

Storia della Storiografia
Histoire de l'Historiographie
History of Historiography
Geschichte der Geschichtsschreibung

Rivista internazionale · Revue internationale
International Review · Internationale Zeitschrift

65 · 1/2014



Fabrizio Serra editore, Pisa · Roma

Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Milano n. 310 del 26/07/1982

Direttore responsabile: Edoardo Tortarolo

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www.libraweb.net

Stampato in Italia · Printed in Italy

ISSN 0392-8926

ISSN ELETTRONICO 2281-1141

Amministrazione e abbonamenti

Fabrizio Serra editore®

Casella postale n. 1, succursale n. 8, I 56123 Pisa,
tel. +39 050 542332, fax +39 050 574888, fse@libraweb.net

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Contents

METAHISTORY FORTY YEARS AFTER

Guest Editors:

Claudio Fogu and Kalle Pihlainen

Claudio Fogu, Kalle Pihlainen, <i>Metahistory's Fortieth Anniversary</i>	11
Arthur Lima de Avila, <i>A Plane, a Bomb, a Museum: the Enola Gay Controversy at the National Museum of Air and Space of the United States (1993-1995)</i>	15
Chris Lorenz, <i>It Takes Three to Tango. History between the 'Practical' and the 'Historical' Past</i>	29
Claudio Fogu, <i>Figuring White in Metamodernity</i>	47
Ewa Domanska, <i>Retroactive Ancestral Constitution, New Animism and Alter-Native Modernities</i>	61
Hans Kellner, <i>Reading Hayden White Reading</i>	77
Julio Bentivoglio, <i>Caio Prado Júnior, the 1930s Generation and the Brazilian Historical Imagination: Exercising Metahistory</i>	89
Kalle Pihlainen, <i>The Eternal Return of Reality: On Constructivism and Current Historical Desires</i>	103
María Inés La Greca, <i>Narrative Trouble, or Hayden White's Desire for a Progressive Historiography Refigured by Judith Butler's Performativity Theory</i>	117
Nicolás Lavagnino, <i>Specters of Frye: Muthos, Ideology and Anatomy of (Historiographical) Criticism</i>	131
Omar Murad, <i>Modernist Figuration in the Representation of Argentina's Recent Past</i>	145
Robert Doran, <i>Metahistory and the Ethics of Historiography</i>	153
Ruth V. Gross, <i>Everyday Figuralism and Narrative Confusion, Kafka Style</i>	163
Verónica Tozzi, <i>Hayden White and Conversational Pluralism</i>	171
Wulf Kansteiner, <i>At the Limits of Historical Realism: Narration, Argumentation, and Ethics in Synthetic Holocaust Historiography</i>	183
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS	203

Specters of Frye: *Muthos*, Ideology and Anatomy of (Historiographical) Criticism

Nicolás Lavagnino

ABSTRACT

The influence of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* in White's work is evident from the very moment that the reader begins to read the Introduction to *Metahistory*. Frye appears there as providing a kind of vocabulary for the analysis of historical narratives, focusing on the concept of *emplotment*. But it can be said that in the face of the plurality of critical theories contained in Frye's *Anatomy*, White has proceeded, from *Metahistory* onwards, in a cautious, even restrictive fashion, generating an artificial division between the vocabulary of ideological implication and that of *emplotment*. This caution, I argue, has restricted much of the potential and utility of Frye's critical specters for a historical narratology. The exclusive focus on *emplotment* in White's work has an important role, which is to reinforce the distinction between the tropological deep base and the surface strategies of which plots and implications are two of the dimensions surveyed. Yet, as a result of the commitment to the idea of a tropologically informed depth, we get a curious amputation of Frye's theory of *muthos* in order to make space for this artificial distinction. But narrativism should not generate these false dilemmas. White's philosophy of history and Frye's literary theory tend to converge on a view of language that places it in a continuous social *praxis* within the variable spectrum of human behavior. It is for this reason that in the end I suggest to adopt the framework of "radical interpretation", present in the philosophy of language of Donald Davidson, as a way to enrich this perspective and deepen what I call *broad muthos theory*.

*There is no such thing as creation ex nihilo.
The prefiguration-fulfillment model dispels
the myth of a creativity without violence.*

Hayden White, "Northrop Frye's place
in Contemporary Cultural Studies"

I. FRYE, AUERBACH, JAKOBSON

THE influence of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* in White's work is evident from the very moment that the reader begins to read the Introduction to *Metahistory*, probably the most widely read, quoted, criticized, and discussed text in twentieth century's philosophy of history.¹ Frye appears there as providing a kind of vocabulary for the analysis of historical narratives, focusing on the concept of *emplotment*. This kind of vocabulary is, among others (such as Pepper's *world hypothesis* and Mannheim's *ideological implications*), located in a situation of irreducible complementarity with the other two. This situation is marked at the same time by tensions from

¹ N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); H. White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

which the conceptual space for authorial decisions, styles, and peculiar attributes of composition emerges. In turn, this set of variables is made dependent of a deep instance, the infrastructure of historical text, which finds in its tropological information an inescapable base.

