Metahistorical Prefigurations: Towards A Re-Interpretation of Tropology in Hayden White[1]

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I propose a new interpretation of Hayden White's *Metahistory*. Instead of treating it as a classical text on historical narrativity, I argue that *Metahistory* should be read as an inquiry into 'metahistorical prefigurations', that is, into the moral and ontological presuppositions underlying historical writing. I demonstrate that White's tropes, plots, formal arguments and ideological implications did not primarily refer to linguistic features of historical texts, but to the (metaphysical) views historians hold regarding the nature, goal and purposes of the historical process. Characteristically, only the introduction and the conclusion to *Metahistory* dealt with 'narrative prose discourses'; the larger part of the book focused on what Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Croce and others thought about the nature of historical reality and the moral duties of those who study it. Though there is no reason to question that White has made important contributions to what is called the 'narrativist turn', I argue that *Metahistory* is seriously misrepresented if it is only regarded as the flagship of narrativism.

When in 1993 the Italian journal *Storia della Storiografia* published a collection of afterthoughts on Hayden White's *Metahistory*, Hans Kellner made the pertinent point that it was probably better not to speak about *Metahistory*, but about *Metahistories*. For, as Kellner rightly observed, the goals White's 1973 book aimed at were so divergent that one cannot do justice to the book without differentiating between a number of distinct dimensions in it, each of which has its own agenda, its own 'horizon' and its own intended audience.[2] *Metahistory* was, indeed, at least an account of nineteenth-century historical thought in Europe, an experiment in using the jargon of literary studies to typify metahistorical assumptions and a passionate appeal to historians to leave the ivory tower of 'scientific' historical scholarship. But it was *not*, as I will argue in this essay, a book on narrativity. Apart from some remarks in the preface, the introduction and the conclusion, the book hardly paid any attention to historical narratives. With some small exceptions, *Metahistory* did not deal with the rhetoric of historical texts, with the discourses that historians produce or with the semantic fields in which historical writers operate. *Metahistory*, I will argue, was not so much a specimen of narrative analysis, but rather an analysis of metahistorical beliefs.[3]

Yet, *Metahistory* is commonly regarded as a book that challenged the historical discipline to think of historiography as a form of literature. It is said to have acquired a symbolic role as 'the initiator of the linguistic turn in historiography'.[4] *Metahistory* is even known as a 'manual of tropology', as Wulf Kansteiner phrases it, since it provided historians and literary theorists with a technical set of instruments, borrowed from ancient rhetoric and modern literary criticism, for analysing the poetic elements of historical writing.[5] Did White himself, at the very beginning of his book, not declare that one of his 'principals aims' was the establishment of such a poetics of historiography?[6] Hence, White is often regarded as one of the central figures of narrativism. His name is considered to be inextricably bound up with the so-called 'linguistic turn' in historical theory.[7]

It is, indeed, impossible to doubt that White has made a major contribution to the 'narrative turn' in the humanities (an expression that is, I think, more appropriate than the often-used 'linguistic turn').[8] Both *Tropics of Discourse* and, especially, *The Content of the Form* explored the notion of discourse, gave clear examples of narrativist analysis and attempted to define the complex relationship between fact and fiction.[9] In these two volumes, White developed his well-known claims that historical narratives should be considered as '…verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found*' and that '…narrative, far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, already possesses a content prior to any given actualization of it in speech or writing.'[10] So far, there is no reason to disagree with those who regard White as one of the main initiators of a narrativist understanding of historical writing.

The problem is, however, that this narrativist approach, the greatest part of which dates from the late 1970s and early 1980s, is often projected *backwards* in White's 1973 book. White himself has encouraged this, in the conclusion to *Metahistory*, by claiming that he had analysed the 'linguistic protocols' of historical writing.[11] But, as I will argue, none of the ten chapters that preceded the conclusion offered anything like a linguistic analysis of historical writing, an inquiry into the use of facts and fiction in historical prose, an investigation of lexical and grammatical features in a sample of historical texts or an analysis of the historian's rhetorical strategies. Rather, these chapters dealt with metahistorical convictions, with the kind of expectations human beings have about the course of the historical process and with the way in which historians tend to connect 'causes' and 'effects' in their understanding of reality. The White of 1973 did not analyse historical *texts*, but historical *prefiguration*.[12] Though White described the various forms that this prefiguration could adopt by means of rhetorical and literary terms – this has presumably caused part of the confusion about *Metahistory* – he did not (yet) inquire what kind of opportunities literary criticism had to offer for the study of historical texts. This, once again, attracted White's attention only after the completion of *Metahistory*, after the discovery that most reviewers of the book valued the theoretical expositions as by far more challenging and disturbing than the historical analyses.[13]

Instead of seeing *Metahistory* as a starting point for developments that characterise White's work from the late 1970s and 1980s, I propose to see *Metahistory* as a finishing point or as a provisional culminating point of White's studies from the 1950s and 1960s. In *Metahistory*, White brought together his inquiries into the role of ideology in cultural politics, his attempts to design an 'inner logic of world views', his strong conviction that historians ought to contemplate the past in a full awareness of the ambiguities of contemporary life, his interest in the great European thinkers of the nineteenth century and, above all, his quasi-existentialist emphasis on the absolute freedom in which human individuals have to choose a past that matches with their moral and political beliefs.

In what follows, I will first inquire what the title word 'metahistory' was intended to mean. Secondly, I will connect White's notion of metahistory to each of the four axis in White's 'quadruple tetrad' (tropological prefiguration, emplotment, formal argument and ideological implication).[14] I will do so, not by repeating White's own definitions, but by analysing how White actually used these concepts in his discussions of Ranke, Marx, Burckhardt and others. This will lead me to conclude that White's structuralist model of interpretation, outlined in the introduction to *Metahistory*, was not so much an end in itself as it was a tool for analysing metahistorical visions. I will examine some possible objections against this view and conclude with a couple of remarks on the implications of my re-interpretation of White's tropology.

