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# Historical Narrative as Performative Structuration\*

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María Inés La Greca†

## Abstract

Through an analysis of key insights from two central figures of philosophy of history, Louis Mink and Hayden White, this article tries to answer the following questions: firstly, why can narrative structure be thought as a *cognitive instrument* (Mink) for the historian?; secondly, why is narrative structure best approached as a product of a figurative operation of *emplotment* (White)?; and finally, why is historical narration's cognitive-imaginary double nature – the production of interpretations of past events by endowing them with the meaning of plot conventions – best comprehended as a performative structuration? This last question sums up my interest in presenting a third way of thinking about historiography's supposed *hybridity* elaborated from my particular re-working of Mink's and White's reflections with an important difference: I will not pursue the traditional line of thought of history's *scientific-literary* hybridity. Instead, I will argue that we can approach historical narratives as *cognitive and imaginary linguistic performances*.

**Keywords:** pictorial narrative - performative structuration - Louis Mink - Hayden White

## Resumen

A través de un análisis de las ideas clave de dos figuras centrales de la filosofía de la historia, Louis Mink y Hayden White, este artículo trata de responder a las siguientes preguntas: primero, ¿por qué la estructura narrativa puede ser pensada como un *instrumento cognitivo* (Mink) para el historiador?; segundo, ¿por qué la estructura narrativa puede ser mejor comprendida como un producto de una operación figurativa de *tramado* (White)?; y, finalmente, por qué la doble naturaleza cognitivo-imaginaria de la narración histórica – la producción de interpretaciones de acontecimientos pasados dotándolos con el significado de convenciones de trama – es mejor comprendida como una estructuración performativa? Esta última pregunta resume mi interés en presentar una tercera manera de pensar la supuesta *hibridez* de la historiografía que propongo a partir de mi especial reelaboración de las reflexiones de Mink y de White con una diferencia importante: no voy a seguir la línea tradicional de pensamiento de la *hibridez científico-literaria* de la historia. En cambio, argumentaré que podemos entender las narrativas históricas como *performances lingüísticas cognitivas e imaginarias*.

**Palabras clave:** narrativa histórica - estructuración performativa - Louis Mink - Hayden White

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The epistemological reflection on historiography has been urged over and over again to address the issue – sometimes presented as a blunt accusation – of its hybrid nature as a discipline: while it claims to be a cognitive endeavor with scientific aims, it cannot deny its closeness to literary writing as long as we acknowledge that its theoretical production presents itself in the form of narratives about the past. Within contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophy of history, the question about the scientific-literary hybridity of historiography's has received several answers and has also provoked fruitful and passionate debates around the specific nature of the production of knowledge about the past. If we follow Frank Ankersmit's famous article on the recent history of this issue (Ankersmit 1986), we may find two ways of raising the same question. First, Ankersmit reviews the debate around the scientific nature of history that emerged in the face of the failure to reduce it to the Hempelian "covering-law" model of scientific explanation. Against the negative conclusions that this failure could imply regarding history's cognitive claims, a strong defense of the *autonomy* of historical knowledge was done. Secondly, according to Ankersmit, when this debate was exhausted another question was posed: that of the specific *narrative* nature of history. Here, Ankersmit draws an internal distinction in this debate: on the one hand, the precursory work of Arthur Danto (1985) and Louis Mink (1987); and on the other hand, as a radical renewal of the way the Anglo-Saxon tradition was approaching historical knowledge, the paradigm-changing work of Hayden White (1973) as a new linguistic or *narrativist* philosophy of history.

Following, I will focus on two central figures of these different ways of posing the question of history's hybridity: I will present Louis Mink's reflections on the autonomy of historical understanding (specifically called *configurational* comprehension by him) and Hayden White's narrativist proposal of studying the figurative operations that every narrative about the past presupposes. I will try to think through this issue by bearing in mind the following questions:

- 1) Why can narrative structure be thought as a cognitive instrument (Mink) for the historian?
- 2) Why is narrative structure best approached as a product of a figurative operation of emplotment (White)?
- 3) Why is historical narration's cognitive-imaginary double nature (Mink) – that produces interpretations of past events by endowing them with the meaning of plot conventions (White) – best comprehended as a performative structuration?

This last question sums up my theoretical interest in presenting a third way of thinking about historiography's supposed hybridity. It is elaborated from my particular re-working of Mink's and White's reflections but with an important difference: I will not pursue the line of thought of history's *scientific-literary* hybridity. Instead, I will argue that we can approach historical narratives as *cognitive and imaginary linguistic performances*.

# 1. Louis Mink and narrative structure as a primary cognitive instrument

## 1.1. Chronicle versus narrative

Louis Mink is one of the philosophers who argued for historiography's autonomy as a specific mode of comprehension different from scientific and philosophical comprehension. He called it *configurational* and identified it with narrative form, which he considered cognitively irreducible. Given the aim of this paper, it will be better to start with Mink's argument – presented in “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument” (Mink 1987) – about the difference between two ways of representing historical events: chronicle *versus* narration. It is important to remember that this argument is not only going to be quoted *in extenso* by White more than once but that he will also highlight it as fundamental for his own thinking.

I consider it relevant to pay attention to this use of Mink's argument by White because I think that Mink cleared out the way for White to abandon the previous way of inquiring into historiography's hybrid nature and allowed him to effect – as Ankersmit has claimed – a true paradigm change for Anglo-Saxon philosophy of history. In a few words, it was Mink who bequeathed to White *the* question that will finally inaugurate *narrativism* as we know it.

Let us start, then, by analyzing the distinction between “chronicle” and “narration”. By “chronicle” Mink understands a mere chronological ordering of event descriptions or “facts”. A chronicle relates different event descriptions only by succession and temporal contiguity relationships, as in a mere juxtaposition. So, we are allowed to logically assimilate it to a statements conjunction. It would be valid to confirm or refute the truth of a historical representation understood as a *mere* chronicle by assessing the individual truth value of each of its statements: identifying at least one false statement would render the total conjunction false. But although this way of truth assessing would be adequate for a chronicle, Mink rejects it for a historical representation as long as it has a *narrative* form. And for Mink, historiography is narrative.

