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Tozzi, Verónica

Introduction

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Introduction

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The study on the status of narrative in structuring the past has been a central topic in the so-called *New Philosophy of History*.[1] If we were to summarize in a few sentences the gallons of ink spent on it, we could say that "narrative is not an empty form to fill in with any external and independent content. Narrative is the content of the form".

In the golden age of Analytic Philosophy of History – interested in the question whether or not history could formulate *lawlike* explanations of past events just like natural sciences are supposed to do – the debates around the place of narrative in history were limited to assess its explanatory potential. The requirements of the "explanation" were the central issue; however, the "story form", although widely used in history, was just useful for it potential didactic function.[2]

In the twentieth century strictly historiographic context, the narrative form had no better luck. The historiographic revolution carried out by the *École des Annales* offered powerful arguments to expurgate, from the historical discipline, any kind of narrativist operation on behalf of "scientific analysis" in the manner of social sciences (Sociology, Economy, Geography, etc.).[3]

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[1] Denomination due to Ankersmit (1986) to refer to the narrative turn caused by the appearance in 1973 of *Metahistory*. The very discussion of analytic philosophy of history, interested in the status of the explanations and generalizations in history and its relationship to the law-like explanations of science, is displaced by the attention to the overall significance of the historical text regardless of the meaning of empirical singular statements that compose it. In other words, the choice of epistemological holism in detriment of positivist atomism.

[2] Danto addresses the issue in Chapter XIII of *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Danto 1965). There, our philosopher demonstrated, through a careful analysis and many examples, that there is no incompatibility between legal and narrative explanation of human phenomena, but there are only different descriptions of the same phenomenon with varying degrees of generality or wealth. As a result, richer and more detailed descriptions are excellent candidates to be included in historical narrative; however, descriptions of events in terms of "type" instead of "token" are those that will enable us to subsume the phenomenon under *lawlike* explanations. Notwithstanding, it is "Narrative Sentences", Chapter VIII of the book, one of the pioneers and classic texts in the philosophical reflection on the cognitive autonomy of narrative language. For an overview of the debate see White 1987.

[3] As examples of accounts that emphasize the negative evaluation of narrative by the first and second generation of *Annals School*, see Burke 1990, Le Goff 1992. This critic is supposed to be based on the strong bond that narrative form has with the interest in political events ('*événements*') (results of human actions mainly carried out by politically relevant human beings). Criticism to narrative history means criticizing the *histoire événementielle*. On the other hand, Paul Ricoeur and Hans Kellner have shown this through some very deep studies that put in question the assumed incompatibility between narrative and analysis as they have also shown the unavoidable narrative nature of presumably not narrative historical studies like *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* of Fernand Braudel (Braudel 1949). The point is there still is a controversy not only about the status of narrative but on the very scope of such kind of "anti-narrative discourses" like those from Modernism literature or no-narrative like Annals School.

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In 1973 Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* is published (White 1973). As the title indicates, the book offers an extensive study – meta-historical in nature – of selected narratives bequeathed by the works of great historians and philosophers of history of the nineteenth century. Those narratives, under the Whitean metatheoretical magnifying glass, will no longer be assessed or appreciated in terms of how their supposed atomic components (factual statements) made it possible to believe in its truth or rather motivate their rejection. The "story" or "narrative" is much more than the sum of its parts (factual statements), rather it should be appreciated as a totalizing configuration of the relationships between past, present and future in which the epistemic, ethical-political, and aesthetic mutually irreducible dimensions equally contribute to produce a meaningful image of the past. As Frank Ankersmit has noted, the thoughts embedded in *Metahistory* inaugurated in the field of the philosophy of history the study of the very theoretical status of the narrative itself. That is, after *Metahistory*, the research on the relationship between narrative and history is raised to the status of historical theory (Ankersmit 1986). But we must recognize that it was Louis Mink who – radicalizing some of Danto insights – definitely contributed to the establishment of the cognitive autonomy of what he calls "narrative configuration". As La Greca will develop, Mink deployed an extensive analysis of the holistic nature of narrative configuration by capturing the "undetachability" of its "factual statements".[4] There is no inference or logical relationship between statements and narrative as a whole; nevertheless, the truth and the meaning of each of the statements can only be assessed (displayed) as a part of a narrative whole.

