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INTERPRETATION, HISTORY AND NARRATIVE

1. Introduction: Historical Narratives as Fictions and as Metaphors

At present, one of the most recurrent views in the philosophy of history claims that historical writing is interpretive and that a primary form that this interpretation takes is narration. Furthermore, narration, according to this approach, is thought to possess an inevitably fictional element, viz., a plot, and, in this regard, the work of the narrative historian is said to be more like that of the imaginative writer than has been admitted heretofore. The upshot of this philosophically, moreover, is the assertion that historical narrations, qua narrative interpretations, are to be assessed, in large measure, in terms of the kind of criterion of truth that is appropriate to literary works. And a subsidiary, though far less tendentious, consequence is that our understanding of historical interpretation can profit from literary or "discourse" analysis.

This position, which was perhaps anticipated by Nietzsche,[1] is suggested in varying degrees by Roland Barthes[2] and Louis Mink;[3] it has been developed most extensively by Hayden White;[4] and it commands a following among historians, literary critics and philosophers of history.[5]

For White, historical writing is interpretive in several separable, though interrelated, registers. Historical argumentation in the dissertative mode involves a paradigm choice; second, in a broad sense, a historical tract requires the choice of an ideological perspective; and, also, a historical narrative itself enjoins a choice of a plot structure, which, in turn, is related to the discursive tropes that "figure" the writing of the text.[6] For the purposes of this paper, it is White's conclusions about the specific status that he assigns to narrative interpretation which preoccupy us.[7]

Stated roughly, White identifies historical discourse with interpretation and historical interpretation with narrativization. A historical narrative is not a transparent representation or copy of a sequence of past events. Narration irreducibly entails selecting the events to be included in its exposition as well as filling in links that are not available in the evidential record. The historian does not find or discover her narrative; she constructs it. This process of construction involves distortion[8] and the imposition of generic plot structures (such as Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire) on the sequence of past events. The plot structures that are culturally available to the narrative historian are inherently fictional; they are not merely neutral, formal armatures on which events are displayed; they have a content--hence, White's emphasis on the notion of the content of form. Moreover, that content is fictional.

This conclusion, however, does not lead White to argue that historical interpretations cannot be truthful. Rather they are truthful, but in the way that White takes fictions to be truthful. That is, historical narratives, like fictional narratives, are, by virtue of their plot structures, true in the ways that metaphors are true.

Marx's characterization of the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte .as a farce is assessable in the same way that the sentence "our last faculty meeting was a farce" is assessable. Here, the presiding idea is that there is a variety of metaphorical truth, in contradistinction to literal truth, and that fictions and that historical narratives (with plot structures derived ultimately from myths) are a subspecies thereof.

In according historical narrative this means, albeit fictional in nature, of characterizing reality, White stands at odds with various Continental theorists, such as Levi-Strauss[9] and the Annales school,[10] who disparage narrative history as regressively unscientific, alternatively mythic and fantastic. White, in contrast, grants historical narration cognitive purchase, specifically in terms of metaphor (though sometimes he also uses the notion of allegory to make this point).

White summarizes his position succinctly by saying:

To emplot real events as a story of a specific kind (or as a mixture of stories of a specific kind) is to trope these events. This is because stories are not lived; there is no such thing as a `real' story. Stories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a `true' story, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions which means, of course, that they can be 'true' in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which any figure of speech can be true. Is this true enough?[11]

Though as a slogan this is quite pointed, it does require some care in order to understand what White is asserting. Contra Paul Ricoeur's analysis of White,[12] White is not entirely erasing the distinction between fiction and historical writing. Historical writing does refer to past events and those references must be supportable on the basis of the evidential record. In virtue of this evidential requirement, historical writing can be assessed in terms of a literal criterion for truth in a way that fictional exercises should not be. However, in addition to this standard of truth, the historical narrative-i.e., the selection, combination, and arrangement of events attested to by the record-is to be evaluated by another criterion, one shared with fictional narratives-to wit: metaphorical aptness.

In this regard, there is a superficial resemblance between the structure of White's account of historical interpretation and Joseph Margolis's notion of robust relativism. For Margolis, the descriptions that ground interpretations are susceptible to evaluation in terms of truth and falsity, whereas the overall interpretation requires some other sort of assessment, say in terms of plausibility.[13] For White, the notation of the events by the historian is responsible to literal canons of evidence, whereas the narrative constructions themselves are metaphorically true. The historian promotes understanding in her reader by casting a sequence of historical events in the form of a culturally shared and familiar narrative pattern (e.g., tragedy), and we assimilate the past under a common myth. This pattern of meaning-embodied in the plot structure, which itself has a kind of mythic content-illuminates insofar as it is a serviceable analog for the past.

So far, I have merely offered a sketch of historical constructivism d la White. In the next section, I will try to refine the various arguments that he uses to advance this position, and, in the concluding section, I will review the problems that confront White at almost every turn, along with offering a diagnosis of certain of the deep presuppositions that I believe lead White astray.

2. White's Arguments

White characterizes his approach as concerned with a specifically historical kind of writing[14] and he explicitly aligns himself with the narrativist, as opposed to a scientific, conception of historiography.[15] This seems extravagant to me, for clearly science can be narrative in form--e.g., the geological account of the disposition of the continents--without ceasing to be scientific, and, therefore, narrative cannot be the quiddity of history as differentiated from science.[16] However, even if White's commitment to narrativism is sometimes overzealous, his position is still a challenging one. For, obviously, history is often (most often?) presented in

narrative form--even if narration is not the essence of historical exposition-and, thus, the finding (if it is that) that historical narrative is always in fundamental ways fictional remains a significant epistemological thesis.[17]

White's leading idea is that historical interpretation is a construction or an imposition on a sequence of past events insofar as it involves narration.

The coherence that narration supplies to a sequence of events is an imaginative invention. The historical series of events is not coherent--despite the claims of speculative philosophers of history like Hegel; rather, historical events begin to take coherent shape only through the historian's narrative efforts.

In this respect, White is not thoroughly anti-realist; he does not deny that the'. past existed. He is only opposed to the notion that there are "real stories," that is, that narratives of the past reflect the structure of ongoing, successive, past events. The past, in other words, is not storied, and representing sequences of events in story form is, strictly speaking, adding something to them.

Furthermore, even if the references to past events in the historical account are assessable in terms of truth or falsity, that added "something"-the narrative configuration or pattern (which is more than the conjunction of all the truth-functional references in a historical account)-is not. It must be evaluated as metaphor or allegory. That is, narrative histories must be thought of in terms of something called narrative truth which involves more than establishing the truth values of the conjunction of the atomic sentences that comprise them and which is spoken of as a different kind of truth.[18]

On White's account, typical historiographic practice proceeds under the assumption that narrative historians are discovering the structure of past processes--that is to say, "real stories." But for White stories are invented, not found, and their invention by historians is structurally continuous with the efforts of authors of fiction. Thus, historical narratives are on a par with fictional narratives in this respect, and their cognitive value, qua narration, is of a piece with things like novels-viz., they are sources of metaphorical insight.

White attempts to support his view with a wide range of considerations, involving slogans, contrasts, and analyses of the nature of narrative. These different forms of argumentation build on and segue with each other in various ways. Their 'effect, one supposes, is meant to be cumulative, though one also suspects that White thinks that each has force independently of the others. So for purposes of this presentation, I will introduce them 'as separate considerations, while also taking note of the ways in which later analyses and arguments build on and flesh out earlier ones.

White's often repeated[19] core slogan, which he shares with Louis, Mink,[20] is that lives are lived and stories are told. Our lives do not come packaged as stories; we invent stories about them retrospectively through imaginative effort. Thus, the historians' narrative cannot be taken as a reflection of the lives lived by historical agents. If historians think this way-as White believes they do, despite what they may say--then narrative historians are woefully mistaken.

