (theories or narratives), but a heuristic strategy that contributes to illuminate the differences and similarities among rival interpretations, albeit not exclusively in the disciplinary framework of academic history, but also in any space or sphere where the past is in dispute.²⁴ Here, I

²² R. Jakobson and M. Halle, *Fundamental of Language* (The Hague: Mouton & Co-Gravenhage, 1956).

²³ R. Doran, "Editor's Introduction", H. White, *The Fiction of Narrative*, xiii-xxxiii, and H. Paul, *Hayden White* (London: Polity Press, 2011), K. Ball, "Hayden White's Hope, or the Politics of Prefiguration", R. Doran, *Philosophy of History after Hayden White* (London, New Delhi, New York, Sidney: Bloomsbury, 2013), 89-108, and F. Ankersmit, E. Domanska, and H. Kellner, *Refiguring Hayden White* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

²⁴ This point necessitates of a clarification. Of course there is no hindrance to the implementation of the grid to an individual work, whether historiographical, literary, or commemorative. This notwithstanding, any application or any reading, even of a meta-historical character, is done from a context and that

would like to recover three readers of White's work that support this account: Keith Jenkins, who provocatively (and even ironically) asserts that the fundamental teaching of White's work is the failure to distinguish between history and meta-history; Allan Megill, with his appreciation of the nature of drifting or interpretive change – he calls “dialectic rhetoric” what I call “conversational pluralism”; and finally, David Harlan, who has paid attention more than anyone else to the cultural and democratic consequences of White's work.

Since long ago, Keith Jenkins has recognized Whitean tropology as a strategy to capture the refiguring nature of historiographical controversies: all history is a re-writing of the past and all rewriting is not only an opening but a refiguration and promotion of other new and unsuspected refigurations.²⁵ However, Jenkins has linked this open and pluralistic renewal emerging from White's work to a certain postmodernist self-consciousness of failure. In “Nobody does it better: Radical history and Hayden White”, he writes:

Radical historians thus turn the weaknesses of ‘proper history’ into strengths, celebrate the fact that historians’ representations (including their own) are *always* failed representations, that historians qua historians always get the past wrong, and that it is these “facts” which become the basis for a new *synthesis* which, discarding the desire for closure, builds uncertainly on uncertainly.²⁶

Jenkins' comments on the role of radical historians prompt two types of objections; one against the assimilation of his position with that of White, and, second, concerning the plausibility as well as the radical-ness of Jenkins' own position. Whether applied to nineteenth-century historiography, witness literature about the Holocaust, or Saul Friedlander's latest book, White's tropological analysis is precisely addressed to the rejection of the right v. wrong or false v. true predicates in the evaluation of historical representations.²⁷ The rejection of narrative closure does not refer to an alleged falseness of close narratives, because false or wrong implies that there is some correct or true way of doing things but we are missing it or it is not within our reach. Moreover, Whitean appropriations of Auerbach's figural causality in order to elucidate the conditions of production of a “realistic representation” show that what makes any interpretation ‘realistic’ is the use of conventionally shared resources of configuration in some specific context.

Being non-definitive, in the sense of lasting in the future as “the realistic figuration”, does not mean, or is not a result of, a failure in representing reality, given that it is not possible to fail in getting some goal that has not been pursued, i.e. reaching the “definitive representation” instead of “our realistic representation” according to our context. Weaving interpretive change or history of historiography in terms of

very context offers alternatives, that is, the meta-historian as a competent user of the grid, has examples of the various alternative uses, which will contribute to the exercise of his expertise in implementing meta-historical tools in an individual case, or in choosing which is the trope that is running more strongly in the individual work.

²⁵ K. Jenkins, *Refiguring the past* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

²⁶ Ankersmit, Domanska, and Kellner, *Refiguring*, 112.

²⁷ S. Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945: The Years of Extermination* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007) and H. White, “Historical Truth, Estrangement, and Disbelief”, Jena, 2011 (unpublished paper reference with permission by the author).

tropology and figural realism makes it impossible to think of White assessing the variety of interpretations and the relationship between them in terms of failure and error. On the contrary, the force and value of any figuration is not assessed in terms of whether it is definitive or not, but in terms of its suitability to be recovered in other contexts, to be taken in new contexts as predecessor.

On the other hand, Jenkins' description of the task of radical history in terms of its acknowledged necessary failure is impractical, because: from which perspective and from which context can I sustain the failure of what I am thinking or interpreting? Any evaluation of error or success always happens in some context. The hope that a new participant arrives is not necessarily motivated to show me some mistake but to teach me any other way to conceive or see things, or simply to remind us that things could always have been otherwise.