I

In the bulk of articles published on *Metahistory*, the concept of 'metahistory' has received only marginal attention.[15] This is unfortunate, because, as I hope to demonstrate, the term reveals what kind of project White's modes of prefiguration, emplotment, argumentation and ideological implication were supposed to serve. Like most other key concepts in White's writings, 'metahistory' had already been in use before it was employed by White. During the 1920s and 1930s, the term had circulated among Jewish and Christian thinkers in Germany, who had felt that both the secularisation and the professionalisation of the historical discipline compelled them to distinguish between history in the everyday sense of the word and history as a scene of divine providence. Isaac Breuer, for example, had written about the *metageschichtliche* vocation of the Jewish people as bearers of messianic hope, while Wolfgang Müller had used the term to refer to the second coming of Jesus Christ and the deceptions of Satan in the last of days.[16] On the European continent, 'metahistory' had become an umbrella term for historical approaches that aimed to find a 'Logos der Geschichte' (a logical pattern in the course of history) or a divine meaning of the world.[17] In the English-speaking world, 'metahistory' had entered the historians' vocabulary as a label for the kind of history written by Arnold J. Toynbee in *A study of history*.[18]

Most likely, Hayden White borrowed the term from Christopher Dawson, according to whom metahistory was a discipline concerned '…with the nature of history, the meaning of history and the cause and significance of historical change.'[19] This conception of metahistory comes close to the first of the three meanings that White attributed to the term: a 'synthesizing vision' of history or an idea about the course of the historical process in general.[20] Though such a view of history is rarely made explicit in regular historical writing, White believed that it provides historians with a perspective necessary for making sense of the past. Besides, metahistory was said to refer to philosophical reflection on the nature of historical knowledge (usually called critical philosophy of history).[21] The third and last definition was presented in the introduction to *Metahistory*, where White claimed that 'metahistory' referred to the 'precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively "historical" explanation should be'.[22] This is the level of what White called *prefiguration*, at which historians, consciously or not, make assumptions on the nature of the reality, the nature of causality, the nature of human behaviour etcetera. White added that he did not consider this metahistorical understructure to consist of explicitly used theoretical concepts (like Carl Hempel's covering law model or Marx's base-superstructure theory). He rather understood metahistory to denote historians' views on *what might count* as a theoretical concept (whether a covering law model can do justice to the multiformity of historical situations, for example, or whether historians should always try to analyse cultural production in terms of economic factors).[23]

Though there was, strictly speaking, no common ground beneath these three concepts of metahistory (apart from that they are distinguished from regular historical writing by the breadth of their scope and/or their higher level of abstraction), both the first and the third one referred to the historian's personal understanding of what might be called the metaphysics of history.[24] Both concerned an understanding of what history 'essentially' is, of what the 'final' goals of the historical process are and of the kind of coherence that historical reality 'in the end' displays. Both related to the broad canvas against which historians set their small narratives – though this background is usually hidden from sight and only detectable to the careful observer of 'metahistorical presuppositions'. In what follows, I will use 'metahistory' as an equivalent of these metaphysical views underlying historical writing.

II

How was this understanding of metahistory related to the concepts that contributed most to the fame of *Metahistory*: tropes, emplotments, modes of argument and modes of ideological implication? I will start with the tropes, because they were said to be 'especially useful for understanding the operations' by which historians, at a metahistorical level, 'prefiguratively' grasp historical reality.[25] White, moreover, saw his tropes as the corner stone on which the rest of his theoretical building (modes of argument, modes of emplotment and modes of ideological implication) was founded.

Unfortunately, in the literature on White more attention has been paid to what the tropes *are* than to what the tropes were intended to *do*.[26] Most textbooks on historical theory correctly say that tropes are rhetorical figures, invented by rhetoricians in ancient Greece, re-invented during the Renaissance, applied by Giambattista Vico to the study of cultures, categorised by Kenneth Burke in *A Grammar of Motives* and used by Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss in their structuralist linguistics. But this information fails to provide answers to questions like: What was the meaning of White's claim that Nietzsche opted for a 'poetic defense of history in the metaphorical mode'? What was the function of metonymy in Marx's 'philosophical defense of history in the metonymical mode'? Or, more generally, what did White intend to reveal by associating historical consciousness with rhetorical figures?

The best way to answer these questions is not to consult the introduction to White's book, which only gave a theoretical exposition of tropology, but to study the chapters in which White practically dealt with nineteenth-century historical thought.[27] With regard to the tropes, for example, I believe it is better not to repeat White's well-known definitions of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony – these can be found in almost every textbook – but to read carefully a passage like this:

> So Ranke prefigured the historical field in the mode of Metaphor, which sanctioned a primary interest in events in their particularity and uniqueness, their vividness, color, and variety, and then suggested the Synecdochic comprehension of it as a field of formal coherences, the ultimate or final unity of which could be suggested by analogy to the nature of the parts.[28]

The most important thing to observe in this passage is that White did not use the tropes of metaphor and synecdoche as labels to characterise Ranke's *writings*, but as means to typify the metahistorical *beliefs* underlying this historical writing. Referring to the short Ranke fragments that Fritz Stern had included in *The Varieties of History*, White explained that Ranke expected historians to be fascinated by 'the particular for itself', that is, by the uniqueness of every historical detail and by the endless variety that human culture displays throughout history. At the same time, Ranke expected historians to belief that in this variety a pattern could be discerned. He assumed that all historical 'particulars' took part in a 'universal' development of the human spirit through the course of time.[29] According to White, the combination of these two beliefs could be characterised with the trope of metaphor. For a metaphor, as commonly understood, is 'a figure of speech (or a trope) in which a word or phrase that literally denotes one thing is used to denote another, thereby implicitly comparing the two things'.[30] So, White concluded, a metaphor highlights both the uniqueness of every particular thing and the similarities between these things.[31] In White's understanding, Ranke did something similar when he simultaneously emphasised the singularity of historical events and the large-scale development of the human spirit. This is why White, in the passage quoted above, said that 'Ranke prefigured the historical field in the mode of Metaphor'.