Now, without diminishing the contributions of analytic philosophers to the study of narrative, and following Ankersmit, we must say that it is White who definitely displaces the study of narrative in terms of its conformity or not with the scientific standards of natural science. And this, I dare say, may stem from two reasons: first, because, as a historian,[5] White could have been most affected by the criticism that historians themselves leveled against narrative history (related to the *histoire événementielle*) not so much from the Neo-positivist model of the natural sciences, but from the developments in the social sciences strongly influenced by the contributions of Structuralism and Marxism, as well as the influences that these two theoretical approaches had on Sociology, Anthropology, Linguistics, Geography and Economics. The second reason would be that, after his dissertation, White left social history research to pursue issues related to the history and theory of the discipline, paying attention both to philosophers of history and to historians.

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[4] In the case of historical understanding or narrative, although historians summarize their conclusions in the final chapters, such conclusions are displayed rather than demonstrated, are ingredients of the reasoning itself rather than drawn from it.

[5] We should not forget that his training was in history and his PhD thesis was: "The Conflict of the Papal Leadership Ideals from Gregory VII to St. Bernard Clairvaux with Special Reference to Schism of 1130" (unpublished).

Metahistory, the book whose forty years publication anniversary calls for this dossier, is not only about the chronological organization or the beginning-middle-end structure of the story, but also about the triple-dimensionality of it (each story is a combination of explanatory decisions, ideological and generic-narrative decisions). The triple dimensionality implies that no dimension is more important, more basic or more determining than the other two in the same way as no specific combination is dictated by something as independent facts or raw data. If you allow me to speculate about the past, I would say that if *Metahistory* had simply pointed out the various ways to explain, the several ways of narrating, and the different ideological commitments embedded in historical works, in the '70s no expert historian – aware of his own historicity, responsible for his ideology and explicit about his narratives preferences – would feel scandalized. Rather, he would have appreciated the book as an illustrating walk around (through) the varieties of historical writing. But White's bet did not stay at this "explicit" and "superstructural" (according to his own terms) level of all historical work. Rather he offered an "explanation" – of metahistorical, pre-critical and linguistic character – of the operation that gives rise to these various combinations as well as of the irreconcilable nature of the relationship between alternative interpretations of the past. Tropology (the study of the four basic figures of classical rhetoric: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony) refers to the diversity of poetic acts motivating epistemic, ethical and aesthetic combinations which in turn make up the style of the historian. That is, *Metahistory* does not only give us an account (*à la* Danto) of the irreducible historical significance of language in general and narrative sentences in particular (because they speak about past events in terms of later events, retrospectively), neither is it just a pointing out of the fact that the significance of the statements of a narrative depends on the narrative whole. *Metahistory* reveals, using literary theoretical investigations on the conventions of storytelling, the basic and irreducible types and narrative figures employed by historians. Thus, a detailed explanation of the irreducible controversial nature of the story is given to us.

White's book – as well as the following *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (White 1978) –[6] immediately received all kinds of criticism in the context of philosophical discussions such us realism and anti-realism about the past, objectivism vs. relativism, the under-determination thesis, and scientific demarcation.[7] In 1987, White published a new compilation: *The Content of the Form* (White 1987), which contains two of his most controversial texts: "The Value of Narrative in the Representation of Reality" (White 1987) and "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation" (White 1987). The

[6] Remarkable in this compilation is "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" (White 1978) by sustaining textualism, formalism and linguistic determinism, attracting almost more criticism than the very well known introduction to *Metahistory*. The book has great interest today because it brings together texts that show his structuralistic affiliation as well as those that bind him to a more humanist tradition linked to Vico, resulting in two interpretative tendencies of his work in dispute until this day.