This is the interpretive line followed by Allan Megill. In "The Rhetorical Dialectic of Hayden White", Megill points out that "one is tempted to reread *Mimesis* in the light of White's comments, for he prompts us to see that book as itself an instance of rhetorical dialectic".²⁸ On dialectics White follows his heroes Hegel and Marx but, Megill continues, dialectics in its purest form, unlike rhetoric, seeks to resolve the contradictions from the beginning on a scientific basis and at a (supposedly) superior (extra-textual) level. White's dialectical rhetoric, instead, does not seek closure. Dialectical rhetoric is as critical as can be imagined, but it refuses to believe that as a form of rhetorical criticism it can offer standards for interpretive correction.²⁹ What is sought is that the audience accepts the truth of the statement, or that it can be persuaded to do so. Now, where does this dialectical rhetoric take effect? Precisely, Megill tells us, in White's reading of Auerbach, that is, in the recognition that the task of literary history is to produce the 'concept' of literary history, thereby suggesting that there is no separation or demarcation between history and metahistory, metahistory and philosophy of history,³⁰ research practice and normative reflection on how the past should be represented, between language and metalanguage.³¹ The great works of nineteenth-century historians are suggestions not only about the past but also about the very notion of historicizing the past. Therefore the White's concept of history, Megill fairly notes, is rhetorical and "peculiarly aesthetic".³²

Let us see this in detail: something is "peculiarly aesthetic" given that what is produced – "realistic representation of reality" – is emplotted in a figural causal scheme or figure-fulfillment logic: each new configuration comes to fulfill what had been promised in a previous configuration, and this very configuration is re-appropriated as precursor. But this task is rhetorical, this means that plausibility is enough for a dialectical rhetorician, who begins with the exploration of opposites and does not

²⁸ Ankersmit, Domanska, and Kellner, *Refiguring*, 193.

²⁹ See Megill, "The Rhetorical", 191 and 192.

³⁰ That is, there is no difference between the so called critical philosophy of history (the account of the status of historiography) and speculative or substantive philosophy of history. Both of them make use of the same stock of resources related to the narrativization of human past.

³¹ H. White "Auerbach's Literary Theory. Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism", H. White, *Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999): 87-100.

³² "Accepting the notion of a 'concept' of literary history, White suggests in short order that the concept is 'peculiarly aesthetic' and that its aesthetic character is centrally tied up with 'figurality'". Megill, "The Rhetorical", 192.

need the pressure of foundation from the start.³³ In short, unlike the strict dialectician who would seek to resolve Auerbach antithesis between literal and figural, between figurative and literal aspects of any realistic representation, White explores the complexities of ‘fulfillment’ itself. And he does this not in the name of deception or skepticism, or to show the banality of any response. Rather, Megill says, he first puts on hold the question of the truth of speech, and then provides a way to structure the discussion itself.³⁴ Megill notes that White follows the same method in “Freud’s Topology of Dreaming” where he juxtaposes Freud’s dream theory and the theory of tropes as articulated by post-Renaissance rhetoricians.³⁵ In any case he deals with the question of the adequacy of these theories. The same operation can be found in “Formalist and Contextualist Strategies in Historical Explanation”, and in “Narrative, Description, and Topology in Proust”, in which he argues “that there is no such thing as a specifically historical approach to the study of history but fortunately there is a variety of such approaches”.³⁶

In relation to this last remark, David Harlan’s account in “‘The Burden of History’ Forty Years Later” is noteworthy.³⁷ He invites us to connect the call to restore the intimate relationship among history, art, poetry, rhetoric, and ethics before history’s professionalization – such as White put it in “The Burden of History” (1966) – with the call, inserted forty years later in “The Public Relevance of Historical Studies” (2005),³⁸ to restore the dignity of historical studies on the basis of meeting the goals of the larger intellectual community. For Harlan this call has been made all the more urgent by the necessity of coming to terms with popular and nonacademic history:

Nothing like that happened in the mid-1960s, of course; indeed, the profession turned its face in the opposite direction. But things are different this time around: the new popular history is proliferating far too rapidly, has saturated the surrounding culture far too thoroughly, and has become far too prominent for academic historians to continue ignoring it.³⁹