It can be pointed out that *Metahistory* is, as Hans Kellner put it, several texts in one, containing divergent intentions.² Its brief, revolutionary, theoretical, and systematic introduction is extended into an exhaustive tour of the historical imagination in the long nineteenth century, a euphemism used by White to describe the vicissitudes of the commitments towards society and history in the time span between the *Enlightenment* and Benedetto Croce.

This structure is intended to enable the double deployment of the text: first, in the direction of a systematic theory about historical languages that surveys the spectrum of conceptual mediations required to produce a *verbal version* of our past in a *narrative form* operationalized by means of *tropological procedures*. And second, in the distinction of a synoptic view of the *dynamics of linguistic change*, that pays attention to cultural drifts, understood in their broadest sense. Again, Kellner has shown the effectiveness of tropology in proposing a protocol for cultural change alternative to dialectic, evolution, and the vast spectrum of progressive and speculative philosophies of history. The “inflatable” character of tropology allows for passing without much effort from the lexical and grammatical level up to the semantic level and beyond, reaching outside of the text towards the vastness of a civilizational scale.³

Frye’s interplay between generic, archetypal, ethical and historical criticism, or the changes in the historical imagination in White are better comprehended by this appeal to a tropologically informed cultural drift, in which it makes no sense to concentrate on each element individually, or in opposition to others. In a revealing quote White establishes his own lineage this way:

Like Vico, Frye apprehends continuities and inter-animations, rather than oppositions, between those phenomena conventionally called truth and error, sanity and madness, good and evil, objectivity and subjectivity, the literal and the figurative [...] as thus envisaged, the world of cultural forms [...] would resemble more a field of electromagnetic force or a mathematical matrix marked less by evolution than by changing intensities, displacements, and modalities.⁴

In this universe of meaning, retrospective genealogies are constructed, which allow for seeing reappropriations and reconfigurations of the past under the light of current efforts: Frye does this in regard to the literary phenomenon broadly, while White does the same in relation to “historical systems”. The answer to the question of ‘what is a historical system’ is no other than the assertion that it is the effort towards a retrospective appropriation tropologically informed, a change of intensity, a shift in the “electromagnetic field” of inter-animations of meaning that inhabit our social world.

Frye made an impact on White because of the tropological way he has to conceive

² H. Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 193.

³ Kellner, *Language*, 193.

⁴ H. White, *The Fiction of Narrative* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 267-268.

cultural change and the (one might say 'humanist') optimism that informs his brilliant theory of culture.⁵

Yet another analytical model also underlies Whitean procedures: if like Frye, White has written a sort of 'Anatomy of *historiographical* Criticism', and more recently, after Auerbach, he has made at the same time a historicist reading of the 'Representation of reality in Western *historiography*' he has also always subscribed to a kind of 'Linguistics and poetics of the discourse of history', following the theoretical contributions of Roman Jakobson.

Frye, Auerbach, and Jakobson, each in their own way, have provided White with a speculative philosophy of the history of literature, designed a model of the operation or functionality of ordinary language (appealing to quaternary tropology the first two; displaying a functional or formal-structuralist approach the latter), and, finally, offered the basis for an understanding of cultural change, the prefiguration of the social, and the modes of production of a sense of reality.

In *Metahistory* White has transfigured their insights into a two-way modality: a 'dynamic synoptic view', which White inherited from Jakobson, but expressed in the rich characterization of the culturally available typological inventory provided by Frye. At the same time, the ontological substratum of *Metahistory* is properly Auerbachian: enthymemes, figures, criteria of tropological prefiguration, sequencing modes, emplotment, formal arguments, ideological implications, everything converges as a rich arsenal available to a culture obsessed with the definition and articulation of what cannot be defined and articulated, that is, a cohesive approach, a consistent and durable concept of 'reality as history'.

This model finds, from the irreducibility of its elements and their overlaps, differences and inherent contradictions, many of its most fertile edges along with some of its more patent problems such as that of the redundancy of surface vocabulary, which this essay seeks to explore by looking at what remains and what is left out of Frye's 'anatomy of criticism' in Whitean 'metahistory'.