According to Mink, narratives establish among events under description more and more complex relations than mere temporal succession –as opposed to what a chronicle does. Moreover, those different kinds of connections are presented in the narrative as interrelated, thus constituting the story's overall coherence. The ordering principle of “the facts” in a chronicle would only be their temporal location, i.e., the order dictated by the date of each event. But Mink points out that from the date of an event a historian can maintain a minimum sense of its possible relation to other events. When the historian achieves a comprehension of events in its field of study, he understands them as responses to, or as a consequence from, another event, for example (Mink 1987, p. 57). And this kind of connection cannot be reduced to the mere anteriority and posteriority relations among occurrences: it is rather a connection perceived through the description of events as *elements* of a narrative (anteriority and posteriority rela-

tions would be a necessary but not sufficient condition). We should underline that this is the same characterization we will find in White when he distinguishes chronicle and narrative in *Metahistory*: he will claim that at the level of the story events have meaning and relevance inasmuch as they *function* as a *story element* (White 1973, p. 7). It does not seem to be mere coincidence, then, that Mink explores the type of interrelations among events that we find in historical narratives in terms of a particular *configurational* mode of comprehension (Mink 1987, p. 51).<sup>1</sup> The configurational mode allows a number of things to be comprehended as elements in a single and concrete complex of relationships. If we accept that historical narratives are examples of this mode of comprehension, we can claim that they produce a particular configuration by which they render events intelligible. This configuration implies establishing different types of relations between events that includes temporal order but exceeds it, because narratives

aim at producing and strengthening the act of understanding in which actions and events, although represented as occurring in the order of time, can be surveyed as it were in a single glance as bound together in an order of significance, a representation of the *totul simul* which we can never more than partially achieve (Mink 1987, p. 56).

In the configurational comprehension of a story, Mink tells us, 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 the contingency of the forward references. This internal organization of the narrative, this way of relating events as a single configuration in which they are elements of a story, allows Mink to conclude that in a narrative actions and events comprehended as a whole *are connected by a network of overlapping descriptions*, an overlap that enables – rather, that produces – the events comprehension as a totality (cfr. Mink 1987, p. 58).

We can see that the distinction between chronicle and narrative leads us to a double result: first, we acknowledge that the validity of historical narratives cannot be determined only by assessing the truth value of event descriptions individually taken as statements of facts. If a narrative produces a network of relationships among the descriptions it connects, the validity of that structuration is different from the truth value of all the descriptions taken as a total conjunction. Even if every description were individually true, this does not say anything about the structure of relationships that the narrative form implies. Secondly, this same difference between the whole descriptions and the narrative structure explains narrative's *cognitive* value. What determines which descriptions are going to be part of the narrative is *its structuration as a whole* and not each individual past occurrence description:

“Events” (or more precisely, descriptions of events) are not the raw material out of which narratives are constructed; rather an event is an abstraction from a narrative. An event may take five seconds or five months, but in either

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<sup>1</sup> It is also relevant for this issue Mink (1987, pp. 35-60).

case whether it is one event or many depends not on a definition of “event” but on a particular narrative construction which generates the event’s appropriate description. This conception of “event” is not remote from our ordinary responses to stories: in certain stories we can accept even something like the French Revolution as a simple event, because that is the way it is related to characters and plot, while in other stories it may be too complex to describe as a single whole. (Mink 1987, p. 201)

This issue is related to another one: the temporally asymmetric nature of the historian’s language, of the specifically retrospective kind of knowledge that history offers. Mink claims that in the case of human actions and changes, to know an event by retrospection is categorically, not incidentally, different from knowing it by prediction or anticipation. In a challenging manner he claims that it cannot even be called, in any strict sense, the “same” event, because the descriptions under which it is known are governed by a story to which it belongs, and there is no story of the future (Mink 1987, p. 48).

## 1.2. Synoptic judgment

Mink attributes the configurational nature of the act of narrating to the historian’s making of a *synoptic judgment* over the events he tries to comprehend through the study of relevant evidence. This concept enables Mink to enforce his main thesis: that a narrative is not a mere adding-up of descriptive statements but a certain way of relating “information” that exceeds what the mere chronological order could “tell us”. In “The Autonomy of Historical Understanding” (Mink 1987), he argues at the same time against those who claimed that history had a proto-scientific nature due to its failure to obey covering-law model’s standards, and against those who, by criticizing this position, would attempt to reduce historical explanation to common sense-like elaborations, although in some sense more sophisticated than common sense ones. Mink’s basic strategy in this paper lies in enumerating a series of characteristics of historical practice that have been referred to as evidence for its pre-scientific nature and offering a new interpretation that transforms them into evidence in favor of the discipline’s autonomy, again against its reduction to natural science explanation model’s framework. Thus, by taking the concept of “context” as a key to accounting for the historian’s task, Mink claims:

The minimal description of historical practice is that the historian deals with complex events in terms of the interrelationship of their constituent events (leaving open entirely the question whether there are “unit events” in history. Even supposing that all of the facts of the case are established, there is still the problem of comprehending them in an act of judgment which manages to hold them together rather than reviewing them *seriatim*. (Mink 1987, p. 77)

Comprehending “the facts” implies a reflexive judgment by which the meaning of the conclusions refers retrospectively to the ordering of the evidence done by the narrative: the significant conclusions of the historian “are ingredient in the argument itself”, they are *undetachable*, in the sense that “they are *represented by*

the narrative order itself". As ingredient conclusions they are, Mink continues, *exhibited* rather than *demonstrated* (Mink 1987, p. 79, emphasis by the author). That is how Mink explains why historians read each other: because the conclusions at which they arrive through their research are integrated in the narrative as a whole, and not simply summed up at the end of their writings. "Synoptic judgment" is then the name that this general synthesis to which history aims at receives, an aim only achieved by studying events in their interrelationships and not merely "extractable" from their chronological ordering. And this is narrative's *cognitive* value for Louis Mink: to enable us to comprehend a mere succession by endowing it with a sense that the succession would never manifest by itself. The value of narrative as a synoptic judgment or configurational comprehension mode resides in accounting for the reason why a succession of events can amount to a specific historical process.

