Hayden White and the Crisis of Historicism

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> *To study history means submitting to chaos and nevertheless retaining faith in order and meaning. It is a very serious task, young man, and possibly a tragic one.*
>
> Hermann Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game*, 1943

When Joseph Knecht, the strong-minded hero in Hermann Hesse's celebrated novel, starts some good conversations with Father Jacobus, the Benedictine scholar-in-residence at the monastery of Mariafels, he learns a few things about historical scholarship that no historian would strike as surprising or remarkable: always historicize, never allow any anachronisms, avoid reading your own opinions into the views of others, be attentive to both changes and continuities in human history.[1] As for the subject of their first conversation – the speculations of an eighteenth-century theologian – Joseph has few objections against this historicist program. Things get more complicated, though, when these historicist hermeneutics are applied to the ideals governing the institution that has delegated Knecht to Mariafels. This is the Castalian Order: an intellectual community proud of its skills in "ordering" the world of thought by juxtaposing, contrasting and combining ideas from different historical and geographical contexts in thought-experiments known as the Glass Bead Game. "I have no quarrel with the student of history who brings to his work a touchingly childish, innocent faith in the power of our minds and our methods to order reality," Father Jacobus declares, "but first and foremost he must respect the incomprehensible truth, reality, and uniqueness of events."[2]

This is a far-from-innocent advice, as Joseph is quick to find out. By drawing attention to the particularity and context-dependency of historical events, it poses a dilemma to all those who, like the Glass Bead Game players, treat historical events as bearers of trans-historical, supra-temporal, timeless meanings. Either they have to reject the historicist approach of a Father Jacobus (as the Castilian Order does), or they have to abandon the Game and affirm that there is no other reality than the infinitely varied, complicated history of human stirrings and failures (as Joseph, near the end of the novel, does). Or perhaps has a more subtle effect to be attributed to the historicist lessons of that white-haired historian at Mariafels. Perhaps does his instruction make Joseph sensitive to historical change in such a tacit and gradual manner that after a while, "ripened within him in the course of his historical studies," historicism naturally seems to emerge as more plausible than the timeless truths of the Game players.[3] Once the novel's primary character has learned to see the world in historical terms, there is no way back. Exposure to historicism has irreversible effects.

This is why the study of history, as Father Jacobus tells his visitor, is not only "very serious," but potentially "tragic" as well. By "submitting to chaos," historians run a risk of loosing "faith in order and meaning," at least as long as these are understood in non-historical terms. Eventually, in Hesse's version, an act of will, a strong personal determination of the kind that Joseph displays when he resigns from his Castilian office and escapes into the "real" world, assures that "history" and "meaning" do not exclude each other – that meaning can be found (or made) *within* the particularities of the historical contexts in which human persons, outside the Castilian province, shape their lives.

Is there a sense in which Hayden White's long-term contributions to the field of historical theory share the concerns that led Joseph out of Castilia? Is there a sense in which White invites his readers to "submit to chaos and nevertheless retain faith in order and meaning"? To what extent do White's epistemological skepticism, his readiness to challenge historical orthodoxies and his "nominalist" understanding of historical narrative presuppose the existence of a human subject that lives by will alone in a world "full of change, history, struggles, and eternally new beginnings"?[4] Of course, White's work is usually read in narrativist terms. It is honored and criticized for breaking down traditional boundaries between historical and literary writing, for analyzing linguistic aspects and constraints of historical knowledge and for challenging historians to acknowledge that moral and aesthetic preferences are the only grounds for favoring one type of narrative representation over another. Judged by the inspiration it has provided for historians and literary theorists in the past few decades, this narrativist reading has not been unproductive. Moreover, as an interpretative proposal, it finds support in a good many of White's essays from the 1970s and 1980s (as well as in the introduction and conclusion to *Metahistory*, which are presumably the most-cited pages White has ever written). But for two reasons, it falls short in explaining what is at stake in White's historical theory. First, it generally neglects large parts of White's *oeuvre*, among which in particular the more than fifty titles (books, essays, introductions, reviews) published before *Metahistory*. Secondly, this "standard interpretation" does usually not explain *why* White is fascinated by historical narratives, for which *reasons* he insists on the legitimacy of different modes of representation and what *motivates* him to provoke controversies over matters of meaning, freedom and responsibility. These deficiencies are, perhaps, related in so far as the clearest indications of the questions and concerns that inspire White's philosophy of history can be found in his earliest writings.