II. WHITE'S FRYE: IDEOLOGY, EMPLOTMENT, AND A NARROW THEORY OF *MUTHOS*

The intensity of White's explicit references to Frye's work finds its peak in the Introduction to *Metahistory* and in *Tropics of Discourse*,⁶ in which the presence of Frye's literary theory is most visible, serving as a prop to analyze the "absurdist moment" in contemporary literary theory, or to follow the complex relationships between history and myth, as much as to inquire about the configuration of narrative frames. Later, in the 1980s and beyond, Frye's presence fade away. In *The Content of the Form* he is mentioned three times, mostly in dialogue with the figure of Fredric Jameson.⁷ In *Figural Realism* all that survives of Frye is the emplotment typologies, in

⁵ Regarding Frye's critical optimism it is interesting to contrast it with the cultural pessimism of Auerbach. In this sense, despite the undeniable influence of the author of *Mimesis* on White, his attitude toward cultural change is much closer to that of the Canadian theorist. R. Doran, "Editor's Introduction" White, *The Fiction of Narrative*, xxxi-xxxii.

⁶ H. White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁷ H. White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

the context of archetypal criticism.⁸ In the 1990s two important papers devoted to Frye, “Ideology and Counterideology in Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*” and “Northrop Frye’s place in Contemporary Cultural Studies”, presented respectively in 1991 and 1994 – and now collected by Robert Doran in *The Fiction of Narrative* – complete White’s major references to the Canadian theorist.⁹

These progressive waning of Frye’s presence in White’s work can be best understood by considering that, in the face of the plurality of critical theories contained in Frye’s *Anatomy*, White has proceeded, from *Metahistory* onwards, in a very cautious, or restrictive fashion, merely considering the availability of archetypal criticism (one of the four criticisms offered by Frye in his *Anatomy*) as a provider of an useful vocabulary to characterize historical narratives in relation to their ‘aesthetic or poetic features’, as ‘allegories’.¹⁰ In sum, tragedy, comedy, satire, and romance designate types of allegories generated by the deliberate, recurrent, and stabilizing use of language, that White, following Foucault, has defined as “style” or as a determined “poetics”.¹¹

Now, any attentive reader of Frye knows that what Frye means by emplotment is rather more than that. For Frye, emplotment is a dynamic structural principle, which he calls ‘muthos’, that generates specific sequences of events and agents, granting a special status to the symbol or verbal model of the action represented, and that suggests some guidelines for receiving and decoding it (I will return to this in the third part of this work).

The importance of the information and inherent complexity of the ‘muthos’ led Frye to clarify, in response to critics who claimed that he was unaware of the social dimension of literary criticism, that he hardly talked about anything else.¹² It is thus hard to ignore the fact that a ‘muthos’ is a type of artifact that comes to terms with the past (in the form of Frye’s historical criticism) and the present and future (through ethical criticism) by means of a dual characterization of the realm of shared experience. As Frye puts it:

The narrative aspect of literature is a recurrent act of symbolic communication: in other words a ritual. Similarly [...] the significant content is the conflict of desire and reality which has for its basis the work of the dream. Ritual and dream, therefore, are the narrative and significant content respectively of literature in its archetypal aspect.¹³

Through emplotment, agent’s intentions, worldviews, and the prefiguration of the social order are arbitrated. Put another way, emplotment constitutes the ordinary language to which more complex refinements and elaborations of various political, utopian, or properly doctrinaire views can be later attached. In this sense – and this is relevant when we think about *Metahistory* and the interplay it presupposes between irreducible vocabularies or tropological operations that underlie the cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic elements within the discourse of history – it is clear that there is

⁸ H. White, *Figural Realism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

⁹ White, *Fiction of Narrative*, 247-254 and 263-272.

¹⁰ White, *Metahistory*, 15n.

¹¹ H. White, “And Old Question Raised Again: Is Historiography Art or Science? (Response to Iggers)”, *Rethinking History*, 4, 3 (2000): 391-406.

¹² N. Frye, *The Stubborn Structure* (London: Methuen, 1971), 14.

¹³ Frye, *Anatomy*, 105.

no plot without ideological implication, and conversely, that emplotment vocabulary is a lexicon for the survey of ideological implications within narratives. In fact, we would not know what use we could give to a theory of literary genres, if it were not to analyze the social, political, and ideological dimensions of the analyzed verbal behavior modules.

What I want to show here is that in *Metahistory* White generates an artificial division between the vocabulary of ideological implication and that of the emplotment, which means, in fact, a positioning about the latter, in a way that restricts much of the potential and utility of Frye's critical specters.¹⁴ We may now ask about the effectiveness of this restriction in Whitean theory. It is intended to legitimize, along with the consideration of the vocabulary of formal arguments and that of the modes of emplotment provided by Frye, the appeal to a third vocabulary, that of Mannheim, as a touchstone for the analysis of ideological implications. By resorting to Mannheim, White aims at "survey[ing] different notions regarding the role of the human sciences, diverse attitudes towards social change, distinctive conceptions of the directions that these changes should have and the means to be employed, as a result of the divergent identification of the relevant temporal instances".¹⁵ Through this tracking of attitudes

the ethical moment of a historical work is reflected in the mode of ideological implication by which an *aesthetic* perception (the emplotment) and a *cognitive* operation (the argument) can be combined so as to derive prescriptive statements from what may appear to be purely descriptive or analytical ones.¹⁶