However, how can we arrive at this synoptic judgment? Mink presents an analogy between the interpreter of the meaning of a statement and the historian. The interpretation is a function of the meaning of the individual terms of the utterance, plus its syntax, plus emphasis, and so on, all interpreted in a particular discursive context. In a similar manner, the historian tries to understand a complex process as a function of the component events plus their interrelationships, plus their importance, all interpreted in a larger context of change (Mink 1987, p. 80). In short, historical knowledge surpasses the act of determining the events that happened in the past. Mink – as White will also do – compares the discussion over the ambiguity of a linguistic utterance with the disagreement among historians around the correct description of individual events or their interrelations, or their relative importance, or of the significance of the process as a part of its larger history. The relevant issue is that what history offers as knowledge of the past is not a recounting of events in chronological order, but a particular configuration of those events taken as a whole.

### 1.3. History *versus* fiction

However, till this moment of my reconstruction of Mink's arguments, what has been said about narrative form applies both to historical and to literary or fictional narrative at the same time. This fact presents a dilemma to Mink, the dilemma of the *cognitive and imaginary* nature of narrative structure as long as *historical* narrative claims truth for itself as a whole, and not just for its statements-elements. Between writer and reader different kinds of contracts are subscribed in history and in fiction: in the first case, there is a claim to be a true representation understood by writer and reader; in the second one, there is no such agreement – we could think of a verisimilitude agreement, but even this is not necessary. So, Mink says, "there is therefore something for historiography, however fallible, to be about, something which makes it true or false even though we have no access to that something except through historical reconstruction from present evidence" (Mink 1987, p. 184). Now, we cannot appeal to the individual truth value of the statements of facts contained in the narrative because, as

we already saw, the logic conjunction model could be suitable for assessing the truth-value of a chronicle, but not that of a narrative. So, the question to answer is *how can we assess the truth-value of a narrative as a whole?* We could claim that the configuration or network of overlapping descriptions that constitutes the narrative form must “correspond to” the “real configuration” of past events. For this to be right, we should assume that we can determine, with more or less accuracy, that the historical narrative being assessed “corresponds to” the untold story that the historical past in itself is, that the real referent of every historical narrative has in itself a narrative structuration, the form of an untold story. To assume such a realist ontological presupposition is not the way to go for Mink. Therefore, without abandoning the defense of the autonomy of historical comprehension, or the cognitive value of narrative as its specific form, Mink takes over the sophisticated and dilemmatic task of analyzing the cognitive and imaginary nature of historical narrative.

A first dilemma over historical narrative appears when we consider the possibility of aggregating two different narratives into a single, more complex one – assuming, of course, that certain requirements are met regarding proper chronological order and coincidence of characters and events. In the case of fictional narrative, this is possible although it is not necessary. Mink says that if we take *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, even though they are plays in the same trilogy, we don’t consider it a failure of Sophocles if the conventional sagacious Creon of *Oedipus Rex* is not continuous with the willful and blasphemous Creon of *Antigone*. Moreover, in cases where fictional narratives are aggregated in a single major unit, it would seem that fiction borrows its conventions from historical representation. And this is so because we believe that historical narratives should aggregate, i.e., “insofar as they make truth-claims about a selected segment of past actuality, they must be compatible with and complement other narratives which overlap or are continuous with them” (Mink 1987, p. 196). Mink adds – interestingly referring to a previous quote from *Metahistory* – that “Even if there are different ways of emplotting the same chronicle of events, it remains true that historical narratives are capable of *displacing* each other”, while this is not the case with fictional narratives, which do not displace each other given that “each, so to speak, creates the unique space which it alone occupies rather than competing with others for the same space as historical narratives may” (Mink 1987, p. 196).

However, Mink claims that, as a matter of fact, historical narratives do not aggregate. He rejects the idea that the reason why they do not aggregate is because of the tendency of historians to introduce subjective elements to them, their individual idiosyncrasies and values. Instead, he considers that the reason why two narratives cannot be merely additively combined is that in the earlier narrative of such an aggregate the end is no longer an end, and therefore the beginning is no longer *that* beginning, nor the middle *that* middle: “The more comprehensive narrative may be given its own formal unity, but this is a new unity, which replaces the independent coherence of each of its parts rather than

uniting them” (Mink 1987, p. 197). So, Mink concludes that it is historical narrative that borrows from fiction the convention by which each narrative generates its own imaginative space, within which it does not depend nor can it displace other narratives.

The presupposition that historical narratives should be able to aggregate into more comprehensive wholes without losing their unity takes us back to the presupposition that narratives *as a whole* can be true or false, i.e., that their very form represents *something* that could aid to confirm it or refute it. Could evidence be of any help here? No, because it could only allow us to decide over questions of fact but not over the possible combination of relationships among statements of fact that the narrative produces. Not only does evidence not “dictate” which narrative could be produce, but it also does not allow us to decide the preference over one or the other. There are no *rules* for narrative construction, as there could be for evidence analysis and interpretation. And historians have acknowledged this fact by making no effort in teaching how to construct a narrative as part of the professional apprenticeship of the historical guild (Mink 1987, p. 199).

So, this allows us to conclude with Mink that narrative form in history, as in fiction, is an artifice, the product of individual imagination. This conclusion leads us to a new dilemma: the hybridity of historical narrative manifests itself in that – in Mink’s own brilliant words – 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 (Mink 1987, p. 199).

