

## Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory"

### Objective

Justifying how/why narrative should be seen as a component of historical discourse and historiography (writing form)

### Structural Methodology (How he assembles his theory/argument)

#### *Section I: Framing of history as a discourse and historiography as a form of writing*

- How theorists and philosophers have considered history and narration
- 19<sup>th</sup> century view of historical inquiry as "empirical" inquiry (historical fact versus interpretive)
- "Dissertative mode": "The historians dissertation was an *interpretation* of what he took to be the true story, while his narration was a *representation* of what he took to be the real story" (3)
- From Hegel: "The doxa of the profession, in other words, took the form of the historical discourse, what it called the true story, for the content of the discourse, while the real content, politics, was represented as being primarily only a vehicle for or occasion of storytelling" (5)

#### *Section II: Sets up his undertaking: a refutation of the critique that narrativity inherently dramatizes and novelizes its subject matter (pp. 9-10)*

- Announces the investment of the next section: Structuralists and Poststructuralists of the 1960s "claimed to demonstrate that narrative was not only an instrument of ideology, but the very paradigm of ideologizing discourse in general" (10)

#### *Section III: Challenges the distinction between historical and fictional through Structuralist and Poststructuralist theorists*

- Levi-Strauss: knowledge, historical method and historical knowledge: "representation of events in chronological order of their occurrence . . . is for him nothing but a heuristic *procedure* common to every field of scientific study, whether of nature or of culture, *prior to* the application of whatever analytical techniques are necessary for the identification of those events' common properties as elements of a *structure*" (11)
- All chronological scales are culture-specific (biased) and White positions Levi-Strauss' "objection to the expropriation of narrativity as the 'method' of a 'science' purporting to have as its object of study a 'humanity' more fully realized in its 'historical' than in its 'pre-historical' manifestations" (12)
- Humanism anchored in Western conceptualizations of civilization
- Use of Barthes to establish how the distinction between "historical" and "fictional" discourses are challenged: "simply from looking at its structure, and without having to invoke the substance of its content, historical discourse is in its essence a form of ideological elaboration" (13)
- Barthes (from Lacan) on reality and imaginary via language-acquisition: "What is 'imaginary' about any *narrative* representation is the illusion of a centered consciousness capable of looking out on the world, apprehending its structure and processes, and representing them to itself as having all the formal coherency of narrativity itself . . . this is to mistake a 'meaning' (which is always constituted rather than found) for 'reality' (which is always found rather than constituted)" (14)

*Section IV: Establishing narrative discourse and continuing investment in dislocating history and historiography from science/empiricism*

- Jakobson's "codes," by which logic, poetic, and rhetoric across "factual" and "fictional" discourses
- "Discussion of the nature of narrative history have tended to ignore one or another of these functions in order either to save narrative history for the 'science,' on the one side, or consign it to the category of 'ideology,' on the other" (17)
- White's extrapolation of Jakobson: "every narrative discourse consists, not of one single code monolithically utilized, but rather of a complex set of codes, the interweaving of which by the author—for the production of a story infinitely rich in suggestion and variety of affect, not to mention attitude toward and subliminal evaluation of its subject-matter—attests to his talents as an artist, as master rather than as the servant of the codes available for his use" (18-19)

*Section V: Narrative historiography compared to literary, myth, allegory*

- "just as the contents of myth are tested by fiction, so too the forms of fiction are tested by (narrative) historiography. If in similar manner the content of narrative historiography is subjected to tests of adequacy to the representation and explanation of another order of 'reality' than that presupposed by traditional historians, this should be seen less as an opposition of 'science' to 'ideology,' as the *Annalists* often seem to view it, than as a continuation of the process of mapping the limit between the imaginary and the real which begins with the invention of 'fiction' itself" (21-22)
- Historical narrative "test[s] the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of 'imaginary' events" (22)
- Figurative language versus scientific favoring of literalism (24-25)
- "the dual conviction that, on the one hand, truth must be represented in literal statements of fact and, on the other, that explanation must conform to the scientific model or its commonsensical counterpart, has led most analysts to ignore the specifically 'literary' aspect of historical narrative and therewith whatever 'truth' it may convey in figurative terms" (25)

*Section VI: "Truth" can be figurative*

- Ricoeur: "reading" of action resembles reading of a text (26)
- White on Ricoeur: "plot" as "crucial to the historical representations of events" as well as a structural component of fictional stories (27)
- White on Ricoeur: "he has assigned historical narrative to the category of symbolic discourse, which is to say, a discourse whose principal force derives neither from its informational content nor from its rhetorical effect, but rather from its imagistic function" (27)
- White on Ricoeur: "narrative is beyond a mode of explanation, more than a code, and much more than a vehicle for conveying information . . . . It is a means of symbolizing events without which their 'historicality' cannot be indicated" (28)
- White's positioning: "There is, then, a certain necessity in the relationship between the narrative, conceived as a symbolic or symbolizing discursive structure, and the representation of specifically historical events. This necessity arises from the fact that human events are or were products of human actions and these actions have produced consequences that have the structures of texts—more specifically, the structure of narrative texts. The understanding of these texts—considered as the products of actions, depends

upon our being able to reproduce the processes by which they were produced, that is to say, our ability to narrativize these actions. Since these actions are in effect lived narrativizations, it follows that the only way to represent them is by narrative itself" (29)

*Section VII: White's view*

- "I noted earlier that the notion of narrative itself contains an ambiguity of the same kind as that typically found in the use of the term 'history.' Narrative is at once a mode of discourse, a manner of speaking, and the product produced by the adoption of this mode of discourse. When this mode of discourse is used to represent 'real' events, as in 'historical narrative,' the result is a kind of discourse with specific linguistic, grammatical, and rhetorical features, that is, 'narrative history.' Both the felt adequacy of this mode of discourse for the representation of specifically 'historical' events and its inadequacy as perceived by those who impute to narrativity the status of an 'ideology' derive from the difficulty of conceptualizing the difference between a manner of speaking and the mode of representation produced by its enactment" (32-33)
- "the notion of what constitutes a 'real' event turns, not on the distinction between 'true' and 'false' (which is a distinction that belongs to the order of discourses, not to the order of events), but rather on the distinction between 'real' and 'imaginary' (which belongs both to the order of events and to the order of discourses). One can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less 'true' for being 'imaginary'" (33)