Herein lies the crux of the problem. While the unassailable ideological character of (historiographical) literary artifacts is highlighted, the plot is reduced to an aesthetic perception, discernible from properly cognitive operations, setting with this what might be called a 'narrow theory of 'muthos'. Additionally, the site of ideological implication is 'derived' from an analysis of the possible combinatorial modes of aesthetic perceptions and cognitive operations (plots and arguments) for which it proceeds assuming affinities, structural homologies and strains that generate the conceptual space for the emergence of 'styles'. Affinities, whose mention does not cover more than a couple of pages in White's text, become dependent on the specification of relations between the 'surface' modes or vocabularies listed before, and a deep tropologically informed grammar.

All this construction is highly controversial and potentially superfluous in its analytical distinctions. Suffice to follow Frye's spectra to find that the modes of em-

¹⁴ I want to emphasize here that the term "specters" allows the crossing of two main ideas in this article: first in the critical terminology of Frye, the critical spectrum implies the attempt to show the existence of ranges and nuances between positions that reciprocally are intermingled. For example, the displacements and the overlaps that lead from tragedy to satire or from the literal and descriptive symbolism to the formal one, do not imply a rigid grid, but appeal to the idea of force fields between partially divergent and convergent structural principles. I will return to this in the third section. But in turn, this spectral range is complemented in this article with the idea that the presence of Frye in White's work is itself evanescent, ghostly, spectral. The specters/spectra of Frye, in a theoretical sense, would help to answer some of the criticisms made to White (e.g. with regard to the "rigid grid"), except for the fact that the same spectra have assumed a spectral character. That said, the alternate use between "specters" and "spectra" does not respond to any other reasons than stylistic variation.

¹⁵ White, *Metahistory*, 24.

¹⁶ White, *Metahistory*, 27.

plotment themselves are devices designed to track different attitudes towards social change, diverse conceptions of the orientations that these changes should have, and the means to be employed, as a result of the divergent identification of the relevant temporal instances. With this, what I want to show is that it is relatively easy to express the particular orientations of the ideological implications in the vocabulary of the plot, and not coincidentally, since both vocabularies are proposed for the same, to account for the social production and reproduction through the analysis of extended verbal behavior. That is to say: the vocabulary of ideological implication does not designate specifically anything else *except* what can be tracked by an extended theory of *muthos* like that of Frye.

Naturally, I do not suppose that White does not read Frye's work properly. Indeed, he has quite a deliberate reason for adopting a restrictive view of emplotment, which is to reinforce the distinction between the topological deep base and the surface strategies of which plots and implications are two of the dimensions surveyed. It is my first contention that this move exposes White's theory to the risk of redundancy and unnecessary multiplication of "surface vocabularies", especially after it posits the ideological implication as a derivative combination of the other lexicons (emplotment and formal argument). Secondly, and most importantly, as a result of the commitment to the idea of a topologically informed depth that can be traced with surface vocabularies, we get a curious amputation of Frye's theory of *muthos* in order to make space for an artificial distinction between emplotment and ideological implications. Regardless of whether this is justified or not, the enormous potential of Frye's spectral theory of criticism (historical, ethical, archetypal, generic) is lost, for the most part.

III. A WORLD OF (CRITICAL) SPECTERS: BROAD THEORY OF *MUTHOS*

We might now recall that Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* juxtaposes four types of criticism: 'historical' criticism correlates types of verbal expression, 'cultural' in a generic sense, with specific visions of the space for action represented (the 'modes' of possible action);¹⁷ 'ethical' criticism relates those same expressions with visions of the future and idealized interactions, in a move that simultaneously posits a certain status to the representation in question;¹⁸ 'archetypal' criticism explicitly posits types of images and sequences as they are reflected in the representational vehicles according to the first two types of criticism;¹⁹ and, finally, *rhetorical* criticism analyzes the types of genres as specific forms of 'events', as well as the literary *modes of presentation* that prepare and guide its decoding.²⁰

The greatness (and grandiloquence) of the *Anatomy* lies in its inclusive and ecumenical spirit. Far from proposing privileged variants for the practice of each of these criticisms, Frye aims to articulate the set of spectra of possibility, of range and variation present in the critical space (hence the mention of the genre of the *anatomy*). These spectra, in turn, overlap and interact (as in White's case, but without necessity of "structural homologies") as partially coincidental and partially disjunc-

¹⁷ White, *Fiction*, 249-251. Frye, *Anatomy*, 33-68.

¹⁹ Frye, *Anatomy*, 129-239.

¹⁸ Frye, *Anatomy*, 69-128.

²⁰ Frye, *Anatomy*, 243-337.

tive *aspects* or diverse modes of considering the *same* textual records, anticipating the Whitean analysis of historical textuality as a partial overlapping of the interpretative records.