Following the helpful suggestion that, in some specific sense, White advocates a "return of the moral imagination" in historical thought,[5] this chapter proposes to read White against the background of what is known as the "crisis of historicism." Because of a Babylonian confusion about the word historicism, a twofold clarification is needed. First, the "crisis of historicism" denotes a number of distinct crises. These include, but are not limited to, (a) the intuition, articulated by such philosophers as Wilhelm Dilthey and Martin Heidegger, that the linear narratives of nineteenth-century historical thought were inadequate because of their indebtedness to a transcendental, Cartesian subject-position, (b) the fear that "historical criticism"

would undermine traditional religious authorities such as the Bible, the "historical Jesus" and the lives of the saints and, most importantly, (c) the uncertainty, famously expressed by Ernst Troeltsch, but also by some characters in Hesse's novel, whether any moral absolutes would survive the challenge of historical contextualization.[6] In what follows, "the crisis of historicism" initially refers to this third type of crisis: to the disquieting thought that there are, perhaps, no moral standards which transcend the limits of our historical condition. It will, however, soon become clear that, in White's *oeuvre*, the "crisis of historicism" has its own particular meaning.

Secondly, albeit reaching a climax in the inter-war years, the crisis of historicism in Troeltsch's sense was (and is) experienced at various times and places. There is an element of nonsimultaneity (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*) in the crisis of historicism. Presupposing some kind of clash between a growing historical consciousness and a desire to reach beyond the individual and the particular to the absolute or universal, the crisis only occurs if both conditions are met. Simply abandon the search for universals or deny that historical change has any significant effect on human values and the crisis will be eliminated. The "crisis of historicism" may therefore well be called a traveling problem, or a challenge that faces different groups at different times and places, depending on whether and when they fulfill the conditions that may cause them to feel torn between historicism and its rivals.[7] Because of this, no anachronism is involved in suggesting that White's scholarly agenda, half a century after Troeltsch (and a full one after Jacob Burckhardt, the historian who reportedly served as a model for Hesse's Father Jacobus), was shaped by concerns stemming from the crisis of historicism.

Now, it may not be insignificant that, throughout his *oeuvre*, White addresses the relation between historical studies and moral inquiry, but hardly ever spends more than a few words on Troeltsch's worry that an excessive historical consciousness may threaten moral values. Likewise, one cannot fail to notice that, in his early work in particular, White finds lots of inspiration in sociologists like Weber, but never reads these thinkers as responding to the crisis of historicism that arguably served as the context in which their thought took shape.[8] Does this "absence" of Troeltsch's crisis of historicism in White's writings indicate that one of the two conditions mentioned above – the desire to reach beyond historical situatedness – makes no appearance in his thought? Does White envision a historicism without crises, without disturbing implications in the sphere of moral thought, without the risk of tragic loss envisaged by Father Jacobus? In what follows, I will argue that, after a "liberal humanist" phase in which the author averts the possible threat of historicism by embedding historical variety in narratives of humanist progress, White in the 1970s and 1980s indeed appears to have few problems with the moral "relativism" that Troeltsch feared. This is because an strongly voluntarist understanding of morality leads White to emphasize the individuality and singularity of each moral situation to such an extent as to deny that people should long or hope for moral wisdom transcending the limits of their historical situation. Yet, as few have pointed out, in the early 1970s, White encounters another "crisis" caused by historicist thought, or a profound concern resulting from the kind of conclusions that Troeltsch *cum suis* hesitated to draw. If indeed all moral

inquiry is context-bound, then does this imply that the study of the past is morally irrelevant? Why should one want to study the past, if there is no moral education to be gained from it? According to my reading of *Metahistory*, White suggests a monumental mode of dealing with the past exemplified, in the last chapter of *The Glass Bead Game*, by Joseph Knecht's heroic self-affirmation in the face of history's absurdity.