Though the invocation of "lives" here, as we shall see, is too restrictive as well as infelicitious in other ways, what is intended can be put more rigorously and comprehensively: "Histories, then, are not only about events but also about the possible sets of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure. These sets of relationships are not, however, immanent in the events themselves; they exist only in the mind of the historian reflecting on them."[21]

This slogan is fleshed out in terms of various, further contrasts. Since the past is not storied, historical narratives axe not found or discovered; rather they are invented.[22] In this sense, historical narratives are constructions[23]-constructions that give a sequence of events, such as one might find notated in a historical chronicle or annal, a meaning.[24] Historical narratives, in

this regard, are also said to constitute meaning.[25]

But events, as lived, do not have meanings. They only get meanings by being invested with a function in a narrative. That the Battle of Stalingrad was the turning point of World War II, for example, acquires this significance by being a complication in a narrative plot about World War II. The Battle of Stalingrad, qua event, had no meaning; and, indeed, it could figure in other stories in which it would have a different meaning. (In an architectual history, for example, the significance of the battle might be that it occasioned the destruction of important buildings.)

Related to the meaning/real event contrast is a contrast between meaning and a copy of an event. Putatively, practicing historians have the naive view that their narratives could be copies of events past--by which I understand White to mean something like a perfect replica or mirror-image,[26] But historical writing cannot afford a perfect simulacrum of the past. It involves selection and filling in; so it is actually a deviation from an exact copy or representation of the succession of events. In fact, White does not hesitate to call it a distortion,[27] presumably a distortion in contrast to whatever would count as a perfect replica or mirror-image of a succession of past events.

Narration has its own conditions of intelligibility. Narrative coherence requires features like beginnings, middles and ends-ends, particularly in the technical sense of closure. But, on what must be ontological grounds, White thinks it is obvious that events do not emerge from the flux of history closured. Closure is a product of narrative coherence. It is the aim of achieving narrative coherence that leads to the selection and hierarchical ordering that imbues the relevant events with meaning, while also distorting them in the sense at play in the preceding paragraph.

Narrative coherence, then, is an imposition[28] on the historical past. Moreover, the patterns of narrative coherence thus imposed upon (or constructed out of) a collection of historical events are conventional (rather than, say, realistically motivated).[29] This inventing, distorting, constructing, imposing, constituting, meaning-making (signifying), and convention applying activity are all acts of the imagination (in contrast, one supposes, to some more literal information assimilating process). Moreover, this imaginative activity on the part of narrative historians is not different in kind from the activity of the literary fabulist and should be treated as telling us about the world in the same way.

White runs his various foils to actual sequences of events (and perfect replicas thereof) together rather indiscriminately. That is, imagining, constructing, distorting, signifying, constituting, and so on are never scrupulously and differentially defined, and they are all used to serve roughly the same purpose: to underpin the animating distinction between living (the succession of real events) and telling (narrating). One would think that signifying, imagining, distorting, conventionalizing and so ont-not to mention selecting-(though potentially interrelated in interesting ways) should not be lumped together so cavalierly. However, in White's brief they serve as "intuition pumps[30] directed at consolidating the reigning slogan that distinguishes between living (history as process) and telling ,(history as narrative artifact). Each contrast, that is, is meant to convince us of a disjunction between a sequence of real events or a perfect replica thereof (whatever that might be) and a narrative structure which introduces fictional elements into the flow of events.

White expands upon and concretizes his slogans and intuition pumps by exploiting analyses of narrative by literary theorists-both those of the recent structuralist/poststructuralist dispensation, and that of Northrop Fyre.

From continental literary theory, White derives the idea of what he calls "narrativizing discourse."[31] This is putatively discourse that gives the impression that there is no narrator. It is the discourse that in contemporary literary circles is often called "transparent," that is, writing which presents itself to the reader as unmediated and full-a transcription of reality without gaps: "the whole unvarnished truth and nothing but," so to speak. Such discourse, ostensibly appearing without a narrator, presents itself as if "the events seem to tell themselves."[32] The property of "events telling themselves" is called narrativity, and discourse that imbues the events it recounts

with this property is narrativizing.

The transparency or narrativizing effect is the hallmark of what many literary theorists call the realist text, such as is supposedly found in the form of the nineteenth century novel. In adopting the narrating strategies of the realist text, the historian, likewise, presents events as if they were "telling themselves." For White, this implies that naive, narrative historians really have a deep, though unacknowledged and even disavowed, affinity with substantive philosophers of history, like Marx and Hegel, who see the historical process as a single unfolding story--history speaking through the acts of humankind. Thus, if substantive philosophers of history are open to criticism, then less grandiose but nevertheless still narrativizing historians should be vulnerable to the same kind of criticisms.

So, both ordinary narrativizing historians and philosophers of history can be charged with distortion and with masking their highly selective procedures with an imaginary aura of coherence, integrity and fullness that exploits our desires (for coherence, etc.), but which misrepresents reality.[33] White writes, "Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see 'the end' in every beginning?[34] Any form of narrativity-which is the presupposition that narrative structure literally corresponds to something in the historical past-amounts to the belief that "events tell themselves." But "real events should not speak, should not tell themselves. Real events should simply be."[35] Or, to return to White's earlier slogan: stories can't be found because real stories aren't out there in the world of the past to be found.

Though White uses the conceptual frameworks of continental literary theorists to augment his account of narrative history, the literary theorist upon whom his argument most relies is Northrop Frye. As we have seen, White believes that narrative historians impose pre-existing plot configurations on event series, thereby rendering them intelligible. But this raises the question of identifying some of the plot configurations that historians are supposedly employing. And it is in this context that White is able to use Frye in order to cash in his more philosophically motivated conceptions of historical narration.

According to Frye, there are certain master genres into which literary narratives fall.[36] These include Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire/Irony. On the basis of the analyses of nineteenth century historical writing in Metahistory and of more recent figures, such as A.J.P. Taylor,[37] White advances the hypothesis that the kinds of narrative configurations identified by Frye in literary fictions are also operative in historical narratives. This empirical claim, if it is sustainable, gives White's more philosophical speculations real bite. For surely narrative configurations of the order of tragedy do have a content as well as generic conditions of coherence such that we would be prone to suspect a historian who selected events from the historical flow under their aegis of imposition in the epistemically dubious or distorting sense. Tragedies, comedies, romances and satires do seem invented rather than found, at least for the most part. So, if historical narratives tend to have these structures with significant regularity, we might very well admit that the practice of historical writing is of a piece with fiction. For these patterns are, first and foremost, fictional genres.

One reason that White advances in favor of the idea that historical narratives are impositions is that events can be emplotted in different stories. This, of course, becomes particularly convincing when we think of the stories in terms of generic forms like tragedy and comedy. For certainly the same events or cluster of events can figure in tragedies or comedies-e.g., in Hamlet or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.

Moreover, if it is the case that historical narrative is as thoroughly dependent on generic structures at the level Frye describes them, then the idea that they illuminate metaphorically becomes more perspicuous. Actual series of events may not literally be satiric, but by emplotting them in a satiric structure the narrative historian may be seen to be exhibiting certain aspects of those events in a revelatory way. By likening a sequence of actual events to satire, an apparently desultory group of events takes on a familiar and understandable shape. Furthermore, the notion

that these generic structures function as metaphors accommodates White's worries about the selectivity of narrative, for metaphors function cognitively by drawing selected, though ideally revealing, analogies.

Whether White is committed to the existence of only four generic plots is unclear. On the one hand, there are indications in his writings that there might be more, such as the epic;[38] on the other hand, Frye's recurring fourfold division is the most frequently invoked characterization of generic narrative configurations. However this issue is resolved, White does appear to believe that the number of narrative configurations culturally available to the historian is limited and the repertoire is at the level of generality found in Frye's typology. At the same time, White does not think that each historical narrative will be subsumable under one and only one of Frye's types, because some historical works will mix configurational options. Nevertheless, whether pure or mixed, all historical narratives will employ generic configurations and, therefore, possess an inexpungable fictional dimension.

Connected to White's theory of emplotment is his theory of tropology-the tropics of discourse. Not only are the events in historical narratives arranged or emplotted in accordance with a finite number of culturally available story forms (myths), but the events are described by means of tropes, notably metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony, and the tropes a historian favors influence or prefigure the choice of plot structure of the historian's narrative as a whole.

On White's view, since the historian, unlike the scientist, works, for the most part, in the medium of ordinary, rather than technical, language, his tendency will be toward the employment of tropes. A given historian will customarily gravitate toward the use of one trope over others. The use of a particular trope is likely to predispose her toward, or to correspond to, one form of culturally available emplotment over others. Thus, from the ground up, so to say, the work of the narrative historian begins to converge on that of the writer of literary fiction at the level of descriptive tropes which, in turn, portend the use of certain kinds of plots that are mythic in nature.