[7] You can see these critics in *History and Theory* (1980), Beiheft 19: *Metahistory: Six Critics*.

theses sustained there (of a clearly constructivist nature) about historical discourse and the relevance of literary theory to illuminate its status, generated all kinds of reviews. Many of them claimed that White either denied the past or the existence of an independent referent from the historical writing, or even held an *anything goes* relativism, or effected a conflation of history and fiction or history and literature (in the sense of *belles lettres*). Most ferocious (but not sharper) reviews have come mostly from disciplinary historians who, not acknowledging important philosophical theses debated in contemporary philosophy of science and language – like the theory-ladennes thesis, holism and the underdetermination of theories by data –[8] rested on their "disciplinary rules" or appealed to the "regulatory" nature of belief in the independent reality of the past as a shield to protect the discipline from arbitrary and uncontrollable proliferation of historical interpretations of the same phenomena. The best reviews, I dare argue, have come from other narrativist philosophers of history as in the case of Paul Ricoeur and David Carr, especially because both authors have offered their own alternative theories of narrative and the relationship between history as a discipline and narration (paying attention to the notion of "historical experience" or "narrative experience").[9] (In the present dossier, Pihlainen will explore these issues.)

In the late 80's White participated with the lecture "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth" at the conference organized by Saul Friedlander concerning the representation of the Holocaust, published in 1992 under the title *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution* (Friedlander 1992). In this text, he introduces what will be the second-most quoted and discussed topic of his work: "writing in a middle voice", a notion close to "intransitive writing"[10] as a style apt to "represent" the so-called "limit events" from the twentieth century and to provide an alternative to the promoters of the Holocaust's irrepresentability thesis. This work, although controversial and discussed in the context of the disciplinary rules of history, found a positive reception by all those concerned with new ways of expressing and representing historical events not considered of historical significance by hegemonic or official versions of history. Taccetta writes on this subject.

In 1999 he published his fourth book (also a compilation), *Figural Realism, Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (White 1999), where we find the development of another main topic, derived from Whitean readings of Auerbach: "figural realism". Martini applies the notion to history of science and Lavagnino gives an account of the notion itself. Figural realism has generated a lot of writing by White him-

[8] All these debates could clearly contribute to the issue identified by Mink about undetachability.

[9] Already in this century, we find more sophisticated critical work of theorists and philosophers of history well acquainted with the contributions of the new philosophy of science, as well as other historians of the field of Intellectual and Concept History. All of them self-conscious about the constructive role of historical research and the historicity of history itself (Spiegel, Phillips, Tows, Gumbrecht, Jay, Ankersmit, and Lorenz).

[10] White got these ideas from Roland Barthes.

self and others by extending this type of analysis to all kinds of "representations" of the past, whether in history, literature, art, cinema, monuments or memorials. In 2009, on the occasion of his 80th birthday, we can find this different type of reception, more suited for a critical development of a research program rather than the assessment of its potential threat to "historical reality".[11] The present dossier is an example of this constructive approach to White's work.

We would be tempted to describe White's intellectual life in terms of stages, changes, revaluations, self-corrections, displacements, etc. However, his recent book, *The Fiction of Narrative. Essays on History, Literature and Theory* (White 2010) (a compilation performed by Robert Doran, gathering the unpublished texts and chronologically organizing them from 1957 to 2007), appeared in 2010 questioning those descriptions. The book is revealing in three ways: first, by showing White's erudition and the plurality of readings through which he has traveled throughout his life, stimulating more than ever to discuss their sources and influences.[12] Second, because it shows us that many of the ideas we consider as late ones, such as "modernist event" and "figural realism" were already explicit in his early writings, though without the name we use now to identify them. Finally, this book enables us to read White under the lens provided by his Auerbachian figural realism since, in our attempt to trace who White's precursors were, we ourselves choose ours. Figuration and historical refiguration are the inevitable drift in which we exercise our own self-creation. Lavagnino will specifically address this issue.