1. Humanist historicism

Among White's largely forgotten pre-*Metahistory* writings are three textbooks, conceived in the now almost equally forgotten tradition of the Western Civilization course.[9] Co-authored with Willson H. Coates, *The Emergence of Liberal Humanism* (1966) and *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism* (1970) tell a glorious story of expanding liberty. They relate how, from the Italian Renaissance onward, new ideas about nature, the self, religion, politics, freedom and the common good transformed "the European mind" to the extent that modern liberal humanism could have qualified as "the most nearly triumphant philosophy" in the entire Western world if "the irrational propensities of Western European man" not stopped its advancement in the early twentieth century. A third book, published (in White's own Major Traditions of World Civilization series) as *The Greco-Roman Tradition* (1973), covered "the rise and fall of the classical humanistic ideal" in Greece and Rome.[10] As the authors themselves admit, these books proceed from the assumption that "freedom of conscience and liberty in all its aspects constitute the most important tradition in Western civilization." Deeply indebted to a 1960s version of the secularization thesis, the two earliest volumes in particular read like a Whig history of modern, secular humanism. Typically, story elements that run counter to this liberal narrative – Leo XIII's *Syllabus of Errors* or Hitler's rise to power – are presented as "challenges" and "dilemmas" that liberal-minded Europeans had to face. Thus emplotting modern European history as a battle between forces of light and darkness, the authors do not conceal their critical attitude toward "practices of magic, myth, and superstitious beliefs of the most archaic kind" or "the unsurpassed agonies of the witch trials." Likewise, they frankly speak of "failure" and "irrelevance" if such phenomena as Romanticism in an industrializing society and "ethics of ambiguity" in times of political decision appear to them as anachronistic.[11] Indeed, by Father Jacobus's criteria, these volumes cannot exactly be called historicist.

This should not come as a surprise: nowhere in his early historical writings does White display a particular affinity with a hermeneutics of "otherness" and "difference." To be sure, in his praise for Croce, most eloquently expressed in "The Abiding Relevance of Croce's Idea of History" (1963), White fully endorses the Italian thinker's resistance against sociological typologies and "general laws" in the name of history's individuality, particularity and unpredictability. His translation of Carlo Antoni's *Dallo storicismo alla sociologia* (1959) – an outright condemnation of Dilthey's, Troeltsch's and Weber's classificatory methods – also indicates a genuine interest in what Russell Jacoby calls "the specificity of history."[12] But in White's own

historical writings, typologies, ideal types and schemes borrowed from Weber, Arnold J. Toynbee and (in the late 1960s) Giambattista Vico always serve as means for ordering history and exploring that "foreign country" called the past. In offering a threefold typology of historicisms, White's introduction to Antoni's book even employs the very same classificatory methods that the Italian author so passionately warns against.[13] The large amounts of criticism that White's work in medieval church history receives during the late 1950s and early 1960s also amount to the charge of too rigidly imposing Weberian ideal types, insufficiently respecting the "otherness" of twelfth-century Roman Christianity and, in general, not being historicist enough in the hermeneutical sense of the word.[14]

Yet, if not historicist in their hermeneutics, White's textbooks on "liberal humanism," like his Croce essay, are certainly historicist in their *Weltanschauung* or presuppositions about the nature of historical reality. Indebted to what Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, criticizes as "humanist historicism," these volumes insist on the endless variety, multiplicity and unpredictability of human history, without fearing, as Troeltsch did, that moral values suffer from such a consequent historical contextualization. The books do so, first, by insisting on the primacy of human agents as actors in history's drama. Humanism, so they tell their readers, is "an attitude of mind which takes man as the effective qualitative center of the universe and as sole responsible agent for the creation of order in the world of human affairs." Downplaying social contexts, cultural conventions, collective actions and unintended consequences of intentional conduct, this "humanism" treats the human individual and, more specifically, the human will as the primary actor in human history. Whereas this definition already implies a rejection of any and all religion, White adds, significantly, that he considers "liberation from all transcendentalist aspiration" an important aim of modern humanism. Take your life into your own hands, without ever projecting moral authority or moral responsibility into whatever transcendental realm, is the humanist message White's textbooks convey. Thirdly, a blanket condemnation of any supposedly timeless truth "as both fundamentally unhistorical and philosophically naïve" indicates how much this humanism intends to respect historical variety. All this is, finally, embedded in a narrative of progress, which portrays humankind as a collective personality, growing in time and showing a remarkable ability for adaptation and transformation. If, within this narrative, varieties in human moral discourse can be seen as corresponding to distinct phases in a process of human self-realization, and if "all attempts at knowledge are essentially efforts at human self-understanding," as *The Emergence of Liberal Humanism* puts it, then the possible threat of historicism is effectively averted. Then, indeed, White can be as openly historicist as Herder was, because the "sacred canopy" of his belief in progress provides an overall meaning to the historical process in the same way that (as *Metahistory* explains at length) Herder's belief in a "unified organic force" in which all human life participates enabled him to rejoice in whatever historical varieties he encountered.[15]