These spectral indications guide the first type of 'historical' criticism. According to the type of agency sustained in the text, the potential of intervention in the domain postulated by verbal expression, a mode of inter-relationship with different "orders of reality" sanctioned by the discourse is legitimized. This facilitates the understanding of the type of 'reality' posited by the text itself as emergent in a given context. This theory of modes has been recovered by White, not in *Metahistory* – where it is not even mentioned – but in the two articles above mentioned collected in *The Fiction of Narrative*.

Frye himself has drawn attention to reductive readings of his theoretical framework, that do not respect its concern for the modes in which literary expression is embedded and particularly oriented towards the production and reproduction of a given social order.²¹ More properly, what Frye's notion of "criticism" supposes is the stabilization of the character and status of verbal expression. The second kind of criticism (ethical), then, is a diverse but necessary study on the social implications of the adoption of a particular characterization of the symbols and the status given to language as an extended practice.

We see here the influence of Frye's procedures on White's postulates: a "style" is evaluated as the confluence of the decisions made on the spectra delineated by the four criticisms. In all extended verbal practice we find a potential of intervention (agency), a statute of the symbolic (representation), a sequence of emplotment (*mythos*) with its associated images and patterns, and an effectuation that predisposes or presupposes a 'radical form of presentation'. Far from any formalism, these critical spectra are established to evaluate in a meta-critical manner the status of the literary, and its inscription in, and continuity with verbal and nonverbal *praxis*. The resulting schemes do not lead to any determinism. On the contrary, they are provided to be able to better evaluate the critical paths and emerging senses of reality, prefigured and generative in their turn, of the rest of the practices and interactions of the speakers. Literature, in this broad sense of inter-spectral drift, is nothing else than the pre-figuration of the social. This is what the device is for.

Frye's gesture does not point at showing "orders of determination" but to establish interpretive possibilities of configuration within spectra that allow us to work simultaneously inside the different force fields where extended verbal expression is inserted. Relationships are of transit and contiguity, returning with this to the image of "electromagnetic fields" and "inter-animations" highlighted by White.²² This naturally implies an expansion of the literary phenomenon in itself, but it does not drive us to a textualist "linguistic idealism". In Frye's perspective "the literary is also outside the literature, as the 'non-literary' is inside".²³ Thus, the material for the critic

is the totality of verbal experience, or even imaginary [...] and not just the small part by con-

²¹ Frye, *The Stubborn*, 122.

²² White, *Fiction*, 267-268.

²³ T. Todorov, *Critique de la critique* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1984), 109.

vention called 'literature'. The constant verbal bombing [...] contributes to form the literary imagination much more strongly than poetry or fiction.²⁴

This extension of the raw material of criticism reconfigures for us a 'broad theory of *muthos*'. In this theory, human behavior is comprehended in the analytical domain of those who are interested in building "a theory of the use of words".²⁵ Thus, for Frye, "our literary universe has expanded into a verbal universe, and no aesthetic principle of self-containment will work".²⁶ In this sense we can say that Frye has been trying to articulate from the *Anatomy of Criticism* onwards a theory of the use of words as a social and tropologically informed pragmatics.²⁷

IV. THE STATUS OF TROPES AND KELLNER'S PARADOX

The lexicon of tropology, in this context, is presented in the analytic operation as a type of language that specifically aims at focusing the pragmatic function of language when it intervenes in the consolidation of regimes of practices within a language, considered as a realm of interaction in a shared environment. But we can ask if the postulation of a metalanguage that allows comparability and arbitration – White's idea in *Metahistory* – necessarily implies recourse to the image of depths and surfaces with its orders of determinations, and if it drives us to the morass of relativism. Some of the most effective criticisms of White's work have focused on these issues. In his review to *Metahistory*, Fredric Jameson has exposed the iron dilemma around the depths and surfaces of historical languages.²⁸ If surface levels – plots, arguments, ideological implications – merely register "affinities" between them, then they turn out to be clearly superfluous, since tracking these affinities should lead to the integration of these varied dimensions around their common terms and "structural homologies".²⁹ Additionally, the adoption of tropology as an informant base is a bad argument to hold a skeptical or relativist stance: it is in order to explore upon agreed and contested terms, syllogisms and enthymemes in progress, on an empirical basis approached with a specific vocabulary, and it is to find a basis for comparison and arbitration (as hard as it might be) that the entire tropological experiment is proposed. The tropological redescription eliminates incommensurability and exposes us to the detailed account of the consequences of the ontological commitments of the speakers. Tropology, in this fashion, intends to find a way of analyzing the recurring traffic of essentially contested meanings.