However, the way in which Ranke understood the relation between the singular and the universal was too peculiar to be labelled with a single trope. Characteristic of Ranke's vision was that he saw a *qualitative correspondence* between singular and universal. This means that in Ranke's view, singular and universal were supposed to share certain qualities. In White's understanding, Ranke specified this relationship when he prefigured historical reality in terms of micro and macro cosmoses, the latter of which were related to the former in the same way that a human individual and affectionate behaviour are related in the expression 'he is all heart'.[32] Since White took this expression as an example of the figure of speech known as synecdoche, he could claim that Ranke suggested a 'Synecdochic comprehension' of the historical field.

In this Ranke example, the tropes clearly referred to *metahistorical beliefs* or, to put it differently, to modes in which historical reality was 'prefigured'. They were not related to rhetorical figures in Ranke's historical writing. Neither did they refer to narrative structures or stylistic devices in Ranke's historiography. And this is not only true for the quotation given above, but for the whole Ranke chapter. When White, for example, elaborated on the metaphorical aspect of Ranke's metahistorical beliefs, he said that the metaphor referred to the way in which 'the [historical] process as a whole was to be comprehended.'[33] With regard to the synecdoche, he added that it was a 'tropological characterization' of the historical field.[34] Apparently, White's primary concern in using tropes was to give adequate characterisations of metahistorical beliefs. He intended to develop a vocabulary for describing presuppositions regarding the nature of historical reality.

This interpretation can be substantiated with evidence from other chapters. When White said that 'Marx apprehended the historical field in the Metonymical mode', he was referring to Marx's understanding of the historical process as a 'panorama of sin and suffering', in which 'schism, division and alienation' were a daily reality.[35] When White claimed that Hegel's understanding of nature was characterised by 'the modes of Metonymy and Synecdoche', he meant that the German philosopher regarded the use of causal and 'typological' (taxonomical) concepts as proper means for representing changes in the natural world.[36] In the Burckhardt chapter, White explained his characterisation of Burckhardt's 'historical vision' in terms of irony by saying that Burckhardt did not expect anything good from politics, business or the study of the past: he 'surveyed a world in which virtue was usually betrayed, talent perverted, and power turned to service of the baser cause.'[37]

This evidence – which could easily be doubled or triplicated – gives cause to suspect that there is something wrong with the idea that White's tropology referred to historical *texts*. In all of the examples just surveyed, the tropes were related to metahistorical *beliefs*, not to historical narratives. They specified the ways in which historians thought about the nature of historical reality and the course of the historical process, instead of describing the modes in which these historians wrote on particular historical phenomena. I therefore conclude that White's tropes referred to ontological

beliefs underlying historical writing, that is, to regulative ideas about what historical reality 'essentially' is and what the 'final' goals of the historical process are. It was these ontological presuppositions, or 'the deep structural forms of the historical imagination', rather than the texts written from particular ontological perspectives that White analysed in his tropology.[38]

In passing, I note that this may explain why White could offer tropological characterisations of what historians and philosophers thought about history without paying much attention to historical narratives. Characteristically, White based his portrayal of Ranke on prefaces, brief fragments from some introductory lectures and a theoretical essay – not on Ranke's 'real' historical writing in *Die römischen Päpste in den letzten vier Jahrhunderten*, in his *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation* or in his *Französische Geschichte, vornementlich im sechzehnten und siebenzehnten Jahrhundert* (though White listed all of these titles in his bibliography).[39] The same phenomenon can be observed in the Burckhardt chapter. Though White discussed some of the ideas expressed in *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien*, he did not analyse the narrative texture of Burckhardt's book. Neither did he consult *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen*, albeit he occasionally referred to the book's title. Instead, he based his reconstruction of Burckhardt's metahistorical views on the *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, *Der Cicerone* and *Grosse, Glück und Unglück in der Weltgeschichte* – none of which can properly be called a historical narrative.[40] For White's purposes, it was simply not necessary to analyse historical narratives: it was sufficient to find some explicit theoretical considerations that reflected the author's views on the nature of reality. Such considerations could easier be found in prefaces, diaries and theoretical pieces of work than in 'proper' works of history.

III

Interestingly, much of what has been said about tropology also goes for the three remaining layers in White's 'Viererpack':[41] emplotment, formal argument and ideological implication. Using the Ranke chapter as my case again, I first observe that White applied the term 'ideological implication' in a rather broad political sense. His characterisation of Ranke as a Prussian conservative was based on his understanding of Ranke's social and political ideals. Ranke's ideology, as White saw it, consisted of his convictions about what was good in politics and healthy for European civilisation.[42] In White's view, these convictions were unequivocally conservative, because Ranke believed that the nation-state was the logical culmination point of historical development ('the goal toward which everything tends'). Ranke, in White's reading, was inclined to see the political reality of his own days as 'the *ideal of all time*'.[43] Characteristically, White spoke about 'the conservative implications of Ranke idea of history', rather than about the conservative implications of Ranke's historical writings.[44] In the Ranke chapter, 'ideological implications' referred to the kind of political affinities that can be deduced from a metahistorical vision, rather than to

ideological preferences that shine through a historical text. Thus, if the Ranke chapter is a representative example, White's ideological implications were not so much related to a property of texts, but rather to the political consequences of a metahistorical vision.[45]

Thus, in *Metahistory*, 'ideology' did not have the specific, pejorative meaning it had in Marx or in White's own essays from the mid-1960s.[46] Neither was ideology equated with reified consciousness dissociated from the material world or with the reductive political philosophies that White had formerly shared under the term.[47] On the other hand, ideology did not broadly denote all 'metaphysical and moral convictions' that had been categorised under this heading in White's earliest writings, most notably in his doctoral dissertation.[48] In *Metahistory*, 'ideological implications' were strictly related to the political implications of a metahistorical vision. In particular, White emphasised that ideologies either aspire to political change or to conservation of political systems. Ideological implications therefore were the attitudes towards political transformation that flowed from metahistorical prefigurations of the historical field.[49]