Nineteenth-century German historicism felt the first pangs of a crisis as soon as it left this Herderian organicism behind.[16] This suggests the question whether

White faces a crisis of historicism, too, when (shortly after Foucault's *The Order of Things*) the language of progressive development disappears from his writings. Does White's humanist historicism, increasingly weaned from its belief in progress, persist in emphasizing the desirability of human self-determination in the face of historical change, difference and dissimilarity? Or does the author agree that, without belief in progress, "submitting to chaos" may threaten "faith in order and meaning"? In my reading, *Metahistory* indeed engages in a vigorous struggle with "the crisis of historicism," but in a distinct sense of the word. Not Castilian fears or Troeltschean worries, but moral concerns about the ironic condition of historical studies lead White to pit himself against "the crisis of historicism."

2. A crisis of historicism

In its hermeneutics, *Metahistory* is even less historicist than the textbooks mentioned above. Hypostatizing historical "ages" and attributing "integral consistency" to how people understood reality within such long-time epochs as "the Medieval period," the book deals in broad generalizations, looks for patterns rather than for particularities and focuses on "family characteristics" between "types" of human thought. Moreover, just as White's 1955 Ph.D. dissertation explains the rise and fall of twelfth-century papal leadership ideals with help of a large-scale model of how social institutions ideal-typically evolve, so *Metahistory* identifies Enlightenment historiography and the subsequent forms that Western historical consciousness took between the days of Herder and Burckhardt with four phases of a cyclical model, which White still in the late 1980s believes to have the nature of an "iron law."[17]

However, as the cycle indicates, the spread of these historical modes of thought in Western Europe is *not* identified with a progressive realization of human rationality. *Metahistory* differs from White's humanism textbooks in acknowledging that "rationality" and "irrationality," or wisdom and foolishness, cannot simply be contrasted in terms of binary oppositions, as is assumed in classic "Western civilization" narratives about the triumph of reason over myth and superstition. After Horkheimer's, Adorno's and Foucault's critical diagnoses of Enlightenment rationality, White discerns a need for theory that takes "unreason," "myth," "dreams" and "religious speculation" as serious as modes of human inquiry as it does "reason," "history," "science" and "liberalism." An "adequate psychological theory" or "theory of human consciousness" would not set over reason "against imagination as the basis of truth against the basis of error," but recognize "the *continuity* between reason and fantasy." "[T]he mode of their relationship as parts of a more general process of human inquiry into a world incompletely known might be sought, and the process in which fantasy or imagination contributed as much to the discovery of truth as did reason itself might be perceived."[18] Hence White's enthusiasm, expressed in the first two chapters of the book, for such philosophers as Nietzsche, Hegel, Herder, Vico and Leibniz, all of whom attempted not to contrast history and myth, or reason and imagination, but to conceptualize these modes of inquiry as "parts" of a "whole." (It is perhaps no coincidence that a fragment of *Metahistory*'s first draft, published in 1966,

focuses on Hegel.)[19] What White hopes to derive from these thinkers is not an alternative narrative of progress or an overarching philosophy of history providing "ultimate" meanings to the contingencies of history – after his humanism textbooks, White no longer trusts such *grand récits* – but a "metahistorical" mode of thought that can foster a creative interaction between rational and imaginative dimensions in human thought.

Following White's exposition of his "tropology" in the book's introduction, many readers have identified the four phases in White's model with "linguistic" paradigms and their "closed-cycle development" with a gradual elaboration of "the possibilities of tropological prefiguration (…) contained in poetic language in general."[20] However, given the striking dissimilarities between the introduction and the subsequent chapters of *Metahistory*, it may be preferable to examine how White actually *uses* these tropes throughout his book, rather than to repeat his own definitions.[21] This operation yields complex results: since the tropes (literally: "turns") are relational terms, they can be, and are in fact, used for mapping diverse types of relationships (texts to contexts, past to present, thought to action, etc.). In the first two chapters of the book, however, White's "master tropes" primarily denote response patterns to the question asked a moment ago: how to relate history and myth, reason and imagination, fact and fiction, reality and vision?