#### 1.4. The value of Minkian dilemmas

As we reach this moment in the reconstruction of Mink’s thoughts it is fundamental to stress his value as a philosopher of history and brilliant analyst of narrative form for the comprehension of the historical past. More importantly, the dilemmatic aspects of historical narrative that Mink highlights will by no means imply a recommendation to expurgate narrative from history as a way to avoid the uncertainties of the closeness between it and literature or fiction. Mink poses to himself one last objection regarding his defense of the cognitive role of narrative in history. It is said that professional history is fundamentally “analytical” and that its narrative aspects as discourse can be seen only as a “literary art” independent of professional abilities of actual research. He gives a two-fold answer: on the one hand, he stresses that a major part of historiography has been, and still is, narrative in form. So, at least for this part of the practice of the discipline his reflections would be relevant. But, on the other hand, he also claims that:

Even histories that are synchronic studies of the culture of an epoch inevitably take into account the larger process of development or change in which that epoch was a stage. [...] The most “analytic” historical monograph, one might say and could show, presupposes the historian’s more general understanding, narrative in form, of patterns of historical change, and is a contribution to the correction or elaboration of that narrative understanding. That is

what phrases like “preindustrial society” and “decline and fall” express to our narrative imagination. (Mink 1987, p. 184)

In a few words, narrative is for Mink “a primary and irreducible form of human comprehension, an article in the constitution of common sense” (Mink 1987, p. 186). Narratives are neither imperfect substitutes for more sophisticated forms of explanation, nor some unreflecting first steps in the way towards the aim of scientific or philosophical knowledge. We have nothing to fear as historians and philosophers of history studying the cognitive and imaginary value of narrative form, because, as Mink says, even if narrative can be associated with fairy tales, myths and the novel, it still is a primary cognitive instrument whose only rivals are theory and metaphor as irreducible forms of making the flux of experience comprehensible.

In a gesture that was simultaneously being done by Hayden White – and that testifies to the way in which he is co-responsible for the displacement of the reflection over historiography’s cognitive claims as a science in the face of its nearness to literature – Mink bequeaths to White the task he will perform and, in so doing, will substantially change Anglo-Saxon philosophy of history’s debates. This gesture deserves to be quoted *in extenso*:

It is an unsolved task of literary theory to classify the ordering relations of narrative form; but whatever the classification, it should be clear that a historical narrative claims truth not merely for each of its individual statements taken distributively, but for the complex form of the narrative itself. (Mink 1987, p. 198)

## 2. Hayden White and historical narrative as the figurative operation of emplotment

It was Hayden White who took over that unresolved task in order to re-think historical narrative. In his particular philosophic and discursive approach, he considered narrative form ordering relations in the representation of the past as his object of study, incorporating to his theory Northrop Frye’s classification of the four archetypal plot structures, and other elements from Russian formalism and structuralist Saussurean linguistics.

With these theoretical resources imported from literary theory to philosophy of history, White redefines the epistemological question over the scientific-literary hybridity of historiography as the linguistic-discursive issue of historical narratives cognitive-imaginary double nature. White assumes Mink’s chronicle-narration distinction but refigures it through his analysis of *emplotment* – a term he coins – as the figurative procedure by which a mere chronological ordering of occurrences is discursively processed in order to exhibit the formal coherence of a specific type of story. White moves beyond Mink by adopting a classification of plot structures (narrative form ordering relations) to understand the products of emplotment as *a narrativization* of past events that constitutes them as the subject of a historical discourse. White states that “by emplotment I mean simply

the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with ‘fictions’ in general” (White 1978, p. 83). In other words, in the face of the epistemological issue over how a historian can “infer” a story from the present historical record, White assumes that there is no inference but a literary-figurative operation: the historian emplots the occurrences under description according to a specific kind of story. In this way, the question raised by historical narrative and its cognitive-imaginary double nature – being its imaginary aspects what undermines the clear distinction between history and fiction – is dealt with by White’s thorough analysis of *emplotment* as a *figurative operation* identical to the figurative strategies we may find in a fictional narrative: because it is White’s wager that *those same literary resources are necessarily used by the historian when he explains past occurrences by presenting them in a narrative*.

Emplotment accounts for the transformation of a mere chronicle of events into a story through the choice of one plot structure among different ones that are available for the historian thanks to the cultural-literary tradition he belongs to. There is no logical or natural need, says White, to govern the decision to emplot a given series of events as a tragedy rather than as a comedy, for example. This decision may nevertheless be limited to what has been conventionally sanctioned as more appropriate plot types for the representation of the kind of events the historian deals with. However, White is clear in stressing that this is, at least, a relatively free choice (White 1978, p. 156). This free choice makes it possible to consider emplotment as a decision on the part of the historian on how to represent the events under study: this allows us to understand deeper the imaginative input of the historian that Mink analyzed, at the same time that it points at its cognitive nature.

White explains this cognitive-imaginary aspect of the historian’s task by claiming that in the passage from the study of an archive to the composition of a discourse to its translation into a written form historians must employ the same strategies of linguistic figuration used by imaginative writers to endow their discourses with “the kind of latent, secondary, or connotative meanings that will require that their works be not only received as messages but read as symbolic structures” (White 1999, p. 8). That meaning is, for White, the interpretation of events that makes up its manifest content inasmuch as it is also the result of endowing them with the formal coherence of the kind of plot structures met with in narrative fiction – i.e., emplotment. Now, what we must also understand is that for White this operation “is carried out by discursive techniques that are more tropological than logical in nature” (White 1999, p. 8).

It is important to remember that, on the one hand, to claim a fundamental role of emplotment in a historical narrative does not imply that we denied a role to the research process as part of the historian’s task. But, on the other hand, this research process alone cannot account for the way a discourse in which the results of the research done are “expressed” in the form of a narrative is composed. In a significant paper contemporary to *Metahistory*, “The Historical Text

as Literary Artifact”, White elaborates on the operation of emplotment in a way that allows us to deeper understand how it is responsible for the possibility of reading the historical work as a symbolic structure endowed with a “latent” or “connotative” meaning (as opposed to a “manifest” and “denotative” one, respectively):

Properly understood, histories ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that “liken” the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar in our literary culture. (White 1978, p. 91)

To consider historical narrative as a *symbolic structure* or *extended metaphor* implies that it does not *reproduce* the events it describes but it rather tells us “in what direction to think about the events and charges our thought about the events with different emotional valences” (White 1978, p. 91). In other words, White claims that a historical narrative does not *image* the things it indicates, it *calls to mind* images of the things it indicates, as a metaphor does. White explains this effect of charging our thoughts with emotional valences or calling to mind images by viewing the historical narrative as a metaphoric statement that suggests a relation of similarity between the events it is about and the type of stories conventionally used to endow events – of personal and collective life- with culturally recognized meanings. It is in this way that historical narrative “as a system of signs” points into two directions: toward the events it pretends to describe and towards the type of story the historian has chosen to serve as an icon of the structure of those events.