Subsequently, I turn to White's modes of formal argument. Surprisingly perhaps, White based his assessment of the formal ('explicit' or 'discursive') argument in Ranke on Wilhelm von Humboldt's essay 'Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers', a theoretical exposition of the kind of historical methods that White assumed to be characteristic of both Humboldt and Ranke.[50] He did not turn to Ranke's historical writings, but concluded from Humboldt's methodological recommendations that Ranke used 'a uniquely historical mode of comprehension', characterised by a belief in qualitative correspondences between micro and macro cosmoses.[51] White explained that according to this Humboldian 'mode of comprehension', historical explanations had to focus on the representation of part-whole-relationships between a single historical event and a form or structure that could serve as a connecting link between a variety of individual phenomena in a given period.[52] This 'organicist' methodology, as White called it, bare a strong resemblance to Ranke's synecdochic mode of prefiguration (his understanding of the world in terms of micro and macro cosmoses). Like Ranke's metahistorical prefiguration, Humboldt's organicism contained an explicit vision of what historical phenomena are:

> [The] Organicist historian will tend to be governed by the desire to see individual entities as components of processes which aggregate into wholes that are greater than, or qualitatively different from, the sum of their parts.[53]

Though organicism, as defined in this quotation, presented itself as a method for understanding the interrelations between historical phenomena, it was in fact a belief about how historical events are interrelated. As such, it did not differ from the metahistorical beliefs discussed above – as White himself admitted when he called the organicist mode of argument the 'methodological projection' of a synecdochic prefiguration.[54] This allows me to conclude that White's 'formal arguments' referred

to modes of conceiving historical reality rather than to dimensions of historical texts.[55]

Can something similar be said about White's notion of emplotment – the third and last of White's explanatory levels?[56] Strikingly, White used the notion of plot to denote both visions of history-in-general (the 'whole process') and structures embodied in particular historical texts ('emplotment of stories').[57] On the one hand, he used the term to refer to Ranke's delineation of 'the gross historical process' (elsewhere called 'the temporal process') in 'main units of time'. On the other, White spoke about 'the plot of Michelet's history of France', in which *le peuple français* served as a collective hero.[58] In a passage like the following, White even simultaneously dealt with story plots and 'the plot of world history':

> Michelet emplotted history as a Manichean conflict in which protagonist and antagonist are locked in mortal combat and in which one or the other must be eliminated in order for the story to find its culmination, as an epiphany either of redemption or of damnation. But Ranke set the spectacle of conflict within an apprehension of the larger unities which struggles between protagonists and antagonists bring about, and he stressed what was to be gained by the social order in general by the fact of struggle itself. The image of the final unity of humanity was displaced to a point at the end of historical time to serve as the envisioned goal that faith or imagination may conceive the process to be moving toward…[59]

Though in Ranke's case, the difference between the historical process and the span of time covered in a particular work of history was not always that large – think of Ranke's (unfinished) *Weltgeschichte*[60] – the Michelet example makes clear that White did not use 'emplotment' in a uniform manner. Depending on the context, the term either referred to the historical process or to a historical text.

Nevertheless, even when White discussed the portrayal of the French people in Michelet's *Histoire de la révolution*, he did not analyse the literary plot of Michelet's text. He did not investigate how plots structure a story or how different story elements figure within a plot. Rather, the subject of White's analysis was Michelet's vision, his understanding of the historical role of the French people, his view on the relationship between the various actors in the historical field. Thus, even though White's notion of emplotment sometimes referred to works of history rather than to visions of history-in-general, White did not pay any attention to the textual dimension of plots. In *Metahistory*, emplotment is equated with *visions* of history.[61]

If ideological implications, formal arguments and emplotments primarily referred to metahistorical convictions, there is no reason to give much credence to White's claim, expressed in the introduction to *Metahistory*, that '…I will consider the historical work as what if most manifestly is – that is to say, a verbal structure in the form of narrative prose discourse…'[62] It is true that in some of his later articles, especially in his essay on *The Education of Henry Adams*, White would fulfil this promise.[63] But in *Metahistory*, an analysis of metahistorical beliefs was still regarded far more important than inquiries into 'narrative prose discourses'. White's

'quadruple tetrad' referred to the metahistorical convictions that *underlie* 'narrative prose discourses', to the metaphysical views that historians have to adopt *before* they are able to write history. *Metahistory* should therefore be seen as a book on metahistory, not about narrativity.[64]

This conclusion throws new light on the relation between tropes and texts. Many commentators on White's tropology distinguish between 'manifest' and 'deep' structures in historical writing. Whereas the first level is said to correspond to White's plots, arguments and ideological implications, the latter would be denoted by the tropes. Using this distinction, Kansteiner states that White's modes of metahistorical prefiguration '…represent the basic categories with predetermine the secondary, conceptual level of the historian's representational framework.'[65] The foregoing analysis, however, leads to a revision of this model. For though White indeed located his tropes on a 'deeper' level than the other axes in his model,[66] it has become clear that plots, formal arguments and ideological implications are not to be found on the level of narrative discourse. It is therefore necessary to make a threefold distinction in historical scholarship: (1) metahistorical prefiguration, (2) modes of explanation and (3) historical texts. The first, metahistorical level, to which the tropes were related, could be called the 'Tiefenstruktur der historischen Einbildungskraft' (Patrick Bahners).[67] Emplotment, formal argument and ideological implication were located at a level between 'history' and 'metahistory': they mediated between texts and tropes. Historical texts, finally, could be said to rest on two 'layers' of historical imagination and metaphysical speculation.