Forty years after *Metahistory*, we can say that White's researches have been less interested in arguing against "historical objectivity" or "the reality of the past" than against a certain naturalization of existing discursive conventions in historical practice, which assume as non problematic the relationship between (narrative or supposedly anti-narrative) discourse and past reality. His real legacy is to encourage us to a deep research on the ethical implications of any discursive transaction or linguistic choice in human affairs.[13]

Since 2009 – on the occasion of his 80th birthday and continuing today in connection with *Metahistory*'s 40 years publication anniversary – new discussions began to circulate, more interested in the elucidation of the ethical and epistemic inextricable interweaving that every style choice involves. In this very framework, the manners in which White's notions of "figural realism" and "modernist event" illuminate that intertwining acquire a privileged place.

In recent years, White has contributed to this discussion by exploring an old Oakeshot's notion: "the practical past" (Oakeshott himself opposed it to "the historical past", see Oakeshott 1999). Beyond the correctness or acceptability of

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[11] See Ankersmit, Domanska & Kellner (2009).

[12] See Paul (2011).

[13] Only under this consideration his interest in the works of Primo Levi, Virginia Woolf and Proust to name a few, makes sense, in order to improve his intuitions about the inextricable bond between the epistemic and ethical dimensions in any representation of the past.

the distinction, the purpose that inspired White is linked with his never abandoned concern regarding the place that history holds or should play in society (and history actually plays a role in society, whether it wants it or not) as he has been addressing since his early essay "The Burden of History" (White 1978).

His apparent withdrawal from the historical past toward the practical past is nothing but the radicalization of his continual search for new ways to figure out the past without domesticating it. Definitely released from disciplinary constraints or demands against narrativist historians and postmodern attacks, White explores those literary presentations that seem to have dealt, in a more genuine way, with the traumatic realities of the twentieth century.

In "Historical Narrative Systems", Lavagnino approaches an apparent ambitious issue: what is the "nature of historical narratives"? He tries to show that "narratives are, after all, systems that operate under (systemic) tropological procedures", and with this purpose he undertakes the task to highlight the very notion of *system*. He will pay deep attention to Systems Theory in order to formally elucidate "the system of commitments expressed in historical discourse". He claims that systemic analysis applied to narrative is enabled by Whitean accounts about "figuralism", or, as White named, "figural realism". Lavagnino focuses on this kind of concerns because of a theorist's commitment with the idea of a human agency that chooses to effect certain reverse causations, to constitute them retrospectively. In White´s terms, "Historical systems differ from biological systems by their capacity to act *as if* they could choose their own ancestors". I think that the most important notion in Lavagnino's article is that of *autopoiesis*, as presented in Systems Theory by Niklas Luhmann and recently referred to by White himself in the preface to *The Fiction of Narrative* (White 2010). The dialogue between Systems Theory and Whitean narrativist theory will result in a better understanding about how narratives function, what they generate, why they are so important for us if they are historical, and if they are systems. This understanding could be achieved by capturing those important processes for everyone interested in historical processes: change, emergency, contingency, conditioning but human agency.