Starting with eighteenth-century French historians such as Voltaire and Hume, White asserts that, "under the auspices of a Metonymical paradigm – that is, in the mode of severance or extrinsic opposition" – Enlightenment historiography destroyed an "original" (metaphorical) unity of the truthful and the fabulous, thereby raising the Vichian question how the former can possibly emerge from the latter. "The Enlighteners, because they viewed the relationship of reason to fantasy in terms of an opposition rather than as a part-whole relationship, were unable to formulate this question in a historiographically profitable way." Kant, too, is said to have conceptualized "the historical field Metonymically, (…) as merely a conflict, an *unresolvable* conflict, between *eternally opposed* principles of human nature: rational on the one hand, irrational on the other."[22] This metonymical mode works well as long as its adherents are so convinced of the power and promise of their rationalism as to be able to reject its opposites: unreason, superstition and myth. "Put as a rule," however, this metonymical "modality of comprehension" meets a sufficient number of challenges – the observation that large parts of humankind fail to live up to its rational standards, or critical analyses of the Enlightenment's own "dialectics" – as to "degenerate" into irony, that is, into a helpless awareness of its own one-sidedness, its limitations as a means for understanding the fullness of human reality.[23]

Unlike their metonymic forerunners, ironic thinkers like Burckhardt and Croce (White's examples) realized that the world cannot be ruled by reason alone, that "demythologization" will not solve societal problems. But they failed to relate history to myth, or reason to imagination, and consequently isolated "rational inquiry" from what Hesse's novel describes as the blatant irrationalities of political life.[24] In White's version, such a "dead end" can be avoided by "neutralizing" metonymical tensions in some kind of "higher unity," as Herder did, when he tried to integrate the rational and

the fabulous into a synecdochic harmony, arguing that both history and myth articulate some truth about the universe. By rational standards, however, this attempt at reunion of history and myth was itself entirely mythical in nature, as Kant pointed out to Herder, and was therefore more likely to be defeated by metonymic and ironic forces than to overcome their battles.[25] Hence White's somewhat indefinite hope that a more radical overthrow of conceptual barriers, associated with Nietzsche's "metaphorical" effacement of the distinctions between history and myth, might provide a means for returning to a mode of thought in which the two creatively interact.[26] In short, in White's schematic understanding, "metaphor" denotes a unity of reason and imagination, or history and myth; "metonymy" a binary opposition between the two; "synecdoche" a higher unity of both; and "irony" that what is left after the unity has broken down: an inability to meaningfully relate the rational and the fabulous.

Now, when *Metahistory* addresses the "crisis of historicism," this crisis is characterized as a "condition of Irony," as an "Ironic condition of mind" and as "the descent into Irony which was to characterize the historical consciousness" of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[27] In spite of White's not always consistent use of "irony" – Eugene O. Golob has counted no less than twenty possible meanings of this term in *Metahistory* alone[28] – the author leaves no doubt as to his conviction that "the true content of the 'crisis of historicism'" was an awareness of limitations in the sense just explained: an inability, if not unwillingness, to relate historical studies to mythic, religious and other "irrational" modes of thought. Burckhardt, for example, is associated with disdain for "political and religious impulses" and with an "explosion of all formulas, all myths, in the interest of pure 'contemplation' and resignation to the world of 'things as they are.'" Croce is blamed for having moved historical studies out of "the fullness of the noonday sun" to "the partial light of the new moon" – that is, from participation in an effort to integrate human knowledge to the monastic sphere of merely historical contemplation.[29] More specifically, both thinkers are criticized for having separated "rational" historical inquiry from the "irrational" domains of moral and political commitment. This is as unsatisfying as it is dangerous, as White believes that all commitment or involvement requires some kind of myth, dream or "irrational" vision of how life should look like. According to *Metahistory*, all moral aspirations, all efforts to make a difference in life, require a "fictional construction of the world." All political visions ("Activism," "Communism," "Transcendentalism," "Chauvinism," and so forth) require some form of "irrationalism."[30] These irrationalities, argues White, need to be constructively engaged, rather than opposed or ignored, lest they go their own way, just as the Romanticists once opposed the Enlightenment, and "ultimately plunge European civilization into the abyss of totalitarian error." Thus, the ironic failure to mediate between history and myth may not be without consequences: it may eventually "bring about the end of civilization itself."[31]