IV

If this interpretation of White's 'quadruple tetrad' is correct, two questions arise. First, if metahistory can be equated with the 'deep structure of the historical imagination',[68] as I have argued, why then did White categorise the modes of metahistorical prefiguration by means of rhetorical figures? Secondly, how is the 'metahistorical' interpretation of White's tropology, which I have proposed above, consonant with White's frequently made statements that the metahistorical level 'is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature' and that all conceptions of history are constituted on a 'linguistic ground'?[69]

With regard to the first question, I would say that the (rhetorical) tropes provided White with an excellent means for characterising (non-rhetorical) metaphysical beliefs. Ranke's maxim that individual historical events should always be treated as micro cosmoses within a macro cosmos was not 'rhetorical' or 'linguistic' in the way a synecdoche is. Yet, Ranke's metahistorical belief and the classical figure of speech shared the assumption of a qualitative correspondence between the small and the large. It was this similarity that led White to characterise Ranke's metahistory with the trope of synecdoche. Likewise, the trope of metonymy could be used as a label for Marx's vision of the historical process because both tended to apprehend phenomena '…as bearing relationships to one another in the modality of part-part relationships,

on the basis of which one can effect a *reduction* of one of the parts to the status of an aspect or function of the other.'[70]

Using White's definition of metaphor – a trope that typifies phenomena 'in terms of their similarity to, and difference from, one another'[71] – I would suggest seeing the tropes as *metaphors*, that is, as rhetorical figures which metaphorically denoted the modes of historical thought that White distinguished in nineteenth-century Europe. This does, of course, not mean that metonymy, synecdoche and irony can be regarded as variations on the trope of metaphor. Neither does it mean that the distinctions between the four tropes can be called into question. It only means that White used the rhetorical figures called metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony as means to typify in metaphorical ways the kinds of historical prefigurations he found among nineteenth-century historians and philosophers of history. To put it very simply: White saw the tropes as labels which he could stick on different kinds of metahistorical ideas. It is worth noting that White himself supported this interpretation in his 1976 essay 'The Fictions of Factual Representation'.[72] Looking back upon *Metahistory*, in a 1993 interview with Ewa Domańska, he also explicitly acknowledged that 'I only used the concept of tropes metaphorically. It's not supposed to be taken literally.'[73]

Nevertheless, in the introduction to *Metahistory*, the tropes are said to be 'cast' in a linguistic mode. Historical thought is even said to be 'captive of the linguistic mode in which it seeks to grasp the outline of objects inhabiting its field of perception'.[74] This brings me to the second question: how is one to explain White's statements about the linguistic nature of metahistorical prefiguration? Put briefly, one might say that these statements, which are predominantly to be found in the introduction, the conclusion and in some of the more theoretical parts of the book, reflect a fascination that was born in the early 1970s and stayed alive until at least the publication of *Tropics of Discourse* (1978). This was a fascination for the constitutive role of language in the use of concepts and categories for comprehending reality. Instead of believing that language is only a means for communication with others, White came to think that language offers a number of moulds or templates that shape the ways in which human beings think about reality. Since human thought can only be expressed in recognisable linguistic forms, White assumed that thought has to follow the linguistic templates available in a given culture. In his introduction to *Tropics of Discourse*, White went so far as to say that he had come to belief that the 'modes of human consciousness' are derived from what he called 'the modes of language'.[75] Influenced by both Vico and structuralist linguistics, White then made it his task to classify these modes of language by means of tropes. He even speculated that tropes might be constitutive elements of a universal, 'natural language'.[76]

I will not deal here with the difficulties involved in this line of thought. I only point to this development in White's understanding of language in order to explain why White, in certain passages of his *chef-d'oeuvre*, attributed to language a much more substantial role than he did in the main parts of his book. These passages reflect

that by 1973, the type of inquiry that White found most promising no longer coincided with the type of inquiry conducted in the main part of *Metahistory*. The White of 1973 was more focused on the linguistic forms that metahistorical beliefs have to take than the White that had started to write *Metahistory*, back in the 1960s. It is, I think, this change of mind that can be held responsible for the ambiguities that White's book displays with regard to the role of 'linguistic protocols' in historical thought.

<p style="text-align:center">V</p>

In the foregoing I have proposed a re-interpretation of Hayden White's tropology. I have argued that White's tropes did not refer to historical texts, but to metahistorical visions underlying these texts. White's tropes can be seen as metaphors for the modes in which historians prefigure historical reality by means of their moral, aesthetic and ontological presuppositions. I have tried to demonstrate that the notions of ideological implication, formal argument and emplotment, though not always applied in a uniform way, also primarily referred to visions of the historical process, rather than to characteristics of historical narratives. Though it cannot be denied that White has expressed a profound interest in the peculiarities of narrative and discourse, I have argued that this interest did not yet inform White's analysis of nineteenth-century historiography in *Metahistory*. What was most characteristic of White's tropology was that it analysed metahistorical beliefs; or, in short, that it dealt with metahistory, rather than with narrativity.[77]

This conclusion enables us to understand White's place in the historiography of nineteenth-century historical writing. When White started to write *Metahistory*, somewhere in the mid-1960s, the English-language literature on the subject had been recently enriched by a fairly critical type of studies, which sought to 'unmask' the ideological roots of historical writing. Jacques Barzun, for example, had characterised the historiography of Guizot, Thierry and Chateaubriand as 'a channel for political agitation'.[78] Stanley Mellon had defended the view that French historical writing from the Restoration period onward had served as an instrument of conservative political theory.[79] Finally, Georg G. Iggers, according to whom 'German historicism, as a theory of history, possessed many of the characteristics of an ideology', had been convinced that 'German historians in this tradition from Ranke to Meinecke and Ritter were all deeply committed politically'.[80] Though certainly not all American historians of historiography had attempted to analyse such 'deep structures' of historical writing, I mention these examples in order to make clear that White shared his interest in the presuppositions of historical writing with quite a number of other specialists in nineteenth-century European historiography. What distinguished *Metahistory* from its predecessors was, first, that it took metahistory, rather than ideology in the political sense of the word, as the foundation of historical consciousness and, secondly, that it presented a set of tools for analysing the metahistorical dimension of historiography. For these two reasons, at least, *Metahistory* can be said to have marked a new stage in the historiography of historical writing. However, my re-interpretation of White's

tropology clarifies that *Metahistory*, insofar as it focused on the moral and ontological dimensions of historical writing, was rooted in the historiographical currents of its time.[81]