White writes:

the four general types of tropes identified by neo-classical rhetorical theory appear to be basic: metaphor (based on the principle of similitude), metonymy (based on that of continguity), synecdoche (based on the identification of parts of a thing belonging to a whole), and irony (based on opposition). Considered as the basic structures of figuration, these four tropes provide us with categories for identifying the modes of linking an order of words to an order of thoughts . . . on the paradigmatic axis of an utterance and of one phase of a discourse with preceding and succeeding phrases . . . on the syntagmatic axis. The dominance of one mode of associating words and thoughts with one another across an entire discourse allows us to characterize the structure of the discourse as a whole in tropological terms. The tropological structures of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (and what I take-following Northrop Frye-to be their corresponding plot types: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire), provide us with a much more refined classification of the kinds of historical discourses than that based on the conventional distinction between "linear" and "cyclical" representations of historical processes. They also allow us to see more clearly the ways in which historical discourse resembles and indeed converges with fictional narrative, both in the strategies it uses to endow events with meanings and in the kinds of truth in which it deals.[39]

White, then, flus out and supports his claims about the invented or imposed nature of historical narration by means of three substantive, empirical claims: 1) historians structure their descriptions topologically; 2) historians narrate through generic story forms; 3) the tropes a historian uses prefigure or, in some other way, correspond to her generic story forms. Crucial here is the assertion of the operation of generic story forms which can be supported either inductively through a sample of historical writing or (roughly) deductively as following from 1) and 3). Moreover, if 2) is defensible, then the claims; that historical narratives are imposed and that they are fictional gain plausibility insofar as a series of past events would not (or, at least, would almost never) appear to be intrinsically comic or tragic. Consequently, if narrative truth is a

matter of configurations at the level of such (fictional or mythic) plot structures, then it will not be assessable in terms of the truth of the conjunction of its constituent, atomic sentences. That is, if narrative truth is truthful, it must be evaluated on another model, which, logically speaking, opens the possibility that it is a sub-species of metaphorical truth.

3. Resisting White's Constructivism

Though the full force of White's position is best realized when his various intuition pumps are backed up by his empirical claims about the genre-derived nature of historical narratives and his tropology, it seems to me that his intuition pumps rely upon certain philosophical presuppositions that he believes will carry his assertion concerning the fictional nature of historical narrative independently of his general findings about genetic emplotment and tropology. Thus, in dissecting his position, it is important to challenge those philosophical presuppositions before turning to his broad empirical claims about the kinds of generic structures found in historical narratives.

According to White, lives are lived and stories are told. The putative consequence of this is that insofar as historical narratives represent the lives of the past in story form, they do not correspond to what existed in the past and are, therefore, fictional. This is not compelling comprehensively. For it is often the case that we plan-if not our entire lives, at least important episodes therein--by means of telling or visualizing stories to ourselves, and, then, we go about enacting them. That is, lives can be storied; indeed there is a branch of psychology that uses this idea as a research hypothesis? Consequently, with certain life episodes--and, in some cases, perhaps with some monomaniacal lives-there are stories, hatched by historical agents, that had causal efficacy in the past and which could be discovered and written up by historians. Thus, to the extent that the contrast between lives and stories is not thoroughly exclusive, the conclusion that any historical narrative must be fictional is not without exception; there could be historical narratives of storied lives, or, at least, of storied episodes in the lives of historical agents.

Of course, this is not the real issue that the lives/stories dichotomy is meant to broach. For historians are not merely biographers in search of life stories. The contrast between lives and stories is meant to call to mind colorfully the idea that historical narratives are not found or discovered in the past, but are constructions or inventions. The notion of invention here is a bit tricky and open to equivocation. In one sense, historical narratives are inventions, viz., in the sense that they are made by historians; but it is not clear that it follows from this that they are made-up (and are, therefore, fictional).

Narratives are a form of representation, and it is true that historians do not go about finding their representations as one might find a lost picture, a lost photo, or a lost piece of film footage. Photos and film strips are made (invented) and they are not found. We could say that lives are lived, and home movies are invented. But this doesn't entail that a stretch of film footage cannot record the past or yield accurate information about it. Similarly, narratives are a form of representation, and, in that sense, they are invented, but that does not preclude their capacity to provide accurate information. Narratives can provide accurate knowledge about the past in terms of the kinds of features they track, namely, the ingredients of courses of events,[41] which include: background conditions, causes and effects, as well as social context, the logic of situations, practical deliberations and ensuing actions.

Recently, for example, on July 3, 1989, the United States Supreme Court announced a decision that delegated responsibility for regulating the availability of abortions to the discretion of individual states. This decision was the result, in significant respects, of the success of the Reagan regime in appointing a series of like-minded, conservative judges to the Supreme Court. The appointment of those judges, including O'Connor and Scalia, in the context of a background project of contesting the perceived past liberalism of the Supreme Court, was part of a real historical process, a course of events, that culminated on July 3, 1989.

This is not to say that there will not be further consequences to the court's decision nor that this is the final culmination of Reagan's successful efforts to reorient the court. But the fact that there

is more to come does not vitiate the fact that the Reagan administration's decisions and appointments were significant ingredients in a real historical process which had as one result--one, for there will be more--the decision on July 3, 1989. The historian who tracks these decisions and appointments, situating them in their social contexts, will make something--something that may take imagination to accomplish--namely, a historical representation. But there is no reason to suppose that such historical representations are necessarily made-up or invented unless, for some as yet undemonstrated reason, courses of events must be excluded from our ontology. Moreover, if courses of events are admissable ontologically, then they are there to be discovered and represented.

That my counterexamples so far often rely on the idea of deliberations and decisions implemented in ensuing actions may appear open to the objection that they presuppose a commitment on the part of historians to recreating the internal perspective of historical agents. This, in turn, would be criticized as problematic for two related reasons. First, that historians are not simply concerned with narrating events in terms of how the agents saw them and that, even if historians were so disposed, they should not be so exclusively preoccupied since it is often (most often?) the unintended consequences of people's deliberations and decisions about which we most care.

These objections, however, require two remarks. First, if there are courses of events that did issue as planned from the agent's perhaps storied deliberation, this would be enough to show that there is a sense in which the thesis that stories are never found fails to be fully comprehensive. But a second and more important point is that in speaking of courses of events, we are not committed to rendering them solely in terms of the original intentions of the agents involved in them. A course of events may involve failed attempts, like Reagan's nomination of Bork to the Supreme Court, which will result in more deliberative activity which may have further unintended consequences. Or, the agent's deliberative activity may involve miscalculations that call for the historian to illuminate the prevailing conditions that made the attempt misfire. That practical reasoning and its implementation in action provide some of the ingredients that make a course of events adhere in no way implies that the representation of a course of events will be a string of successful practical syllogisms. That practical, deliberative activity will supply some measure of cohesiveness to the narratives of human events does not restrict us to a form of historical intentionalism nor does it preclude discussion of corporate entities like states or classes.[42]

Of course, in speaking of courses of events, I do not mean to imply that any given event is only a member of one course of events. The appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor to the Supreme Court is part of the course of events that led to the decision alluded to above. But that event also undoubtedly figured in various other courses of events--some in the history of the O'Connor family and some concerning the social advancement of women in the United States. And, equally, the event of O'Connor's appointment will also figure in courses of events still in the making. The same event can be part of different courses of events, and, therefore, can be represented in different stories. But the fact that different events can figure in different stories in no way indicates that the stories are fictional. For this suspicion to counterfeit plausibility, we would have to assume that in order to be nonfictional, there would have to be only one relevant story, perhaps of the sort proposed by speculative philosophers of history, and that each event in it would be significant in one and only one way. That is, if there is more than one story, then stories are invented, and, therefore, fictional. But the presumed disjunction that either there is one real story or a multiplicity of fictional ones fails to accommodate the fact that courses of action intersect and branch off from shared events, which intersections and branches can be found or discovered.