In "Narrative Truth", Kalle Pihlainen presents an account for "narrative truth" in the spirit of White's constructivism. He articulates some important misunderstandings in terms of *three* specific biases we could find in most of the critics of White's works. The *first* is the combination of the idea of a truth "out there" with the received assumption that history is somehow a natural category for making sense of the world. The *second* is the faith in the derivability of meaning from facts – that are capable of constituting meaning "naturally". Also, as I understand it, according to Pihlainen, there is a non justified extension from some features of narrative form for living, politics, etc., toward *historical* narratives. The *third* bias assumes that Whitean constructivism gives support to the claim that historical accounts could not be falsified on the basis of facts. He suggests that "the failure of historians to intuit that construction of interpretations and the procedures for falsifying them are different is one of the final obstacles

preventing many of them from embracing narrative constructivist ideas". The point of the whole article is to dismiss the account of these three constructivist theses as involving no responsibility for our representations of the pasts. It is in this context that we could understand, following Pihlainen, the critics against "narrative closure" for domesticating the pasts, and this issue is ethical and not methodological (the responsibility is not simply shouldered by the institution as a result of its practitioners' fidelity to some governing method).

La Greca's article addresses the issue – according to her sometimes presented as a blunt accusation – of the hybrid nature of historical discipline: "While it claims to be a cognitive endeavor with scientific aims, it cannot denied its closeness to literary writing" with the purpose of reshaping some alleged weakness as a strength. By assuming a pragmatic-performative point of view and extending and deepening a discussion that White had with Mink, Jakobson and Austin, she gives us an account of historical narrative as *linguistic performance* which carries out a *performative structuration* of the past. From Mink, she takes the analysis of the hybrid nature of narrative; from Austin, his accounts on "convention", and from Jakobson, the performance model as a model of discourse. The ultimate result of La Greca's path reveals the explanatory effect that narrative performs by appealing to those conventional resources that historians and audience share about "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".

In "The Metaphor of the Stranger in the Historical Narrative of Science" María Martini analyzes Shapin's and Shaffer's *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (Shapin & Shaffer 1985) in terms of the contributions that the Narrativist turn in Philosophy of History have done to the history of historiography itself. Martini starts from a paradoxical situation: on one hand, as from 1970 sociological studies on scientific knowledge questioned representationalist, essentialist and normativist approaches to science, and, according to this – as Jan Golinski claims –, the canonical narrative forms of the history of science seem to be unsustainable. However, on the other hand, those non representationalist approaches to science – Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen says – have not been generally extended to science historiographical productions as representations. In contrast, although progressivist histories of science were strongly questioned by social studies of science, there was not any questioning of the constructions that historians made of the past scientific theories. The appropriation of anthropological and sociological models of research on the part of the historiography of science entailed, on one hand, a fortunate and welcome empirization of the field, but, on the other hand, with equal strength, an attempt to minimize the temporal distance through a close reading of archival material. The influence of social studies of science, as Kuukkanen states, has led to a commitment with the idea of a pre-structured past and with a historical realism without any self-consciousness of the problematic nature of these notions, as the philosophy of history has always warned. The article explores White's studies on Auerbach's *figural causation* in order to show how

Shapin and Shaffer assume the "instrumental" and "artefactual" nature of their own narrative: they use a set of metaphors as historical distancing devices. But the result of Martini's study is not to give an antirealist account of the historiography of science or to doubt its cognitive nature. On the contrary, its purpose is to capture the performative nature of any historical narrative: by giving an account of the past (the past of the current science also) we prefigure our research field and we establish limits to the question of which devices will be permitted or prohibited. Therefore, we should take responsibility for our own project of self-creation.

In "The Filmic Image as a Modernist Apparatus. Cinematographic Devices in the Historical Narrative", Natalia Taccetta starts with the analysis of the crisis of progressive narratives and its consequences for the writing of the past, in order to examine the potentialities of cinematographic images for historical epistemology. Following White's work, she pays attention to the fact that academic history is in a paradoxical situation: on one hand, it "has always been forced to free itself from its literary condition". On the other, "as long as it is linked to words and its gadgetry, it is subject to a regime of truth that imposes a narrative model of representation rooted in the literary realism of the 19th century novel", akin to progressive narratives. Taccetta explores White's thought on the Modernist Literature and its suitability to represent the 20th century limit events, with the purpose of applying it to cinema as an apparatus capable of configuring visions from its inherently technological condition, which breaks with the progressive logic.

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