A historical narrative, then, describes events from the historical record in such a way as to inform the reader what to consider as an icon of the events to render them familiar. That is why the transformation of a chronicle into a narrative by endowing it with a plot structure – i.e., structural coherence – is considered by White as a necessary operation: only in this way is the historian able to make historical events comprehensible, to refamiliarize us with them. But for this to be necessary, we must presuppose that the events investigated by the historian present themselves as strange. White justifies this characterization of the historian’s object of study as “strange” in the same way as he attempts to justify his characterization of this aspect of the historical narrative as “fictional” or, to express it better, *figurative*. He claims that historians seek to refamiliarize us with events which have been forgotten either by accident, neglect or repression; or events in the histories of their cultures which are “traumatic” in nature and the meaning of which is either problematical or overdetermined in the significance that they still have their current lives (such as revolutions, civil wars, industrialization and urbanization, and so on):

In looking at the ways in which such structures took shape or evolved, historians refamiliarize them, not only by providing more information about them, but also by showing how their developments conformed to one or another of the story types that we conventionally invoke to make sense of our own life-histories. (White 1978, p. 87)

Now, we may ask which is the condition of possibility for this explanation effect of the historical narrative to happen. White stresses that the historian shares with his audience *general notions* of the *forms* that significant human situations *must* take “by virtue of his participation in the specific processes of sense-making which identify him as a member of one cultural endowment rather than another” (White 1978, p. 86). In presenting a narration of how a set of events took the shape which he perceives to inhere within it, he emplots his account as a story of a particular kind and the reader, by following his account, “gradually comes to realize that the story he is reading is of one kind rather than another: romance, tragedy, comedy, satire”, etc., and it is thus how he experiences the effect of having the events in the story explained to him: “The original strangeness, mystery, or exoticism of the events is dispelled, and they take on a familiar aspect, not in their details, but in their functions as elements of a familiar kind of configuration”, i.e., the plot structure in which they are encoded as a story of a particular kind, with which the reader is familiar as part of his cultural endowment (White 1978, p. 86).

Until this moment of my reconstruction of White’s analysis we can understand how the imaginary nature of narrative form is an element in the production of historical comprehension. If so, we can understand also how it has cognitive value. White claims that we only think of situations as tragic or comic because these concepts are part of our generally cultural and specifically literary heritage: “How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian’s subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind” (White 1978, p. 85). White calls this an “essentially literary”, “fiction-making” operation but he does not consider it to be any kind of threat to history’s aim of providing a kind of knowledge: first, because plot structures are limited in number; and secondly, and more importantly, because the encodation of events they make possible is one of the ways a culture has of making sense of both personal and public pasts. In attention to White’s own words, I will prefer to call it a *figurative* operation.

Now, the imaginary and cognitive double nature of historical narrative also marks an important realization of White’s analysis, in the line of Mink’s dilemmas. He has claimed that the historian, when producing a narrative, makes a relatively free choice among plot structures. This aspect of historical writing is key to White because he wants to stress that most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways, thus providing different interpretations of the events narrated. Collingwood had already thought of the historian as a narrator that deals with the historical record using his *constructive* imagination, but White criticizes him for not having realized that no given set of recorded historical events can *in itself* constitute a story, that the most it may offer to the historian are – as we already said with Mink – story elements. Moreover, those figurative techniques we have been talking about regarding narration – either historical or fictional – imply that “events are *made* into a story” by suppression or subordination of certain of them, by highlighting others, by characterization,

motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, etc. That is why White concludes that:

no historical event is *intrinsically tragic*; it can only be conceived as such from a particular point of view or from within the context of a structured set of events of which it is an element enjoying a privilege place. For in history what is tragic from one perspective is comic from another. [...] Considered as potential elements of a story, historical events are value-neutral. (White 1978, p. 84)

It is then the historian who decides to configure the events according to the imperatives of one particular plot structure. This shows us that White paid close attention to Mink dilemmas. So, how does White answer to the central issue of the Minkian dilemma over the impossibility of confirming or refuting the narrative form itself as a whole? He claims that in the light of this choice of the historian on how to emplot his narrative, assessing the truth value of statements of fact in it, it is not sufficient to decide over the validity of the total interpretation given by the emplotment to the set of events represented. Moreover, he acknowledges that, under the hypothetical scenario of two narratives with equivalent factual adequacy, what distinguishes one from the other – and may be a reason to prefer one over the other – exceeds any truth value analysis. And this is so because a narrative claim *qua* narrative to be the *right one* about the past is irreducible to the individual truth value of the statement of fact contained in it – just as Mink argued. So, what have we gained from White's sophisticated analysis of historical narrative as a product of a figurative operation of emplotment? The next section aims at answering this question.

### 3. Historical narrative as a performative structuration of the historical past

#### 3.1. Emplotment, from a pragmatic point of view: reading White through Austin's speech act theory

In this final part I focus on the third question that guides this paper in order to claim that historical narrative's cognitive-imaginary double nature (Mink) inasmuch as it produces interpretations of past events by appealing to plot structure conventions (White) can be better understood as a *performative structuration of the historical past*: a *linguistic performance* in the sense in which J. L. Austin understood ordinary language as an eminently pragmatic phenomenon. In order to present this theoretical insight it will be useful to briefly recall Austin's speech act theory general framework.