In White's way of speaking, when a given event is situated in different narratives it can acquire a different meaning. That events have these differential meanings indicates that they are imposed and, therefore, fictional. But talk of meanings here may be a little misleading. Events have different significances in different courses of events.[43] Anthony Scalia's appointment to the Supreme Court has one significance in terms of the great abortion debate and another, though perhaps not completely unrelated, significance in the history of Italian-Americans. In these

examples, the idea of significance can be cashed in causally. If meaning here amounts to playing a role in a network of socially significant causation, then there should be no problems in admitting that Scalia's appointment may have a different meaning in different courses of events. This simply allows that a single event can play a different role in different causal chains. This does not indicate that a meaning has been imposed on the event. Again, the event may occur in different stories because the different stories track different courses of overlapping events."[44]

White's use of the notion of meaning in his arguments gives his thesis a semantic flavor, which perhaps suggests a level of arbitrariness that would warrant talk of imposition. However, it is important to stress that the kind of meaning that an event has in a narrative is a matter of its significance with respect to subsequent events, often in terms of causation and/or practical reasoning. And whether significance in this sense obtains is not arbitrary or imposed. That the historian wants to know what caused the American entry into WWII does not make her citation of the attack on Pearl Harbor an imposition on the historical train of events nor is her imputation of causal efficacy to the attack arbitrary in any way. This is not to deny that events in historical narratives will be events under a description; but within the context of a given research project, the description of a pertinent event is not arbitrary in the way that on some views of language the relation between a signifier and a signified is arbitrary. Similarly, it is not helpful to think of the historian's description of an action in terms of its significance in a course of events as constitutive of the event in any strong sense; whether Pearl Harbor, for example, was a cause of WWII is a fact even if it were not asserted in historical accounts.

White contrasts historical narratives replete with meanings to copies of the past. The historical narrative, involving selection and abduction, is not a copy of the past, and, therefore, is fictional. The contrast here seems forced; the visual references to copies and mirrors is particularly strained though revelatory of an empiricist residue in White's thinking. Obviously, historical narratives are not mirror images of the past; in general (save things like cinematic documentaries) they are not even pictorial, let alone perfect pictorial replicas of anything. But why should the fact that they are not pictures imply they are fictions?

However, the preceding worry misses the point. The idea of a copy of the past should probably be understood metaphorically. A copy of the past would be a perfect reflection of everything that transpired in the relevant time span with nothing added or subtracted. It would bear an exact correspondence to all and only what came about, or even more strictly, to what could have been perceived as past events unfolded. Anything that falls short of this is said to be fictional.

Of course, it is difficult to imagine that practicing historians pursue the production of such copies in their work, or that, informed as they are of the historical evidence, they construe their narratives as perfect replicas of the past. But White, it seems, wants to confront them with a dilemma. Either historical narratives are copies in the relevant sense or they are fictional. The way to deal with this dilemma is to reject it--to maintain that historical narratives are not and, in fact, should not be copies in the mirror sense while also maintaining that this does not make them fictional.

The notion that only copies in the mirror sense would not be fictional presupposes something like a narrowly empiricist, correspondence criterion of truth. White explicitly denies the viability of this approach in one sense--he denies that historical narratives could meet it. However, this does not seem to lead him to reject the criterion entirely. That is, he appears to continue to regard it as the ideal criterion for nonfictional historical exposition, even if it is an unrealizable ideal. And, to the extent that it is unrealizable, he consigns historical narration to the realm of fiction. But what is strange here is that White doesn't take the inapplicability of this ideal of truth as a grounds for advancing alternative criteria of nonfictional truth for historical narratives.

Confronted by the inapplicability of the copy ideal of an empiricist view of correspondence truth, it seems to me that the line one should take is to search for some other grounds for accomodating the truth of historical narratives construed as nonfictional. That is, we should hold onto the intuition that historical narratives can be truthful in the way that nonfictional discourse is true, drop the expectation that this is explicable in terms of a naive view of correspondence to the past

as a whole, and explore alternative models. White, in effect, maintains the criteria of empiricist correspondence, which leads him to reassigning historical narration to the realm of fiction. In this respect, oddly enough, he turns out to be a closet empiricist-presupposing that anything that falls short of the correspondence standard is fictional.[45]

Undoubtedly, there is a parallel between White's strategy here and that of many deconstructionists. When they note the failure of certain theories of language on the grounds that no language is an absolute mirror of the world, they conclude that meaning is an arbitrary, infinitely fluctuating construct rather than surmising that the expectation that a language might absolutely mirror the world was a theoretical error to begin with, and that a better view of the way in which a language is objectively constrained should be sought. That is, they remain in the thrall of a bad theory of language, employing it to motivate their skepticism, at the same time that they agree that no language squares with the idealization. This is akin to reasoning that either existence has an absolute meaning ordained by God or it has no meaning; since there is no God, there is no meaning. This way of thinking shares the theistic assumption that only something like God could serve as a source of meaning. An alternative would be to search for other sources of meaning once the hypothesis that there is no God is endorsed. Similarly, in consigning historical narration to the realm of fiction on the grounds that it is not a perfect replica of the past, White remains implicitly in the very empiricist camp from which he explicitly wishes to part company.

Armed with the copy ideal of nonfictionality, White recycles the issue of selectivity, which must be the most perennial pretext for suspecting the objectivity of historical narration. Obviously, a narrative selects a subset of events and event relationships from the historical flow; thus, if candidacy for nonfictionality depends on correspondence to the whole past, or the whole past within certain stipulated time parameters, a historical narrative will be discounted. But, again, this should lead us to drop the copy ideal of nonfictionality and not to jettison the idea that historical narratives are nonfictional This is not the place to review all the arguments that are designed to show that the selectivity of historical narratives need not be epistemologically problematic in any way that warrants special attention. Some historians may select the events they highlight in dubitable ways, but there are procedures for ascertaining whether the processes of selection a given historian employs are questionable. That is, historians may produce distortive representations of the past because of biased procedures, but this only goes to show that the selective attention of a given narrative may be distorting, and not that selectivity, in and of itself, is problematic. If it were, then scientific findings, which are also selective, would also, by parity of reasoning, be fictional.

White, himself, may remain unmoved by our last argument. For he is apparently ,convinced of the constructivist/conventionalist view of science. Thus, he seems to gain confidence by analogizing historical narratives with scientific theories, as construed by constructivists. Surmising that scientific theories are constructed on the basis of observational data that underdetermine theory choice, which data themselves are theory-laden, White thinks of narratives as similarly constructed, in contexts where the data would support alternative stories, and he thinks of narrative events as, so to speak, story-laden. Thus, if the adoption of a scientific theory is conventional, given the putative fact that it is one construction of the data within a range of equally acceptable ones, then historical narratives, assuming the analogy to scientific: theories, are equally conventional. Their selective organization of the data does not correspond to reality, but is an invention developed within conventional choice procedures. Thus, one dispels the argument of the preceding paragraph by maintaining that scientific selectivity forces us to concede that scientific theories are imaginative constructions-and in that sense fictions-and, therefore, no incongruity is engendered by maintaining that comparable processes of selection with respect to historical narratives render them fictional as well.[46]

A major problem with this invocation of the philosophy of science is that it presumes that the facts of scientific theorizing pointed to by constructivists entail anti-realism. But a solid case for the compatibility of scientific realism with the facts of the history of science, upon which constructivists rely, is available,[47] thereby blocking any facile attempt to derive historical anti-realism with respect to narrative from scientific anti-realism with respect to theories. That is, the selective procedures and inferred nature of theoretical entities does not commit us to

anti-realism; it does not force us to deny that scientific theories are approximately true. Therefore, even if suitable analogies could be drawn between constructivism in science and constructivism in historiography,[48] we would not have to regard historical narratives as fictional.

A course of events transpiring between t1 and t5 need not comprise every event or state of affairs in its temporal neighborhood. Therefore, a narrative representation that tracks that course of events need not refer to every occurrence in the stipulated time span. Narratives are selective but this is appropriate given the nature of courses of events. Nor is it useful to call the reconstruction of a course of events distortive just because it involves selection. Indeed, from the perspective of attempting cognitively to assimilate a representation of the past, the portrayal of a course of events that chronicled all of the events in the temporal neighborhood would distort insofar as it would muddy the links between the pertinent elements in the sequence.

Likewise, our narrative accounts may have to be revised in the light of subsequent events; this does not show that historical narratives are fictional, but only that there are always more stories to tell. Moreover, that some historical narratives may be superseded by ones that are more finegrained no more shows that the earlier ones were fictional than the adjustment of one approximately true scientific theory with further details (atomic theory amplified by the characterization of subatomic particles) shows that the earlier viewpoint must now be evaluated according to a different standard of truth.