It is rather ironic that a book that so clearly intended to address moral and ontological presuppositions has almost invariably been treated as the flagship of narrativism – a movement in philosophy of history that, whatever else may be said about it, represented a turn away from issues related to morality and ontology. It is even more ironic, maybe, that White himself, in some of his follow-ups to *Metahistory*, tended to focus, too, on the linguistic peculiarities of narrative discourse, rather than on their moral and ontological dimensions. The attentive reader of *The Content of the Form*, though, will notice that White, in his analyses of the 'illusory coherence' offered by narrative representations, the metaphysics of narrativity and the 'de-sublimation' of modern historiography, implicitly harked back to what was, according to my re-interpretation, the main goal of his tropology in *Metahistory*: the uncovering of moral and ontological presuppositions of historical thought.[82] This perhaps justifies the claim that, although, as indicated in the introduction, White's *magnum opus* can be said to contain several *Metahistories*, the one that sought to identify metahistorical prefigurations came closest to the heart of White's philosophy of history.

Notes

1   This research was partly funded by a grant from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). I would like to thank Frank Ankersmit and Chris Lorenz for their helpful comments and suggestions.

2   Hans Kellner, 'Twenty Years After: A Note on *Metahistories* and Their Horizons', *Storia della Storiografia* 24 (1993) 109–17, here 109.

3   Following Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, I understand 'text' as 'a meaningful structure, understood as being composed of signs', which meaning is determined 'by rules (or codes) governing the choice and combination of those signs. A. Edgar, 'Text', in: *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory*, ed. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick (London/New York: Routledge 1999) 415. I take 'narrative' to be an 'organisation of language into a structure which thereby conveys an account of events in a connected and ordered manner'. P. Sedgwick, 'Narrative', ibid., 253–4, here 253.

4   Ann Rigney, 'Mixed Metaphors and the Writing of History', *Storia della Storiografia* 24 (1993) 149–59, here 155.

5   Wulf Kansteiner, 'Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History', *History and Theory* 32 (1993) 273–95, here 278.

6   Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1973) x.

7   See, e.g., Geoffrey Roberts, 'Introduction: The History and Narrative Debate, 1960– 2000', in: *The History and Narrative Reader*, ed. Geoffrey Roberts (London/New York:

Routledge 2001) 1–21, esp. 8–10.

8   F.R. Ankersmit, 'The Linguistic Turn: Literary Theory and Historical Theory', in: id.,
     Historical Representation (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2001) 29–74, here 30.
     For a different view, see Brian Fay, 'Introduction: The Linguistic Turn and Beyond in
     Contemporary Theory of History', in: *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, ed.
     Brian Fay, Philip Pomper and Richard T. Vann (Malden/Oxford: Blackwell 1998) 1–12,
     esp. 2.

9   Hayden White, 'Introduction: Tropology, Discourse, and the Modes of Human
     Consciousness', in: id., *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*
     (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1978) 1–25; id., 'The Fictions of
     Factual Representation', ibid., 121–34; id., 'The Value of Narrativity in the
     Representation of Reality', in: id., *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and
     Historical Representation* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1987) 1–
     25; id., 'The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory', ibid., 26–57.

10   Id., 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', in: id., *Tropics of Discourse*, 81–100, here
     82; id., 'Preface', in: id., *Content of the Form*, ix–xi, here xi.

11   Id., *Metahistory*, 426.

12   Mark Salber Phillips seems to hint at something similar in his 'Historiography after
     Hayden White: The Contribution of Genre-Studies', in: *Explorations on Post-Theory:
     Toward a Third Space*, ed. Fernando de Toro (Frankfurt am Main/Madrid:
     Vervuert/Iberoamericana 1999) 145–57, here 146.

13   A list of reviews is provided in Ewa Domańska, 'Bibliografia prac Haydena White'a', in:
     Hayden White, *Poetyka pisarstwa historycznego*, ed. Ewa Domańska and Marek
     Wilczyński (Kraków: TAiWPN Universitas 2000) 361–81, here 362–3. Other English-
     language reviews of *Metahistory* include those written by Gordon Leff in *The Pacific
     Historical Review* 43 (1974) 598–600; Peter Burke in *History* 60 (1975) 82–3; Phyllis
     Grosskurth in *The Canadian Historical Review* 56 (1975) 192–3; Joseph Amato in *The
     Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 423 (1976) 182–3;
     F.M. Barnard in *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science
     Politique* 9 (1976) 366–7; Richard Dellamora in *Queen's Quarterly* 84 (1977) 325–27.

14   The term 'quadruple tetrad' was introduced by Hans Kellner, 'A Bedrock of Order:
     Hayden White's Linguistic Humanism', in: id., *Language and Historical
     Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison/London: University of Wisconsin
     Press 1989) 193–227, here 223.

15   Richard T. Vann, 'Turning Linguistic: History and Theory and *History and Theory*,
     1960–1975', in: *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner
     (London: Reaktion Books 1995) 40–69, here 65; Ewa Domańska, 'Hayden White:
     Beyond Irony', in: *Metageschichte: Hayden White und Paul Ricoeur: Dargestellte
     Wirklichkeit in der europäischen Kultur im Kontext von Husserl, Weber, Auerbach und
     Gombrich*, ed. Jörn Stückradt and Jürg Zbinden (Baden-Baden: Nomos 1997) 104–24,
     here 123.

16   David N. Meijer, *Resisting History: Historicism and its Discontents in German-Jewish
     Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2003) 141; Wolfgang Müller,
     'Metahistorie?', *Merkur* 3 (1949) 1255–57.