In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin aims at thinking ordinary language's aspects that exceed what he calls the descriptive fallacy: the belief that language's only or fundamental function is to describe what is real. Austin explores language uses that do not aim at describing states of affairs but aim instead at performing an action. He presents two kinds of language use: a *constative* use – that

aims at describing some state of affairs and is capable of semantic value attribution – and a *performative* use – those cases in which the speaker's actions require the utterance of certain words for it to be performed. As we know, according to Austin *performative* speech acts require also some conventions or institutional situations to achieve their aims or, as Austin prefers it, to be *happy* or *felicitous*. But along his twelve lectures, Austin abandons the search for a criterion to distinguish between constative and performative speech acts. Instead, he finally claims that *every* speech act possesses both features. So, Austin concludes that we should rather *elucidate the total speech situation* in its triple dimensionality: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary (Austin 1962, p. 153). The locutionary dimension refers to semantic, syntactical and grammatical features of the utterance; the illocutionary dimension retains the performative features, i.e., the action that is done by using those words; and the perlocutionary dimension refers to possible effects of a speech act as different from the performative act itself.

I consider Austin's point of view on ordinary language illuminatingly close to White's own point of view on language and narration throughout his work. Although this paper has been focusing on the specifically narrative features of historical discourse, it should be said that White's more comprehensive way of thinking about discourse is indebted to Roman Jakobson's multifunctional theory of communication and to White's well-known assumption of a tropological conception of language. Regarding Jakobson's theory, White specifically uses it to stress that referential features of historical discourse, without being denied any relevance, must be thought in their relation to other functions that can be performed 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 see that White criticized the focus on the referential function as the only relevant language function in a similar manner as Austin criticized the reduction of language use richness to its descriptive function. Both of them highlighted non-referential or non-descriptive features of our language use and both of them arrived at the conclusion that it was useless to search for a clear and distinct difference among those features or speech acts dimensions. This was due to their similar point of departure: they both were engaging the phenomenon of language, speech or linguistic communication as *ordinary* language to show how its use and functioning exceeded the consideration of mere description as a primary or ultimate aim. While White takes from Jakobson the idea that the referential function 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, we find a crucial element for the issue this paragraph is dealing with: White and Austin both assume a point of view on language that leads them to show the limits of truth value considerations to comprehend it. In other words, *my thesis is that both White and Austin showed us features of language or discourse analysis for which it was irrelevant to ask whether what is said is true or false* – without rejecting the relevance of such question for other fea-

tures: in the case of Austin, 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 configurational-figurative operation. Moreover, both perspectives evolved in each case towards the claim of the complexity of distinguishing clearly among language dimensions: for White, regarding the distinction between the informational and the interpretative aspects, 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 complexity of clearly differentiating what was locutionary, illocutionary or perlocutionary in a given speech act understood as a total speech situation.

We can find another coincidence in Austin's and White's points of view in their interest in stressing the dimension of language "effects": in Austin we see it in his differentiation of illocutionary features of speech acts from perlocutionary ones; in White, regarding the ethical and esthetic dimensions of historical narratives, or even in his contention that emplotment produces its explanation effect because it refamiliarizes us to the historical record by charging it with emotional valences. Both of them acknowledge emotional and conative features of speech acts. These features can well be thought of as related to the speech act force – one of Austin's major insights –, a fundamental aspect of language that cannot be reduced to truth value considerations but is in turn understood by Austin in terms of felicitous or infelicitous illocutionary acts. Moreover, this aspect refers immediately to the socio-conventional nature of language as every speech act condition of possibility.

Summing up, the limit of truth value considerations in the analysis of the phenomenon of language as a pragmatic one, plus the difficulty of distinguishing between co-present dimensions of the speech act and the emphasis in the socio-conventional aspects involved in every speech act felicitous performance are going to be useful theoretical tools for a deeper analysis of Mink's narrative form and White's emplotment understanding them now as *a performative act of linguistic structuration*.

### 3.2. Historical narrative's double nature as informative-figurative duality

To continue developing my theoretical proposal, I would like to comment on a particular pragmatic perspective on historical knowledge: Verónica Tozzi's pragmatic-heuristic reading of White's historical theory. Tozzi also pays attention to Mink's dilemmas and attempts to show that we can use White to reconstruct historiographical debates in a reasonable way. Tozzi claims that, against several misreadings of his work, even though White theorized about historical narrative's figurative (constructed or creative) features, he considered the informational-factual aspects of historiography as ineliminable. Although he was clearly arguing against robust or naïve realism, Tozzi thinks that White does not deserve to be read as an equally naïve factionalism. So, she claims that the historical dis-

course's constructive features studied by White are stressed in order to value the effort done by the great historians and philosophers of history of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century- to which White devoted his formalist-discursive analysis in *Metahistory* - vis-à-vis the inherent difficulties they faced when reconciling the different epistemological, ethical and esthetic wagers they have made in their historical works. In Tozzi's opinion, White does not hold a linguistic deterministic position, nor does he deny the existence of historical discourse referents, but he demands for us to seriously assume (and not merely in a rhetorical manner) that facts are not "given" or already "stored" as facts in the historical record (Tozzi 2009, p. 110). So, according to Tozzi, White can be read as showing that whatever a realist representation of the past could be, it would be something "to do" according to available linguistic conventions.

To sustain her interpretation, Tozzi reconstructs the way in which White thought of the fact/figuration distinction and she proposes to characterize it as a *duality*. She takes this notion from Anthony Giddens, who distinguishes between *duality* and *dualism* in reference to the relationship between agency and structure in a social system. For Giddens, dualism presupposes the existence of two incompatible elements and, therefore, the need to show how one of them can be reduced to the other, or the priority of one over the other - in Giddens's theoretical context, it would be the problem of assigning priority to either the structure or the individual as motors of social production and reproduction. On the contrary, Tozzi explains, thinking in terms of duality refers to a complex interplay that does not imply reduction or prioritization, but a relationship of constitution or structuration between both elements or dimensions. That is how Tozzi uses duality to think of factual-figurative, or informational-interpretative distinction as it was criticized but also retained by White for studying historical discourse. According to her pragmatist interpretation, White neither collapses nor rejects that distinction, but assumes it as a distinction *from* historiographical *practice*, a distinction accepted by historians - i.e., neither a logical nor an essential distinction, but a starting point of his analysis (Tozzi 2009, p. 113). Tozzi also stresses that White rejects the idea that it is the factual-informative features that are specifically historical, inasmuch as historiography aims at presenting past events interpretation in the form of narratives that involve more than a strictly informational dimension. But, she immediately claims, this does not mean that he rejects that feature of historical discourse. On the contrary, Tozzi thinks that White shows us that these two dimensions are two ways of encoding that interplay in historical discourse, two different encoding conventions: one that contributes to the informational dimension, and one that contributes to the interpretative one. Tozzi claims that White's major insight is his contention about the difficulty of drawing a precise line between both dimensions within a single historical narrative, but -she stresses again- this does not imply that the informational content "disappears" or fades into a pure figuration. We can still claim that we are informed by historical discourse, but we should follow White in acknowledging that at the same time we are receivers of a message that leads us to