No historical narrative says everything there is to say, not even about all of the events within the time frame that it discusses. The historian exercises choice in the sense that the linkage between some events and not others will be given salience in order to illuminate a given course of events. It is true, as White repeatedly emphasizes, that in charting these linkages and in making the relevant selections, the historian uses her imagination. But, pace White, it is quite a long throw from the historian' s use of her imagination in discerning said linkages to the inference that the historian's narrative is on a par with that of the imaginative writer (i.e., the writer of fiction). White appears to presume that there is a correlation between the use of the imagination and fiction. But this is illicit. On many views of the imagination, such as Kant's, the imagination plays a role in perception, but my perception of my house is in no way fictional.

Many of White's arguments for the fictionality of historical narrative hinge on contrasting said narratives with copies of the past. Any addition (imaginative construction) or subtraction of detail (selection) from such a copy, conceived of on the model of a mirror, is evidence of fictionality. But the foil is inadmissable. Not only is the visual metaphor inapplicable--it is not the case that not being an exact copy of x entails being a fictional representation of x; but it indicates a residual commitment to a very radical version of an empiricist expectation of exact "perceptual" correspondence between a representation and its referent, which is not only philosophically bogus but is at odds with White's own suspicion of empiricism. Like the skeptic who arrives at her position by accepting a phenomenalist account of perception and who, therefore, remains effectively an empiricist, White regards historical narration as fictional, because he continues to employ something as implausible as perceptual correspondence as the standard of nonfictionality.

White's emphasis on the verbal dimension of historical narration sends him to contemporary discourse theory for insight. There he encounters the idea that narration in what is called the realist text gives the reader the impression that the text is transparent-that it is unmediated, for example, by a narrator exercising selectivity--indeed, that it is as if the text were reality narrating itself. This corresponds to White's own view that historians write as if they were discovering real stories, stories immanent in the historical process, whereas they are really fitting pre-existing story templates onto past events. The ideas that "events narrate themselves" and that the historian, so to speak, records them as a dictaphone might, ostensibly shows acceptance!of the disreputable assumption of speculative philosophers of history to the effect that the historical process is storied--i.e., that historical events have a single significance in some overarching historical narrative.

This is, a very perplexing argument. It begins by attributing transparency-or, narrativity, as White calls it--to realist texts. But to whom does the text appear transparent? Presumably, to naive readers and to the naive historians who write under the supposedly misguided faith that they could track a historical course of events. These naive readers and writers are somehow possessed by the idea that reality is narrating itself. Stated this way, the belief attributed to them is at least obscure and, on a number of readings, absurd.

It is absurd to think of events as telling or narrating their own story in any literal sense, as White notes. But, in fact, it is so absurd on a literal reading that it is hard to believe that any readers or writers, no matter how naive, can be taken in by it. No one could believe that reality literally narrates itself, so it is an inadequate starting point from which to field a dialectically alternative account. It is, so to say, an argumentative red herring, rather than a genuine competing theory whose defeat gives way to White's alternative, fictional account of historical narration. That is, faced with a transparency account of historical narration and White's account, we are not moved to White's theory by the all-too-easy defeat of the attributed transparency view, but rather suspect that we have not started with a viable field of competing accounts.

Stated nonabsurdly, but still obscurely, the transparency effect might be thought of as the impression on the part of naive readers and naive historians that the text is unmediated, that it is without gaps, that it renders a full account of the past. However, this too seems to be such a bizarre conviction to attribute to anyone that it is a non-starter. Historians obviously know that they are selecting a series of events from a larger sequence, and readers have only to look at the title page of the book to learn the identity of the narrator/mediator. No one, in short, believes that historical texts are unmediated; or, to put it positively, any informed reader or writer is aware that a text involves selection. In this, everyone agrees with White, and the view that some do not is a straw man. Where there is undoubtedly disagreement is in the assumption that selection implies fictionality. But the burden of proof is on White to show this, and, in my opinion, the only means at his disposal is the dubious, implicit assumption that nonfiction requires exact correspondence.[49]

Associated with White's implicit presumption of a standard of exact correspondence is his apparent view that if one assumes that there are "real stories," then said stories would have to be of the nature of what we can call absolute stories. For any series of events, an event emplotted in a narrative structure that is immanent in the historical process will have one and only one fixed significance. Something like this view is what leads him to believe that the narrative exploits of practicing historians correspond to those of substantive philosophers of history. I suppose that White is prompted to this intuition on the grounds that if one actually composed a nonfictional narrative in accordance with the exact correspondence standard, one would have a unitary picture of the past in which every event had a determinate place. Of course, White, and perhaps everyone else, thinks that this is impracticable. But White goes on to argue from the infeasibility of absolute stories to the fictionality of all historical narratives.

That is, given an event or a series of events, we can develop a number of stories. No event or event series has one final, i.e., single, fixed significance for reasons rehearsed above. Events and event series can, through narration, be connected with alternative events and event series. A collection of events, in a manner of speaking, underdetermines the stories in which they can play a role. From this, White infers that there can be no "real stories"; if there were "real stories," immanent in the historical process, events would fall into one and only one train of events, said train inscribed in events like the evolution of Hegel's world spirit. Historical narrative presumes that the historical process is narrativized and if the historical process is narrativized and there are real stories, the significance of each event fits into one and only one story. So, since there is always more than one derivable story, there are no real stories.

But once again, the argument proceeds on the basis of a straw man. The requirement that "real stories" be absolute stories is exorbitant from the outset. Stories will be nonfictionally accurate insofar they track courses of events. But courses of events overlap and branch, and there is no need to presume-as perhaps Hegel did-that there is only one course of events. Thus, events and series of events may play different roles in different stories. But that events and series of events

figure in different stories is no obstacle to those stories being nonfictional. There are different stories because there are discrete courses of events whose interest is relative to the questions the historian asks of the evidence. This relativity, which precludes the possibility of an absolute story, however, does not make the historical narrative fictional. Rather it makes the accuracy of the nonfictional account assessable in terms of what questions are being directed to the relevant courses of events.[50]

Like innumerable poststructuralist commentators, White appears to believe that agreement that there is no absolute interpretation, no final word, so to say, with respect to x, should impel us to avoid the imputation of truth to an interpretation of x. That is, if there are a multiplicity of interpretations available for x, then the question of literal truth goes by the boards. A true interpretation would have to be an absolute interpretation; an absolute interpretation would have to be the final word on its subject; but since there axe no such absolute interpretations-here with respect to historical narratives--there is no question of literal truth.

Needless to say, this is a bad argument with respect to literary criticism. To say a literary interpretation is true if and only if it is the only acceptable account of a text is absurd; one does not deny the truth of a literary interpretation by showing that another interpretation is possible. For the other interpretation may be compatible with the interpretation under scrutiny. That a text supports a multiplicity of interpretations does not disallow the possibility that all of them are literally true; the epistemological issue with respect to a collection of interpretations of texts only becomes live when they are inconsistent.

But here it is important to keep two very different arguments separate: one says that truth is inapplicable to interpretations because there is always a multiplicity of acceptable interpretations of x available; the other says that truth is inapplicable to interpretations because there is always, at least in principle, a multiplicity of equally acceptable but inconsistent interpretations of x available. The former view is based on the truism that there may be no absolute interpretation of x, but from that truism it does not follow that several different interpretations of x cannot be conjointly true, for example, that 1984 is about totalitarianism and that it is about Stalinism. The pressure to abandon the question of truth with respect to interpretations only impinges when it can be argued that we are always confronted by a multiplicity of incompatible interpretations.

Turning from literary interpretation to historical narration, the pressing question is which of the preceding arguments can be sustained. Here, it seems to me that it is obvious that there are multiple stories that can be derived from a given set of events, but, without buying into White's confidence in generic emplotment, there is no reason to presume that these different stories must conflict, and, therefore, no reason to believe that they cannot be assessed in terms of literal truth.[51] Sandra Day O'Connor's appointment to the Supreme Court is part of the narrative of recent abortion decisions and part of the narrative of women's social empowerment. These stories need not conflict and both could be true. Insofar as White's arguments about historical narration, unlike Joseph Margolis's arguments about literary interpretation, do not show that different historical narratives can always in principle be nonconverging and inconsistent, historical narrations remain assessable in terms of literal standards of truth.