The importance of the depth model has been also recognized by Kellner who has however insisted on White's awareness of the "inflatable" status of tropology, its transformational power, its ability to swallow field after field of verbal and nonverbal interaction and submit them to its power of heteronomous adscription.³⁰ Contrary to what is assumed by those who have accused White of being both formalist and de-

²⁴ Frye, *The Stubborn*, 84-85.

²⁵ Frye, *Anatomy*, 364.

²⁶ Frye, *Anatomy*, 350.

²⁷ Frye, *Anatomy*, 364.

²⁸ F. Jameson, "Figural relativism or the poetics of Historiography", *Diacritics*, 6, 1 (1976): 2-9. See also W. Kansteiner "Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History", *History and Theory*, 32, 3 (1993): 273-295.

²⁹ Jameson, "Figural relativism", 5.

³⁰ Kellner, *Language*, 228-251. See also H. Kellner, "The Inflatable Trope as Narrative Theory: Structure or Allegory?", *Diacritics*, 11, 1 (1981): 14-28.

terminist, he doesn't want to reduce verbal practice to a pure topological operativity. It is because the former does not collapse into the latter that a model of freedom of choice survives for the speakers, which are those who can articulate, manage, and configure, despite contradictory loads, their own "styles". And it is for that freedom, for that agential aspect of discursive practice, that we escape the flammable ambitions of topology, and avoid the risk that language would use us, instead of being used by us. In this topological humanism, or "Whitean existentialism", as Kellner calls it, lies the gap that separates White from Auerbach and keeps him anchored to Frye.³¹ Yet, the ubiquity of topology in White's work is an ambiguous present that comes in the form of a gift as well as a danger. As a gift, it testifies to the breadth, power, and scope of any topological theory 'of something'. As a risk, it carries the potential of a pure dynamic of transits that drives from one trope to another in an infinite game that does not refer to anything else. This devilish implication must be sealed, if one wants to refer to the elective articulation of agents or speakers. The risk of a 'pure procession' or a pure scheme is present in the different variants of the topological cycle,³² and if that were the case, we would not face the irreducible and plural nature of narratives, but the dreaded scenario of linguistic determinism.

We are thus faced with two divergent ontological commitments colliding at the heart of the Whitean proposal: on the surface the freedom of men, beneath it, the systematic, restrictive, and irreducible nature of a topologically operated language.³³ In this sense freedom and language are antonyms, an undesirable corollary of what we might call 'Kellner's paradox': language is a system of irreducible meaning production, *but* men are free. The first victim of this paradox, the product of topological inflation, is oddly enough the conception of narrative that emerges from the literary theory of Northrop Frye. In order to avoid topological inflation, White restricts Frye's contribution to his third critique (archetypal, centered on the notion of emplotment), and severs his obvious ideological extensions (appealing for it to Mannheim's theory), so that modes of emplotment and ideological implications are considered as responses to alternative and irreducible vocabularies in a context in which speakers can operate, managing aporetic tensions, traditions, affinities, and dis-affinities, in the frame of the distinctively human lives that they forge, suffer, and dream.

V. ON RADICAL INTERPRETATION: THE INVENTION OF NARRATIVISM AND THE FUTURE OF THE IMAGINATIONS OF THE PAST

But narrativism should not generate fear of relapse into the hackneyed controversy between realists, idealists, skeptics, and relativists. White's philosophy of history and Frye's literary theory tend to converge on a view of language that places it in a continuous social *praxis* within the variable spectrum of human behavior. Let us go back to the beginning: we want to understand the ways in which a verbal version of our past in a narrative form, operationalized by means of 'topological procedures', is produced. It is for this reason that I suggest to adopt the framework of 'radical

³¹ Kellner, *Language*, 193-227. See also H. Paul, *Hayden White* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 15-56.

³² Kellner, "Inflatable", 27.

³³ Kellner, *Language*, 219.

interpretation', proposed by Donald Davidson, as a way to enrich this perspective and deepen what I would call a 'broad' *muthos* theory. Normally, a close reading of Davidson's philosophy of language should lead us to suspicion regarding the paradoxes and dichotomies that we are dealing with: when language is contrasted to something else (world, reality, experience), a theoretical path is being followed, in a noticed or unnoticed way, that leads to the idea of epistemic mediations surrounded by skeptical ghosts, and to the notion of representation as a solipsistic resource, as an alternative conceptual schema for the recurring content of the world, or as an entity that is present in the inner theater of the mind. Tropology cannot be, then, a 'system' that refers us to a matrix that automatically "produces" meanings. It is rather a sort of guiding procedure in order to analyze what is at stake when we interpret a chunk of verbal behavior in the context of collective interaction in a shared environment.