17   Walther Köhler, *Historie und Metahistorie in der Kirchengeschichte* (Tübingen: J.C.B.

Mohr 1930) 29, 32; J.G. Bruggeman and A.V.N. v[an] Woerden, 'Woord vooraf', in: [A.E. Cohen et al.,] *Historie en metahistorie: 'Robert Fruin' lustrumbundel 1952* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers Leiden 1952) 3–4; M.C. Smit, 'Kentering in de geschiedeniswetenschap?', in: id., *De eerste en tweede geschiedenis: Nagelaten geschriften van Meijer C. Smit*, ed. J. Klapwijk (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn 1987) 143–60, here 156.

18   Frank H. Underhill, 'Arnold Toynbee, Metahistorian', *The Canadian Historical Review* 32 (1951) 201–19, here 218; John W. Yolton, 'History and Meta-History', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 15 (1955) 477–92; C. Vann Woodward, 'Toynbee and Metahistory', *The American Scholar* 3 (1958) 384–92, here 384–86; George Lichtheim, 'Metahistory', in: id., *The Concept of Ideology and Other Essays* (New York: Random House 1967) 172–76.

19   Christopher Dawson, 'The Problem of Metahistory', in: id., *The Dynamics of World History*, ed. John J. Mulloy (London: Sheed and Ward 1957) 287–93, here 287. White's familiarity with Dawson is apparent from his early article, 'Religion, Culture and Western Civilization in Christopher Dawson's Idea of History', *English Miscellany* 9 (1958) 247–87.

20   White, *Metahistory*, 92.

21   Ibid., 37, 51, 69.

22   Ibid., ix.

23   Cf. ibid., xii, 30–1.

24   Following P[anayot] B[utchvarov], 'Metaphysics', in: *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge/New York/Oakleigh: Cambridge University Press 1995) 489–91, here 489, I take metaphysics as 'the philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution and structure of reality'.

25   White, *Metahistory*, 34.

26   'One reason why early reviewers [of White's *Metahistory*, HJP] may have avoided using the word "tropes" is they did not understand what they were.' Richard T. Vann, 'The Reception of Hayden White', *History and Theory* 37 (1998) 143–61, here 150. See, however, Irmgard Wagner, 'Geschichte als Text: Zur Tropologie Hayden Whites', in: *Geschichtsdiskurs* I: *Grundlagen und Methoden der Historiographiegeschichte*, ed. Wolfgang Küttler, Jörn Rüsen and Ernst Schulin (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1993) 212–32.

27   Frank Ankersmit also distinguishes between, on the one hand, the introduction and the conclusion and, on the other, the 'body text' of *Metahistory*. F.R. Ankersmit, 'Hayden White's Appeal to the Historians', in: id., *Historical representation*, 249–61, here 253; id., 'From Language to Experience', in: id., *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2005) 69–107, here 107.

28   White, *Metahistory*, 167.

29   [Leopold von Ranke], 'A Fragment from the 1830's', in: *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (Cleveland/New York: The World Publishing Company 1956) 58–60, here 59. The German original can be found in Alfred Dove, 'Vorwort', in: Leopold von Ranke, *Weltgeschichte* IX/2: *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte*, ed. Alfred Dove (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot 1888) v–xxvi, here ix–xi.

30   N[icholas] P. W[olterstorff], 'Metaphor', in: *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 488.

31   White, *Metahistory*, 34: 'In Metaphor (…), phenomena can be characterized in terms of their similarity to, and difference from another…'

32   Ibid., 36, 177.

33   Ibid., 176.

34   Ibid., 177.

35   Ibid., 281.

36   Ibid., 82.

37   Ibid., 234.

38   Ibid., 31.

39   Georg G. Iggers, 'Historiography Between Scholarship and Poetry: Reflections on Hayden White's Approach to Historiography', *Rethinking History* 4 (2000) 373–90, here 378–9. Iggers adds: 'It would have been interesting to examine the ideological implications, the emplotment and the forms of argument which interest White in the actual historical narrative. (…) This would have permitted us to look into the actual texture of his texts, to view his heroes (and villains), his psychology, his comprehension of human behaviour, and the political implications' (ibid.). Cf. Dominick LaCapra, 'A Poetics of Historiography. Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse*', in: id., *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press 1983) 72–83, here 81: 'What one at times misses in White is an analysis of the way in which the formalized schemata and patterns he elicits actually function in texts.'

40   Iggers, 'Historiography Between Scholarship and Poetry', 379. Cf. Wagner, 'Geschichte als Text', 219–29.

41   This term was coined by Siegfried Kohlhammer, 'Die Welt im Viererpack: Zu Hayden White', *Merkur* 52 (1998) 898–907.

42   White, *Metahistory*, 173–4.

43   Ibid., 173.

44   Ibid.

45   Jonathan Gorman rightly highlights the metahistorical origins of these political views by saying that ideology in White reflected '…the ethical element in the historian's assumption of a particular position on the question of the nature of historical knowledge and the implications that can be drawn from the study of past events for the understanding of present ones.' J.L. Gorman, 'Reality and Irony in History', *Storia della Storiografia* 24 (1993) 59–69, here 67.

46   Maurice Mandelbaum, 'The Presuppositions of *Metahistory*', *History and Theory* Beiheft 19 (1980) 39–54, here 48.

47   Marx's concept of ideology has of course been extensively discussed. I have made use of Walter Carlsnaes, *The Concept of Ideology and Political Analysis: A Critical Examination of its Usage by Marx, Lenin, and Mannheim* (Westport/London: Greenwood Press 1981) esp. 43–49.

48   Hayden V. White, 'The Conflict of Papal Leadership Ideals from Gregory VII to St. Bernard of Clairvaux with Special Reference to the Schism of 1130' (Ph.D. thesis

University of Michigan 1955) 15–16.

49   In the introduction to *Metahistory*, White defined ideology as '…a set of prescriptions for taking a position in the present world of social praxis and acting upon it (either to change the world or to maintain it in its current state); such prescriptions are attended by arguments that claim the authority of "science" or "realism"' (22). The definition appears to be indebted to Karl Mannheim, even though Mannheim labelled change-oriented political views with the term 'utopia'. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1960) esp. 36. More clearly, Mannheim's influence is visible in White's typology of 'ideological implications'. The four basic positions – anarchist, radical, conservative and liberal – are variations on Mannheim's bureaucratic conservatism, conservative historicism, liberal-democratic bourgeois thought, socialist communism and fascism. White, *Metahistory*, 22–29 (esp. 22–3 note 11); Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 104–30.