Again, the recognition that an event or an event series affords an ingredient for more than one story is a truism. It does not force us to concede that historical narratives cannot be assessed in terms of literal truth. Nor does it seem compelling to suppose that ordinary historians must buy into the presuppositions of substantive philosophers of history in order to regard their narratives in terms of truth. For there is no logical requirement that true narratives be absolutely true. Historians can trace alternative courses of events without presupposing that some one course of event is privileged because history is the story of human emancipation or class struggle.

So far we have been considering White's more abstract, philosophical arguments. Now we must evaluate his empirical theses. For it may be the case that White's abstract arguments, when filled in by his empirical claims, are more convincing. We have argued that the fact that an event may be incorporated in more than one story supplies no reason to believe that historical :narratives cannot be literally true. But if we accept White's claim that all historical narratives are generically

emplotted in terms of romance, tragedy, comedy and satire, perhaps White's position can be given new life. For, on the one hand, most events do not seem to be intrinsically comic or tragic; and, on the other hand, if events are alternatively emplottable as comedies ,or tragedies, then alternative, equally acceptable, but incompatible interpretations seem available such that both cannot be literally true. That is, if one historian's narrative of an event sequence portrays it as comic and another portrays it as tragic, and both are acceptable, though incompatible, then what warrants these interpretations cannot be literal truth.

Of course, whether this argument is successful depends upon whether White is correct in claiming that all historical narratives are generically emplotted in terms of the sort of narrative forms that White suggests. Undoubtedly, some historians may deploy the kinds of mythic plots typified by Frye. But do all historical narratives do this? My own inclination is to think that they do not. For example, in a recent, randomly selected, narrative explanation of the perplexities confronting contemporary socialism, Michael Harrington writes:

One might say from 1883 (when Marx died and the social democracy was about to enter its golden age) to 1945 the socialists attempted, with a notable lack of success, to figure out precisely what they meant by socialism. Then in the postwar age, it seemed that John Maynard Keynes had miraculously provided the answer that Marx had neglected: socialization was the socialist administration of an expanding capitalist economy whose surplus was then partly directed to the work of justice and freedom. When, sometime in the seventies, that Keynesian era came to an end, the socialists were once more thrown into confusion. 'Which is where we are now.[52]

This brief narrative does not seem to me to be identifiable as either a tragedy, a comedy, a romance, or a satire. And, furthermore, if most narrative writing of history is, as I suspect, as generically neutral as this example, then the importance of generic emplotment for the assessment of historical narration becomes extremely exiguous. Of course, whether, in fact, historical narration is typically plotted generically or is more like the preceding example is an empirical question. But even if my counterexample is not the norm, it still shows from the perspective of the philosophy of history that not all historical narratives are generically emplotted. Therefore, not all historical narratives can be matched with equally compelling alternatives in contradictory generic modes. Therefore, not all historical narratives raise the problem of the multiplicity of inconsistent interpretations in such a way that talk of literal truth is rendered problematic.

Moreover, assessing the empirical accuracy of White's theory of generic emplotment would be very difficult-not because there would be so many narratives to consider, but because White's characterization of his generic modes is so vague. Confronted by the preceding counterexample, White would probably attempt to show that it fits one of his genres. But his apparent success in this matter would be based on the fact that these genres are very loosely defined and there are no conditions of application for these modes in evidence. Consequently, some feature of Harrington's little narrative can probably be lined up with at least one feature of one of White's genres. However, White's freewheeling, associative manner of identifying genre membership not only makes his thesis suspicious, but unfalsifiable. Thus, the very ad hoc flavor of White's analysis undercuts its reliability as the basis for maintaining that for any historical narrative, there is an equally acceptable, contradictory narrative--i.e., a narrative in an incompatible genre--which forces us to concede that the criterion of truth is inapplicable to it.

On White's view, historical narratives will be emplotted in terms of romance, comedy, tragedy, satire, or a mode of comparable generality; those modes are said to be incompatible but alternatively available for a given series of events; so, no narrative can be literally true. I am not convinced that these genres are necessarily contradictory in the sense that the argument requires. However, even if they are, it seems to me that many (most?) historical narratives are not emplotted at this level of generality, but derive their plot structures by tracking causes, reasons and consequences in a way that allows for straightforward evaluation in terms of truth. This is not a matter of imposing cultural conventions (White's generic plots) on event series, so the putative undecidability between White's story-templates is of little moment in assessing

typical historical narratives. Furthermore, if White wishes to dispute this claim, he will have to rigorously define his generic plots so that should he find them everywhere, we may rest assured that this is because they are everywhere and not because they are so carelessly characterized that they can be applied to anything.

Along with his theory of generic emplotment, White has his theory of tropes, which is meant to reinforce his theory of plots. Every historical narrative relies on tropes-specifically those of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoehe and irony-and the historian's choice of trope prefigures her choice of generic emplotment. Insofar as narratives are troped, they are emplotted in generic forms. Emplotment in generic forms, then, seems unavoidable, despite my protests to the contrary.

Unfortunately, many of the problems that afflict White's theory of emplotment also plague his tropology. On the face of it, it does not seem difficult randomly to peruse the work of narrative historians and to find long stretches of nonfigurative writing. White seems to think that because historian.,; use ordinary language, they must use tropes. But since there is nonfigurative ordinary language, it is difficult to be persuaded by this argument.[53]

One would think that it would be easy to determine whether historical writing is dominated by the four tropes in the ways White argues. It should be a simple matter of statistically gauging their incidence (along with correlating that incidence with the frequency of the associated generic plots). However, the question is not so easily settled because White's idea of troping pertains not only literally to instances of figurative language but to modes of thought. Thus to determine whether a given trope dominates a historian's writing may call for an interpretation of her style of thought and the correlation of that mode of thought with a trope. A historian, for example, who ,emphasizes the repetition of certain kinds of events in her narrative might be said to be thinking tropically in terms of metaphors. But as with White's plot categories, his trope categories are not tightly defined, and one worries that his attributions of this or that trope to a particular writer has an ad hoc ring to it. That White's discussion of tropes can shift between specific verbal structures and vaguely sketched styles of thought suggests a capacity for ambiguity that renders the claim that all historical writing is tropological disturbingly unfalsifiable.

Furthermore, construed as figures of thought, White's tropes bear a strong similarity to associationist principles for the connection of ideas. Thus, to the extent that such a theory represents a crude but still rather commodious cartography of mental operations, it will come as no surprise that examples of one or another connectives-e.g., similarity, contiguity or contrast-will subsume virtually every example of human thinking. That is, whether thinking is articulated in ordinary language or scientific language, or whether it is narrative or analytic, it will exemplify fundamental associative principles. Thus, casting tropes at a level of generality such that they become indiscernible from associationist principles of thought undermines the attempt to separate historical narrative from other types of human thought, such as science. Indeed, tropes thought of as mental processes subvert the distinction between the literal and the figurative that White himself needs to particularize what he thinks is special about the way historical narratives inform us about the world.

Of course, if we think of tropes less expansively, then I think that we have no reason to think that historians must employ tropes at all, or that in actual practice a historian's writing will inevitably be figurative or dominated by the choice of a particular, dominating trope. And, as well, even if a historian's writing were figurative that would not force us to evaluate it according to some figurative or metaphorical standard of truth because even metaphors, conceived of as implied similes, can be straightforwardly said to be true or false,[54]

If it is not the case that all historical writing is tropological in some nonvacuous way, then it is not true that in virtue of their tropes all historical narratives correspond to a generic plot of the order of comedy, tragedy, romance or satire. That is, the hypothesis of the pervasiveness of tropes cannot support the claim of the generality of generic emplotment nor the corresponding claim of the permanent possibility of conflicting interpretations.