The very idea of contrasting language to something else carries with it the notion of 'linguistic mediation'. And mediating presupposes the key notion of two different objects that must be mediated by a third. This third party (i.e. language) has in its turn its own principle of individualization. That is, the key lies in the notion of "the limits of language", as much because of what is implied as by the fact that it restricts alternative perspectives. By having boundaries a language is revealed as:

- a) an object 'in itself' (structured around a recognizable node with systematic functions).
- b) an object with 'agency', i.e., ability to pursue self-determined purposes that might 'frustrate' language users.
- c) an object with 'contours' defined with respect to a non-linguistic 'otherness'.
- d) an object with 'causal powers' (causal interaction with non linguistic objects, events, and states).

It should be clear that Davidson's attack consists in debunking the first three ideas, while still making place for the last one. In passing, I might point out that a very restricted interpretation of narrativism implies the belief that while historical languages 'appear' to be regulated by the flow of states and occurrences in the world, they are "really" determined by the tropological mechanisms. This is the reason why White speaks of "infrastructure" or "deep structure" of historical discourse, and this is why sometimes narrativism is considered as a form of "linguistic determinism". And this is also why a Davidsonian approach is so important in order to treat these Whitean dilemmas.

If the structure and function of language are of mediation and representation, presumably by those same characteristics "contact problems" may arise. The topics of representation (such as an object-language apprehended mentally) and of contact are, in fact, a unique issue, since the former generates doubts about the second:

If the object (language as representation) is not connected with the world, we can never come to know about the world, having the object before the mind. [...] On the other hand if the object is connected to the world, then it cannot be entirely present before the mind in the relevant sense.³⁴

³⁴ D. Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 70.

The abandonment of all these paradoxes and aporetic tensions drives us to change our way of thinking about language, either in terms of its structure, its scope, its causal powers, or its modes of intervention. It is in this sense that the appeal to Davidson's philosophy of language is relevant. As Richard Rorty perceptively clarifies, Davidson's concept of language

asks us to consider the human being as a being that exchanges marks and noises to achieve certain purposes. We conceive this linguistic behavior as a continuous behavior with non-linguistic behavior, and understand that both types of behavior make sense only as long as we can describe them as attempts to satisfy certain desires in the light of certain beliefs.³⁵

The aim of this vision is to avoid the reification of language, believing that the latter is something that has ends, that it forms a limited whole, or that it may become a differentiated object of study. Language is not an object but a mode of action, a space we inhabit or "an organ with which we come into direct contact with our environment".³⁶ Language is not an epistemic mediator but a causal step, and has no teleological orientation nor has it a systematic structure that produces coherence in the constellations of beliefs, in the form of alternative and irreducible conceptual schemes.

The second point I would like to emphasize here is precisely that the notion of 'conceptual scheme' (for example, the idea of irreconcilable commitments towards the past among which tropology is proposed to arbitrate, if we follow White's instructions relative to this point), to the extent that it requires an appeal to a fixed repertoire of meanings or the intellection of a kind of neutral reality facing the theories (or narratives), does not appear in this sense to be particularly promising. Neither the relativism of conceptual schemes (tropologically informed, we may add), nor the opposite idea that all humanity "shares a common scheme and ontology" lead to the deepening of the interpretation of others.³⁷ But we can think of an alternative route in which

by setting aside the dependence with a concept relative to a non-interpreted reality, or something outside all schemes and beyond all science, we are not giving up the notion of objective truth: quite the contrary. Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we arrive to the idea of a conceptual relativity, a truth relative to a scheme. Without the dogma, this kind of relativity breaks down hopelessly.³⁸

The Davidsonian critique of the so-called "third dogma of empiricism" (the distinction between content and conceptual scheme) is important in order to show the inconvenient ontology of language sustained by White, when he tries to show that tropology is a mode of arbitrage between divergent commitments. That same ontology is supported by many of his critics when they assert that a tropological approach leads to a paralyzing relativism. They both have reified language. Beyond the dispute between objectivity and relativism, this argument leads Davidson to show the un-

³⁵ R. Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 90.

³⁶ D. Davidson, *Truth, Language and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 131.

³⁷ D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 203.

³⁸ Davidson, *Inquiries*, 204.

intelligibility of the idea of irreducible schemes as a basis for a relativistic or skeptical attitude towards our chances of achieving empirical knowledge. The empirical equivalence of our various theories is not an argument that supports a relativistic stance, unless we also deploy an ongoing commitment with the idea of language as an object that has been reified, and lies apart from the rest of our practices.