I would like to finish by pointing out some programmatic directions in which these lines of reading of White’s work allow us to venture. First, the application of tropology and figural realism to emplot the history of historiography not only realizes the inherent pluralism in academic history, but is also instrumental to explaining that the purpose of the discipline is not the closure of debates about the past (although without the sensation of failure that Jenkins observes), but the promotion of new ways of thinking about the past. Second, they enable us to consider the availability, use, and circulation of patterns of figuration, artifices are not property of any elite or disciplined community. The pluralism promoted by White is not limited to academic history but to any configuration of the past, whether made by professional history, or in institutional forms of memory, or literature. This is nowhere more evident than in his dedication to apply his metahistorical tools to Primo Levi and Virginia Woolf’s literary works, or Oliver Stone’s *JFK*, just as much as to Friedlander’s *The Years of Ex-*

³³ Megill, “The Rhetorical”, 193.

³⁵ White, *Figural Realism*, 101-125.

³⁷ Ankersmit, Domanska, and Kellner, *Refiguring*, 169-189.

³⁸ H. White, “The Public Relevance of Historical Studies: A Reply to Dirk Moses”, *History and Theory*, 44 (2005): 333-338.

³⁴ Megill, “The Rhetorical”, 193.

³⁶ White, *Figural Realism*, 65.

³⁹ Harlan, “‘The Burden of History’”, 180.

termination. That is, once the metahistorical chart is made explicit in any text, creative and integrative resources or artifices (metaphorical and synecdochical), and critical and deconstructive ones (metonymic and ironic), are available to all those who interact with the past, whether in the public or in the discipline field.

These three consequences allow us to reconcile two apparently opposite claims about the relationship between academic history and public sphere, disciplinary history and communal or popular histories, or, in White's words, the "historical" and the "practical" past. Few would still argue that historiography does not have to pay attention to the challenges posed by new social movements, by postcolonial theory, by the emergency of new forms of identity, etc. in order to modify some of its disciplinary practices. On the other hand, the so called "memory boom" and the political use of academic histories, as well as the proliferation of histories outside academy, in movies, in novels, and even comic books, has often provoked defensive reactions from historians clinging to the preservation of a critical role for professional history. Appreciating tropology in terms of a heuristic discipline aimed at bringing to light irreconcilable differences would instead enable all of us to engage in a democratic and dialogic way with those 'challenges' to history coming from popular modes of representation, as well as with the 'criticism' that professional historians can direct at other modes of appropriation of the past. Every historicization presents itself as the fulfillment of some unaccomplished promise made by previous or rival historicizations, whether academic or popular, historical or practical, and not necessarily in search of reconciliation or consensus; in fact, more often than not, aimed at highlighting differences. Therefore, from the conversationalist perspective I have sought to outline here, one can conclude that tropology and figural realism effectively take charge of *the burden of history*.

Yet, to return now to our point of departure, we also need to be watchful that debates on whether historians should be the guardians of factual correctness, or, vice versa, histories in the public sphere should be the measure of the genuine experiences of individuals and communities, not be read in foundationalist terms. These debates should be cast in terms of the ontological and anthropological commitments (that is, ponderings on relationships among the five elements of Burke's pentad: actor, act, agency, reason, and purpose) that our modes of figuring the past have performed, as well as in terms of their possible consequences. In other words, whether we care about historical experiences, whether we are interested in the unknown conditions of our actions, whether we want to recover silenced voices, we will always be facing multiple possibilities of historicizing. As White himself put in 2010,

It is worthwhile to point out that an interest in the way historical studies are carried out is or should be a matter of concern to any educated citizen. The professionals may own 'history', insofar as by the term 'history' they mean that aspect of the past, which is studied in the way they study it and write about it. But professional historians do not own the past and they have no exclusive claim over the study of the way in which the past and the present may be brought together in a comprehensive vision of historical reality. As a matter of fact, that claim can as legitimately be made for literary writers and especially novelists writing in the 'modern' mode.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ White, *The Fiction of Narrative*, x.

At last, after forty years of *Metahistory*, philosophers and theorists of history seems to be finally disputing in conversationalist terms about the influences on White (i.e., about who his ancestors were). In Auerbach's terms, this is a dispute to define our own predecessors in the production of the concept of history, but also, we add, one in which no one (whether layman or expert) has a privileged position. This does not imply that we are all wrong, or that 'anything goes'. As a dialectical rhetorician would teach us: any notion is plausible; but beware: to convince any audience (whether of peers or fellow citizens in the public sphere, in the politics of memory, or in active civil militancy) requires a strong effort to combine our epistemic, ethical and aesthetical preferences to offer new ways to refigure the past.

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