However, even if it were plausible to maintain that all historical writing indulges in the use of the four tropes and that for any given piece of historical narration one of the four tropes is likely to dominate, the link between the choice of a trope and the choice of a generic mode of emplotment-the prefiguration thesis--remains persistently obscure. For example, White writes that "The mythos of Synecdoche is a dream of Comedy, the apprehension of a world in which all struggle, strife and conflict are dissolved in the realization of a perfect harmony. . . ."[55] Yet, granting the Frye-derived conception of comedy here, we still want to know what this has to do with any literal construction of the trope of synecdoche. Here we are likely to be told that the trope of synecdoche is integrative,[56] so the integrative trope goes with the integrative plot. But surely one can employ synecdoches, even a great many of them, without that resulting in a narrative of reconciliation. And, if we are told that what is at issue is not literal synecdochal structures but a style of thought that underlies the text, then we shall wonder whether we have two things here-synecdochal thinking and comic thinking--or just comedy, construed ever so broadly as integration, which has nothing to do with tropes except that White has implicitly stipulated that synecdoche can be an equivalent name for it. And, if this is the case, then we merely have a jerry-rigged definition masquerading as the discovery of the very causal-sounding relation of prefiguration.

Neither the generic emplotment hypothesis nor the tropological hypothesis seem to pertain to all historical narration. Nor does the idea--even if the tropological hypothesis were true--that choice of tropes prefigures choice of generic emplotment seem plausible. So accepting the hypothesis that all historical narratives are tropological would not entail that they were all generically emplotted. And if we have no reason to think that all historical narratives are generically emplotted in terms of romance, tragedy, comedy and irony, then we are not threatened by the prospect that any given historical narrative will be in one of these genres but could be equally in another conflicting genre (events emplotted as comedy could always be emplotted in the incompatible genre of tragedy). Rather, historical narratives can be (and generally are) plotted at a lower level of structure, tracking courses of events in terms of such things as causes, reasons and consequences. And there is no reason to think that there must be alternative, equally cogent, but incompatible narratives of given courses of events at this level of structure.

Underlying White's overall view, it seems to me, is a picture of the following sort: a narrative, specifically a nonfiction narrative, is a collection of sentences ordered in a certain way. Narratives, however, are not simply evaluated in terms of the truth or falsity of their constituent sentences. The way in which the sentences are ordered is also epistemically crucial. But this dimension of epistemic evaluation would not be assessed if the narrative were evaluated solely in terms of the conjunction of the truth values of its individual, fact-asserting sentences. Moreover, it seems to be presumed that saying a narrative's epistemic adequacy for White would have to be reducible to the assessment of the truth value of the conjunction of the constituent atomic sentences in the narrative. But since the adequacy of the narrative-with respect to its structure of ordering relations-involves something beyond the truth of the sum of the truth values of its atomic sentences, the narrative as a whole must, at least in part, be assessable in terms of some other standard.

Furthermore, White also appears to presuppose that the sole epistemic category relevant to the assessment of historical narratives is truth--either literal truth construed on the model of some picture theory in which each atomic sentence corresponds to some past fact (or facts), or to some kind of truth construed in other terms. White then worries that whatever governs the selective structure of a narrative may not correspond to anything in the past. Thus the truth of that structure must be assessable in other terms, such as metaphorical accuracy.

Now if this diagnosis of White's presuppositions is correct, it is easy to avoid his conclusions. First of all, too much is being made of the idea of atomic sentences,[57] Narratives are typically written in sentences. But nothing of great importance should hinge on this. For where the relevant narrative linkages are of the nature of relations between background conditions, causes, effects, reasons, choices, actions and the like, the text can be reconstructed perspicuously in terms of propositions which can, in turn, be straightforwardly evaluated with respect to truth. In some cases, these reconstructions will be a matter of paraphrasing the individual sentences in

such a way as to make the relevant narrative relations obtaining between them evident. In other cases, the sentences found in the text will have to be expanded so as to make narrative linkages that are presupposed or conversationally implied explicit. But paraphrases and expansions of this sort in nowise mandate some special criteria of truth.

Undoubtedly, White might concede the preceding point, but still maintain that it does not get at the heart of his misgivings. For even allowing the paraphrases and expansions adverted to above, he will argue that narratives still add something and that this added something--the principles that guide the narrator's selections-is not to be literally found in the past. To the extent that something is a matter of linkages like causes and reasons, White's argument is not compelling. However, he is right to point out that we will assess a given narrative as a good narrative in terms of criteria over and above the truthfulness of all of its propositions even when suitably expanded and/or paraphrased. Should this drive us toward regarding narration as fictional and as assessable as metaphor?

I think not. To be an adequate narrative, indeed to be an adequate historical account of any sort, a candidate needs to do more than merely state the truth (indeed, an historical account could contain only true statements and yet be adjudged unacceptable[58]). It must also meet various standards of objectivity. For example, a historical narrative should be comprehensive; it should incorporate all those events which previous research has identified to be germane to the subject that the historian is seeking to illuminate.[59] A narrative of the outbreak of the American revolution that failed to recount the debates over taxation could include only true, chronologically intelligible statements, and still be regarded as an inadequate standard. Like any other cognitive enterprise, historical narration will be assessed in terms of rational standards which, though they are endorsed because they appear to be reliable guides to the truth, are not reducible to the standard of truth.

Obviously, the selective procedures that historians respect in composing their narratives will be evaluated in terms of all sorts of rational standards, like comprehensiveness, that do not correspond to anything found in the past. However, this does not mean that the selections and deletions in a historical narrative are divorced from literal questions of truth or falsity. For the selections and deletions are assessed in terms of those sorts of standards that experience indicates reliably track the truth.

White's deepest problem seems to be that he believes that truth is the only relevant grounds for the epistemic assessment of historical narratives. And, since narrative selectivity cannot be epistemically assessed without remainder in terms of truth on his correspondence model, it must be assessed in terms of some other standard of truth, such as metaphorical truth. But we can dodge this dilemma by noting that the selections and deletions of a historical narrative are subject to objective standards, which though not unrelated to ascertaining truth, are not reducible to truth. Such standards may be considered our best means for discovering the truth. Desiderata like comprehensiveness are, so to speak, truth-tracking. Thus, in evaluating the selections and deletions the narrative historian makes, we need not feel that we must embrace some special standard of truth, like metaphorical truth. Rather, our concern with historical narratives is that they be true in the ordinary sense of truth and that our assessments of their adequacy in terms of standards like comprehensiveness are keyed to determining truth. That principles governing the inclusion of an event in a narrative, like comprehensiveness, are not reducible to the standard of truth in no way implies that the narrative is fictional, nor that it should be understood as some kind of metaphor. This alternative only presents itself if one mistakenly circumscribes the options for epistemically evaluating nonfiction narratives in the way White does.[60]

White believes that the selections and deletions in a historical narrative are to be explained in terms of literary exigencies. Events are included or excluded with respect to whether they can function as beginnings, middles and ends in comedies, tragedies, romances and satires. I doubt that every historical narrative falls or must fall into one of White's generic types, and I even doubt that historical narratives require middles, and ends, in the technicair sense of closure. A historical course of affairs may have a turning point and it may have results, but these need not be taken

to be mere literary artifacts. Similarly, White writes as though the coherence of a historical narrative is solely a function of a literary imposition. But events in human life very often appear coherent, unfolding in terms of causes, reasons, complications and consequences, and elucidating these relations between actions and their background conditions need not be exercises in fiction.

White and his followers regard historical interpretation as fictional insofar as it relies on narrative. This follows from their conviction that narrative, as such, is fictional. However, neither the philosophical considerations nor the empirical theses advanced in behalf of these views seem persuasive. At the very least, the reduction of all narrative to the status of fiction seems a desperate and inevitably self-defeating way in which to grant the literary dimension of historiography its due.

NOTES

1. See Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life, translated by Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980). Speaking of "monumental history," for example, Nietzsche claims that this venture risks distorting the past by reinterpreting it according to aesthetic criteria and, thereby, brings it closer to fiction (p.17). Nietzsche's specific reason for this belief is that insofar as monumental history functions to provide models for emulation, it will occlude attention to sufficient causes in order to produce representations available for imitation.

2. Roland Barthes, "The Discourse of History," in Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, edited by E. S. Shaffer; translated by Stephen Bann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 7-20.

3. Louis Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in his Historical Understanding, edited by Brian Fay, Eugene Golob and Richard Vann (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 183-203.

4. See Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); White, Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); White, The Content of Form (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987);"White," in Future Literary Theory, edited by Ralph Cohen (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 19-43.

5. For its impact on literary critics and historians see the essays by K. Egan, L. Gossman and R. Reinitz in The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding, edited by Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). For an example of a philosopher of history influenced by this view, see F. R. Ankersmit, "The Dilemma of Contemporary AngloSaxon Philosophy of History," in the journal History and Theory, Beiheft 25 (1986), 1-27. The view is also endorsed in Stephen Bann, "Toward a Critical Historiography: Recent Work in Philosophy of History," Philosophy, 56 (1981), 365-85.