These considerations converge with the previous ones in order to break down this large 'object-language' into 'language uses', and thus also blur the image of language as a medium, an autonomous sphere, a base or deep structure of defined contours that 'organizes' a fixed or delimited substrate. We can see how both ideas work together. In a nutshell: relativism is only possible if language have been already reified. This complex of images, related to untranslatable and irreducible schemes that could lead to relativism, is what Davidson wants to avoid. A 'deep' theory about a large object-language is not necessary:

The idea that there is a basic division between non-interpreted experience and an organizer conceptual scheme is a profound mistake born of an essentially incoherent image of the mind as a passive, but critical, onlooker of an internal spectacle. An adequate account of knowledge does not appeal to such epistemological intermediaries.³⁹

Language is a social practice susceptible of empirical analysis. This analysis can be performed by an interpreter concerned about the specific (tropological) uses of language; an interpreter that counts as one of his attributes the ability to contextualize, both with respect to normal, successful, or conventional uses (whence emerge the usual communication problems, and the very stakes in the notions of translation, meaning, causation, and reference) as with regard to those heterodox, disruptive or abnormal uses (and here arise problems such as the 'openness to other worlds', contingency, cultural change and metaphor, among others). This kind of analysis is what Davidson calls "radical interpretation".

So, what matters in the process of interpretation is not to find 'something' that endows linguistic utterances once and for all with meaning, but to procedurally conceptualize how effectively we understand what others say. 'Triangulation', the name given by Davidson to the interaction between two people with a common environment, provides a starting point for such an interpretation, as it deploys the identification of objects of thought on a dialogic, processual, and recursive social basis.⁴⁰ The 'society of minds' in which we dwell is also, and primarily, an interactive space onto which to dialogically project the causal contour that we share.

Once repudiated the view that divides the representational space in an internal side (the mind) and an external one (the shared world) with its "problematic accesses", the remaining causal connection allows us to speak of representations only in a derivative sense, as a functional "constellation" which is "the bearer of a certain informational content" that can be disclosed through the process of radical interpretation, as has been described above.⁴¹ If the Davidsonian ontology of language is taken into account, what we have called 'Kellner's paradox' turns out to be a false dilemma, and

³⁹ Davidson, *Subjective*, 90.

⁴⁰ Davidson, *Subjective*, 277.

⁴¹ B. Ramberg, "What Davidson Said to the Skeptic or: Anti-Representationalism, Triangulation and the Naturalization of the Subjective", *Interpreting Davidson*, eds. P. Kotatko, P. Pagin and G. Segal (Stanford: CSLI, 2001), 213-236.

tropology has no place there. The vocabulary of tropes functions as an adscription lexicon used by a radical interpreter, for understanding what those who have preceded us have done, and facilitates the comprehension of what we do, 'when we see ourselves as intervening agents'. It is therefore a tool that allows for the understanding of the categorial economy of our linguistic praxis, and increases comprehensive efficiency, so as to allow for the expansion of the contexts of inclusion and comparability among different works, acts, and doings.

It is because we are conventionally accustomed to act tropologically that our interpreters can better understand us. Taken as a tool in the service of radical interpretation, tropology is far from casting us into relativism, skepticism, or the belief of an autonomous sphere of meaning, and also far from leading to a consideration of their inflatable status or to the aporias of 'Kellner's paradox'. If that happens, it is because in the theoretical consideration we have departed from the imbrications and mutual support that Davidson, Frye, and White might lend to one another.

The creation of the present world from the past, as well as the creation of a revolutionary theory of historical language cannot be done without appropriations, spoliation, or violence. To quote the epigraph of this text, figurality dispels the myth of creation *ex nihilo*. The invention of narrativism by Hayden White has led, fortunately, to a different theoretical reality, and in doing so, has plundered, figured, and consummated the preceding theoretical frames of Jakobson, Auerbach, and Frye. For those who are lucky to have been able to learn from him, it is still crucial to interpret these affiliations and retrospective generations of meaning, if we are to guess the future of the imaginations of the past.

Characteristically, the reduction of Frye's specters to a mere consignment of the surface vocabularies of emplotment unnecessarily deprives us of an array of tools that could radicalize, expand, and invigorate the metahistorical approach even more. White's 'anatomy of historiographical criticism' pays too high a price in order to pay homage to 'Kellner's paradox'. The consideration of *muthos*, of ideological phenomenon, the very structure of the theory is affected by this veiled reverence to an inconvenient ontology of language. By means of the tropological characterization of historiographical language, White has shown a path that leads to a greater intimacy with that which we cannot give up: the idea that it is in the narrative of the common past that we articulate a plausible model of the agencies and plots, presentations and representations that we want for our lives. Its tropological character puts historiographical narrative at the center of our concerns, at the heart of our strategies to prefigure the social and to imagine, through language, a sense of the possible (modal) worlds in which we can ultimately only think of ourselves out from the allusive background delivered by those who have preceded us. A situation that we can very well understand here, now, in this moment, since – to paraphrase Mink – we cannot forget what we have learned from Hayden White.

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COMPOSTO IN CARATTERE DANTE MONOTYPE DALLA
FABRIZIO SERRA EDITORE, PISA · ROMA.
STAMPATO E RILEGATO NELLA
TIPOGRAFIA DI AGNANO, AGNANO PISANO (PISA).

★

Luglio 2014

(CZ2/FC3)