process that information in certain ways, rather than in others. In any case, what we cannot do is part the received information from the way it was processed or encoded (Tozzi 2009, p. 115). Therefore, Tozzi concludes that we do not need to read White as contending that “everything is interpretation” in a historical narrative: instead, we should conceive historical narratives as providing encoded information where, using White’s phrasing, a fact is presented where and how it is presented in historical discourse to sanction the interpretation it tries to contribute to (White 1978, p. 107).

Tozzi’s interpretation allows me to emphasize that White was very much interested in showing how different features or dimensions of historical discourse relate to one another in a way that makes it difficult to establish a clear-cut difference between them. As I have already mentioned, Jakobson’s functional model of discourse was at least one major resource for this particular Whitean claim. Moreover, in “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory” (White 1987), White claims he is following Jakobson when he rejects a three-fold distinction between scientific, poetic and rhetoric discourse, a distinction that identifies each type of discourse with the performance of a single communicative function (referential, emotional and conative, respectively). Against this point of view on discourse, White borrows Jakobson’s theory to try and show how *every* discourse performs those three functions, whether it is a factual or a fictional one. Particularly, Jakobson’s model enables him to argue that narrative discourse performs these functions and that a failure to acknowledge this explains how contemporary discussions over the nature of historical narrative have tended to ignore one or the other of these functions either to save historical narrative for “science” or to expunge it as “ideology” (White 1978, p. 40). If we follow Jakobson’s *performance* model, White is confident that we can advance to a more sophisticated understanding of historical narrative as *discourse*, in its complex and multi-layered nature, illuminating its ability to bear a wide variety of interpretations of its meaning. In other words, we can see historical discourse as an *apparatus* for the production of meaning rather than just as a vehicle for conveying information about an extrinsic referent (White 1978, p. 42).

If following White following Jakobson we assume that every discourse offers a particular interaction between communicational functions, we can study how historical narratives perform those different functions. Then, we can understand that acknowledging the figurative aspects of historiography – as Tozzi also claims – does not equal to eliminating *every* evaluation criteria but, instead, it compels us to extend the features to take into consideration at the moment of assessing the production of historical knowledge as narration. The advantages of assuming this pragmatic – specifically *performative*, I will argue – point of view on historical narrative as *linguistic performance* is what the final paragraph of this paper is about.

### 3.3. Historical narrative as a *performative structuration* of the past

I would like to round up this analysis of historical narrative in its cognitive, imaginary and factual-figurative aspects by exploring a final coincidence I see

between White's and Austin's points of view on language. In a few words, I would like to claim that we can gather all the features and complexities of historical narrative we have been discussing by seeing it as a *performative structuration* of the past.

I base my theoretical hunch on the fact that both Austin and White stress a convention or conventional procedure to account for language or narrative as performance. In Austin's case, we saw that the illocutionary features of speech acts refer to an accepted conventional procedure that is presupposed or taken for granted for its felicitous performance –in its interrelation with the locutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of the speech act as well. I believe that we can theoretically benefit from extrapolating Austin's analysis of the conventional procedure presupposed by the illocutionary dimension to the analysis of narrativization in historical discourse. In order to compose a discourse about the events he studies, the historian, according to White, produces a specific and *authorized* narrative about them. If we think about this adequate or *authorized* character of the person and circumstances of this speech act as given by the disciplinary-academic role the historian plays, we can also think that the accepted conventional procedure that conditions the felicity of his speech act is not (or not only) the composition of a discourse *from* the historical record, but *the narrative processing* of its theme.

To make my point clear, let us remember White's argument regarding the fundamental value of narrativization to account for historical discourse. In "Literary Theory and Historical Writing" (Whit 1999), White rejects two criteria to establish the specifically historical character of a given discourse in a way that takes us back to Mink's argument regarding the autonomy of historical understanding (against the advocates of the covering-law model). First, he denies that historiography has a method or object of study of its own:

historical discourse, unlike scientific discourse, does not presuppose that our knowledge of history derives from a distinctive method for studying the kinds of things that happen to be the past rather than present. The events, persons, structures, and processes of the past can be taken as objects of study by any and all of the disciplines of the human and social sciences, and indeed, even by many of the physical sciences. To be sure, it is only insofar as they *are* past or are effectively so treated that such entities can be studied historically; but it is not their pastness that makes them historical. They become historical only in the extent to which they are represented as subjects of a specifically historical kind of writing. (White 1999, p. 2)

Secondly, he rejects the criterion based on historians' claim of justifying their statements in the historical record as sufficient, not denying either that the entities they refer to do exist or that we can obtain information about them. And he continues:

It is intended, rather, to stress that information about the past is not in itself a specifically historical kind of information and that any knowledge based on this kind of information is not in itself a specifically historical kind of knowledge. Such information might better be called archival, inasmuch as it

can serve as the object of any discipline simply by being taken as a subject of that discipline's distinctive discursive practices. (White 1999, p. 2)

Therefore, White concludes that our information and our knowledge about the past are historical because they are taken as the subject of historical discourse. What does this mean?