6. See White, "Interpretation in History," in Tropics, pp. 51-80. The interrelation between these different interpretive registers is also discussed in the "Introduction" to Metahistory (pp. 1-42), among other places. That White continues to regard historical narrative as interpretive is evident in his recent "'Figuring the Nature of Times Deceased'; Literary Theory and Historical Writing;" see, for example, p. 21.

7. Here it is important to note that our reservations about White have less to do with his view that historical narratives are interpretative and more to do with his claims that such interpretive narratives are, in decisive respects, fictional.

8. See White, "Historicism, History and the Figurative Imagination," in Tropics, for example, pp. 111-12.

9. Claude Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

10. See, for example, Fernand Braudel, "The Situation of History in 1950," in his On History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), and Francois Furet, "From Narrative History to History as a Problem," Diogenes, Spring 1975. W. H. Dray criticizes the latter article in his "Narrative Versus Analysis in History," in Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences, edited by Joseph Margolis, Michael Krausz and R. M. Burian (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986).

11. White, "'Figuring the Nature of Times Deceased,'" p. 27. I take the gnomic, rhetorical question at the end of this quotation to signify that narratives as metaphors (in virtue of their generic plot structures) are true in the way analogies are truer-do they provide an insightful fit; are they true enough?

12. Paul Ricoeur, The Reality of the Historical Past, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1984), pp. 33-34.

13. Joseph Margolis, Art and Philosophy (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1980), p. 158.

14. White," 'Figuring the Nature of the Times Deceased,' "p. 18.

15. White," 'Figuring the Nature of the Times Deceased,' "p. 21.

16. For a discussion of the failure of both the narrative and the coveting-law models to pith the essence of history, see Gordon Graham, Historical Explanation Reconsidered (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983).

17. This is the case even if we accept Maurice Mandelbaum's distinction between inquiry and narrative for it would remain a question as to what kind of knowledge (if any) readers could derive from historical narratives. See Maurice Mandelbaum, "A Note on History as Narrative," in History and Theory, VI, 1967; and Mandelbaum, The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1977).

18. White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," in Content, p. 46. White derives this argument from Louis Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," pp. 197-98.

19. See, for example: White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in Tropics, p. 90; "Historicism, History and The Figurative Imagination," in Tropics, p. 111; "Preface," in Content, pp. ix-x; "'Figuring the Nature of the Times Deceased,'" p. 27; among others.

20. See Louis Mink, "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension," and "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument" in his Historical Understanding.

21. White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in Tropics, p. 4.

22. For example, White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in Tropics, p. 82. Here, invention seems to follow from the verbal nature of the historical text.

23. For example, White, "The Burden of History," in Tropics, pp. 28-29.

24. For example, White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," in Content, p. 42.

25. For example, White, "The Burden of History," in Tropics, p. 47.

26. For example, in "Interpretation in History," White uses the metaphor of the mirror of a whole for what narrative passes as (Tropics, p. 51). Also note the analogies to replicas like model airplanes in "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" in Tropics, p. 88.

27. See White, "Historicism, History and the Figurative Imagination," in 7 topics, pp. 111-12.

28. See, for example, White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," in Content, p. 42.

29. That is, for White, narrative forms are the culture's patterns of story-telling and a given event can be plotted in accordance with more than one such structure (which White sometimes refers to as codes [Content, p. 43]). And in his "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," White says that the relation between historiography and narrative is conventional (Content, p. 6).

30. For an account of the argumentative function of intuition pumps, see Daniel Dennett, Elbow Room (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

31. See especially, White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in Content, pp. 1-25.

32. Gerard Genette as quoted by White in Content, p. 3.

33. Though White flirts with the notion of the imaginary as that figures in Lacanian literary theory, he does not accept it whole cloth. He does apparently agree that narrative seduces us through our desire for the kind of coherence and completeness that it counterfeits. However, narratives are also imaginary for him in the sense of being products of the imagination. And, as we have already noted, White does not regard the imagination as discredited epistemically; it has its own realms of veracity, such as the metaphorical. Thus, unlike many contemporary literary theorists, White is not committed to the view that the imaginary structures of narrative necessarily coerce us into misrecognizing reality. They can, rather, reveal reality if they are construed metaphorically.

34. White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in Content, p. 24.

35. White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," p. 3.

36. Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, N J: Princeton University Press, 1957).

37. White, "Historicism, History and the Figurative Imagination," in Tropics.

38. Though White thinks that the epic may correspond more closely to the chronicle than to narrative proper.

39. White, "Figuring the nature of the times deceased," p. 29.

40. See Roger Schank and R. P. Abelson, Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding (Hillsdale, N J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977).

41. I've derived this term from John Passmore, "Narratives and Events," in History and Theory, Beiheft 26 (1987), 73.

42. For an expansion of these points, see Frederick A. Olafson, The Dialectic of Action: A Philosophical Interpretation of History and the Humanities (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). In his Time, Narrative, and History (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), David Carr attempts to defend the notion of "real stories" with reference to corporate entities like nations in terms of the shared myths that serve in practical deliberations. For my objections to

this way of confronting historical constructivism, see my article-review of Carr's book in History and Theory, vol. XXVII, no. 3, 1988.

43. *The idea of significance here is derived from Arthur Danto, Knowledge and Narration (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).*

44. *Of course, if the meaning of events is to be conceptualized at the level of comedy or tragedy, then the issue of fiction cannot be dealt with in the above fashion. But remobilizing the argument in this way depends on the viability of White's theory of generic emplotment which we will take up shortly.*

45. *In his reliance on the "copy" standard of truth, one suspects that White is endorsing the myth of the Ideal Chronicler which Danto attacked so persuasively in Narration and Knowledge, pp. 142-82.*

46. *White's analogies to science, as comprehended by the constructivist dispensation, sit uncomfortably with his claims to be concerned with the specificity of history.*

47. *See, for example, Richard N. Boyd, "The Current Status of Scientific Realism," in Scientific Realism, edited by Jarrett Leplin (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 41-82.*

48. *This may be a big if since the "unobservables" the historian deals with are categorically disanalogous to the "unobservables" of scientific theories.*

49. *For further criticism of the notion of transparency as it is used in contemporary literary theory see Noel Carroll, "Conspiracy Theories of Representation," Philosophy of the Social Sciences, vol. 17, 1987.*

50. *Moreover, the fact that in one story, told for one reason, a causal relation between events A and B is cited while in another story, undertaken for other purposes, that causal relation is not cited does not imply that the causal/narrative linkage in the first story is an "imposition."*

51. *A related point is made against Louis Mink by William Dray in his review of Historical Understanding in Clio, vol. 17, no. 4 (Summer, 1988), 397.*

52. *Michael Harrington, Socialism: Past and Future (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1989), p. 21.*

53. *A related objection can be found in J. L. Gorman's review of The Writing of History, The British Journal of A esthetics 20 (1980), 189.*

54. *See Robert Fogelin, Figuratively Speaking (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).*

55. *White, Metahistory, p. 190.*

56. *White, Metahistory, p. 34.*

57. *Leon Goldstein attacks the atomic sentences model for other reasons in his "Impediments to Epistemology in the Philosophy of History," in History and Theory, Beiheft 25 (1986), 82-100.*

58. *See J. L. Gorman, The Expression of Historical Knowledge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982), ch. 3. See also, J. L. Gorman, "Objectivity and Truth in History," in Inquiry, 17 (1974), 373-97.*

59. *See C. Behan McCullagh, "The Truth of Historical Narratives," History and Theory, Beiheft 26 (1987), 33-40.*

60. *It seems to me that Paul Ricocur makes a similar error in his Time and Narrative (Chicago:*

University of Chicago Press,] 984), vol. I. Pressed to account for historical narrative, he opts for a correspondence theory of truth and maintains that narrative corresponds to temporality. White justifiably rejects this view for its obscurity, but stays with the commitment to truth, modifying it in terms of metaphorical truth. Both White and Ricoeur on my view would do better to recognize that truth is not the only relevant epistemic standard for evaluating narratives. Granting that, they could avoid commitments to strange correspondents (temporality) and special standards of truth.

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