50   White, *Metahistory*, 178–87. Humboldt's essay can be found in his *Werke* IV, *1820–1822*. Gesammelte Schriften IV, ed. Albert Leitzmann (Berlin: B. Behr's Verlag 1905) 35–56. White consulted the English translation: 'On the Historian's Task', *History and Theory* 6 (1967) 57–71. White's choice to use Humboldt's essay as a key to Ranke's thought might have been inspired by Georg G. Iggers, who had expressly stated that '…the basic metaphysical and epistemological assumptions of the great tradition of German historicism from Ranke to Meinecke had been already formulated by Humboldt.' With 'Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers', '…the philosophical theory of German historicism was complete.' Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 1968) 62.

51   White, *Metahistory*, 179.

52   Ibid., 180.

53   Ibid., 15.

54   Ibid., 177.

55   Remember that White modelled his modes of formal argument – formist, mechanistic, organicist and contextualist – after Stephen C. Pepper's 'world hypotheses', which were said to be modes of conceiving how to organise a multitude of impressions of reality into a structural whole. Ibid., 11–21 (esp. 13–4 note 7); Stephen C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press 1942) esp. 82–3.

56   According to Vann, 'Reception of Hayden White', 150 note 22, White was the first to use the term 'emplotment' ('Sometimes yesterday's monstrosity quickly becomes acceptable…').

57   White, *Metahistory*, 92, 142.

58   Ibid., 176, 177.

59   Ibid., 176–7.

60   Using Allan Megill's vocabulary, one might say that in Ranke's *Weltgeschichte*, 'master narrative' and 'grand narrative' tended to coincide with each other. Allan Megill, '"Grand Narrative" and the Discipline of History', in: *New Philosophy of History*, ed.

Ankersmit and Kellner, 151–73, here 152.

61   Cf. Patrick Bahners, 'Die göttliche Komödie: Leopold von Ranke und Hayden White', *Storia della Storiografia* 24 (1993) 71–108, here 81: 'So seltsam es klingt: Ausgerechnet bei Hayden White findet sich kein adäquates Verständnis der Erzählung als Erklärung. Nicht die Erzählungen erklären bei White, sondern ihre mythischen Muster, nicht Geschichte, sondern Metahistory.'

62   White, *Metahistory*, 2.

63   Hayden White, 'The Context in the Text: Method and Ideology in Intellectual History', in: id., *Content of the Form*, 185–213.

64   In 1976, White acknowledged that Lionel Gossman's study of Thierry, published in that same year (three years after *Metahistory*), was '…the first fully rhetorical and stylistic analysis of a modern historian that I know of.' Hayden V. White, 'Introductory Comments', *History and Theory* Beiheft 15 (1976) 1–2, here 1. Unlike White, Gossman studied issues like narrative order, the role of narrators, the difficulties of writing a narrative without an identifiable hero, the function of motifs in a text and the use of quotations. Lionel Gossman, 'Augustin Thierry and Liberal Historiography', ibid., 3–83, here 19, 35, 36, 52. Peter Gay also addressed matters like style and rhetoric in his *Style in History* (New York: Basic Books 1974), but in a much more superfluous manner than Gossman.

65   So Kansteiner, 'Hayden White's Critique', 277.

66   White, *Metahistory*, x.

67   Bahners, 'Die göttliche Komödie', 97.

68   White, *Metahistory*, ix, 2.

69   Ibid., ix, xi.

70   Ibid., 35.

71   Ibid., 34.

72   Hayden White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation', in: id., *Tropics of Discourse*, 121–34, here 128: 'Now, I want to make clear that I am myself using these terms [metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony, HJP] as metaphors for the different ways we construe fields or sets of phenomena in order to "work them up" into *possible objects of narrative representation* and *discursive analysis*.' Elsewhere, White said the tropes provided 'models' for understanding metahistorical acts of prefiguration. Id., 'Interpretation in history', 51–80, here 73.

73   Ewa Domańska, 'Hayden White', in: id., *Encounters: Philosophy of History After Postmodernism* (Charlottesville/London: University Press of Virginia 1998) 13–38, here 25.

74   White, *Metahistory*, x, xi.

75   Id., 'Introduction: Tropology, Discourse, and the Modes of Human Consciousness', in: id., *Tropics of Discourse*, 1–25, here 22.

76   Id., 'Interpretation in History', 74.

77   On the question *why* White was so fascinated by metahistorical presuppositions, see my article, 'An Ironic Battle Against Irony: Epistemological and Ideological Irony in Hayden White's Philosophy of History, 1955–1973', in: *Tropes for the Past: Hayden*

White and the History/Literature Debate, ed. Kuisma Korhonen (Amherst: Humanity Books, forthcoming).

78   Jacques Barzun, 'Romantic Historiography as a Political Force in France', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (1941) 318–29, here 318.

79   Stanley Mellon, *The Political Uses of History: A Study of Historians in the French Restoration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1958).

80   Iggers, *German Conception of History*, 17. Cf. Gerald Strauss, 'Meinecke, *Historismus* and the Cult of the Irrational', *German Quarterly* 26 (1953) 107–14, esp. 113.

81   In the German-speaking world, the metahistorical dimension of German historicism had of course been debated much earlier: initially by Neo-Kantian philosophers (Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert) and later on, with much philosophical acumen, by the early Martin Heidegger. See Charles R. Bombach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press 1995).

82   Hayden White, 'Preface', in: id., *Content of the Form*, ix–xi, here ix; id., 'The Metaphysics of Narrativity: Time and Symbol in Ricoeur's Philosophy of History', ibid., 169–84; id., 'The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation', ibid., 58–82.