What historical discourse produces are *interpretations* of whatever information about and knowledge of the past the historian commands. These interpretations can take a number of forms, ranging from simple chronicles or lists of facts to all the way over to highly abstract philosophies of history, but what they all have in common is their treatment of a narrative mode of representation as fundamental to the grasping of their referents as distinctively historical phenomena. Adapting a famous phrase of Croce's to our purposes, we may say that, where there is no narrative, there is no distinctively historical discourse. (White 1999, p. 3)

This characterization of historical discourse as interpretation, and that of historical interpretation as narrativization, demands that we remember the analysis of emplotment as a figurative operation necessary for the production of a narrative: the composition of a narration appeals to a series of plot structures available to the historian as sanctioned conventions for its literary-cultural endowment.

It is at this point where I find the possibility to *read the figurative operation of emplotment as performative*: taking the literary conventions to which the historian appeals as accepted conventional procedure that contributes to the felicitous performance of historical narratives as authorized interpretation. I consider that White himself makes this performative rereading plausible when stating that by sharing these conventions with his audience the historian can explain the historical events by refamiliarizing them, because he shares with his audience general notions of the ways which significant human situations must obtain by virtue of his participation in the specific processes of meaning endowment of their literary cultural tradition.

Thus White responds to the dilemmatic condition of the historical narrative he inherits from Mink, its simultaneously imaginary and cognitive character: since it is through the performance of a figurative emplotment operation that the historian appeals to narrative imaginary conventions shared with his public in order to represent his object of study while at the same time communicating information on, and interpretation of, such object, allowing for an explicative-cognitive effect.

To enhance the plausibility of my proposal, I would like to point out what I consider as some "hints" favorable to this performative reinterpretation in White's work. I have previously pointed out that White interprets narrativization from his appropriation of Jakobson's performance model as a model of discourse as performance, enabling its interpretation as a kind of performative act (White 1987, p. 44). Having said that, White alludes explicitly to Austin's theory in an interview conducted by Ewa Domanska. White proposes to understand the establishing of the facts by a historian as a performative act to the extent that

that to which we refer as factualization requires an act of classification by identification. I quote:

An event is 'historical' precisely in the extent to which it is new, original, unique, singular, which is to say, initially unclassifiable by the doxological system of classification. The mere establishment by the historian of the specific attributes of this event, the time, place and 'spread' of its effects, constitutes the event's 'identification'. The identification of an event in its singularity and regularity is its factualization. (Domanska 2008, p. 5)

According to White, facing the historical record, the historian will consider that an event demands explanation because of both its singularity and its continuity to other events constituting its context. So, as an example, White mentions the Parisian mob taking the Bastille on July 14, 1789, not as just an act of violence, but also as a revolutionary action. He states that its singularity consisted in setting in motion a chain of events which, taken as a whole, constituted "the French Revolution". From this point on, White says, it can be stated that "it is a fact that the French Revolution erupted as such from the taking of the Bastille on 14 Julliet 1789". But, he continues, the phrase "it is a fact that" adds nothing to the content of truth of the phrase "the French Revolution erupted, etc.". It is true or it is not true that "the French Revolution erupted, etc.", therefore the phrase "it is a fact that" adds to the meaning of the whole phrase "by indicating the speaker's belief or conviction that the French Revolution did erupt or break out or began with the taking of the Bastille in 1789". Following, White reinforces his point by resorting to Austin's categories:

The phrase "it is a fact that" is – to use the terminology of J. L. Austin – a "speech-act", performative or illocutionary utterance belonging to the category of what Austin calls "veridictives". The phrase "it is a fact" does not establish the *truth* of the statement about the eruption of the French Revolution but affirms the "truthfulness" – the intention to speak the truth – of the speaker of the utterance. Facts belong to speech, language and discourse, not to the real world. (Domanska 2008, p. 5)

White claims that, when concerned with interpreting events that do not conform to the already processed historical record, the historian produces a factualization by figurative means. *To understand, then, factualization as indissolubly linked to the figurative operation of emplotment that is, simultaneously, a performative act which does not state the truth of the statement of fact but affirms its "veracity" – the speaker/historian's intention to tell the truth – points again towards the pre-eminence of the pragmatic aspects of the production of historical representations.*

It is interesting that Mink, in his analogy of the historian as a grammarian, noted that just as we do not interpret statements or linguistic expressions by only determining the meaning of each word that compounds it, but we must also analyze the interrelations established between them in the linguistic utterance as a whole – just like the variations in tone or emphasis, and the context in which such utterance took place – in the same way, historical knowledge exceeds the determination of the events that happened in the past. This "exceeding" Mink dil-

ematically interpreted as the truth-claim of the narrative form (and not only of the statements of fact we could try to “extract” from it) while being imaginary in nature, White interpreted it as a relatively free choice within *imaginary* plot structures available to the historian by virtue of the *literary conventions* he has at his disposal thanks to its cultural endowment – that, inasmuch as it is a choice, it simultaneously *produces* a particular kind of story that makes comprehensible past events he intends to represent, while it operates figuratively, encoding the archival information *as* a coherent narrative as long as *its resemblance is performed* with the kind of specific narrative meaning of the plot conventions used. Then, with the help of Austin’s performative perspective, we can go deeper into the cognitive-imaginary (Mink) or factual-figurative duality (White) of the historical narrative, concluding that its claim of realistically representing past events is sustained in the narrative processing of the historical events it produces as a *performative condition of possibility* of any question regarding the truth of the “facts” about the past that the historical narration establishes. As White’s own use of the notion of illocutionary act in Austin allows us to claim, *the figurative operation of emplotment as performative act* again points out the irreducible primary cognitive value of the *narrative structuration* of the historical past: that *before* being able to discuss the *truth value* of any statement of fact, it requires the representation of historical events in the form of a story, which is nothing but the affirmation of its “veracity” as the historian’s intention of speaking the truth, of justifying his production of knowledge about the past, both in the research into the historical record and in his imagination or sensibility, to which, as Mink says, *we give credit*: a figurative performance without which no information could be communicated, and no explanatory effect in his readers could be achieved.

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