All this seems to indicate that White's crisis of historicism is an entirely different problem than the one faced by Hesse's Castilian characters and early twentieth-century theology. Nowhere does *Metahistory* associate the crisis of

historicism with Troeltsch's attempt to escape "moral relativism" (Troeltsch's name does not even appear in the index). Nowhere does the author show himself concerned about "crises" that an increasing awareness of historical variety and multiplicity may cause in the domain of moral certitude. Rather, for White, the "crisis of historicism" denotes the unfortunate circumstance that, in the 1970s as much as in the late nineteenth century, "academic historiography remains locked within the Ironic perspective" and fails to engage in productive interaction with imagination, dream and myth.[32] Yet, my contention is that these two elements in White – the absence of a Troeltschean crisis and his anti-ironic attitude – are closely related. White's aim to rescue historical studies from their ironic cage is motivated by the belief that human beings need to be inspired to take the step that Troeltsch hesitated, and finally refused, to take: to accept full responsibility for the meaning of their lives and the moral values they want to promote.[33]

3. Monumental historiography

Many readers of *Metahistory* have noticed that White is particularly fascinated by the theme of human freedom.[34] Whereas freedom in *The Emergence* and *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism* is predominantly defined in negative terms – the authors highlight the freedom *from* religion, myth, tradition, superstition and ignorance brought about by liberal humanism – the notion of freedom receives a more positive definition in *Metahistory*. Not only does White consider human beings free to think, believe and act in whatever ways they find appropriate; they are also granted a right "to conceptualize history, to perceive its contents, and to construct narrative accounts of its processes in whatever modality of consciousness is most consistent with their own moral and aesthetic aspirations."[35] (Note that this is not the same as declaring that people are free to say whatever they please about the past: in this passage, at least, White merely claims that human beings have a freedom to decide whether to relate history and myth in metaphoric, metonymical, synecdochic or ironic "modalities of consciousness.") These types of freedom are related in so far as historical representations reflect the author's moral and political positions and, vice versa, in so far as ideals, dreams and utopian visions presuppose a certain attitude toward the past.[36] Importantly, White takes these to be *individual* freedoms. Not the state, the church or the historical discipline tells individuals how to interpret their past, present and future: according to humanist reason, they are individually responsible for how they interpret their lives.

The reason why White, unlike Father Jacobus, does not see this meaning become "serious" or even "tragic" if confronted with historicist versions of the past is that White does not believe such meaning to transcend the limits of the individual's situation. He conceives of moral meaning in thoroughly historicist terms. This is not to say that White insists on a radical "otherness of the past." In fact, consistent with his hermeneutics, the theme of otherness ("they do things differently there") is largely absent in White's book. But since the author regards moral meaning as created solely by individual acts of will, and since he attributes to individuals a freedom to

apprehend the "spectacle of history-in-general in terms of felt needs and aspirations that are ultimately personal," he is at pains to point out that these individual perceptions of reality cannot be limited, restricted or disciplined by what others in their situations saw as the meaning, purpose or "proper" mode of understanding reality. White's Marx chapter can therefore state that "one can either adopt Marx's philosophy as providing the perspective from which one *wills* to view one's own place in the stream of historical becoming or one can reject it one similarly voluntaristic grounds."[37] Likewise, in spite of White's praise for Tocqueville, it is the individual reader who has to decide whether or not to accept this Frenchman's tragic conception of reality. In fact, for White, Tocqueville's greatness lays precisely in forcing "the reader to decide for himself 'what actually happened' in terms of what he desires to happen in his own future, asking him to choose between a comfortable drifting on history's stream and a struggle against its currents."[38] Thus, the primacy of the individual will – characterized by Hans Kellner as the only "foundationalism" that *Metahistory* is prepared to endorse[39] – leads White to preclude or deny the possibility of supra-individual standards for interpreting reality or judging good and evil. Accordingly, the Castilian world of timeless truths and moral universals is utterly foreign to White's book. White does not fear a crisis of historicism as Troeltsch or Father Jacobus did, because his voluntarism prevents him from assuming that there is any worth in the "moral absolutes" threatened by historicist thought.

However, if moral decision-making is a here-and-now activity, as White presumes, then why should human beings wish to study the past? If there is no wisdom to be gained in the contemplation of human successes and failures in the past, what, then, is the moral significance of historical studies? Besides, it is one thing to say that reason and imagination need to build upon each other, but another to claim that historical studies should facilitate this interaction. Why cannot literature, philosophy or the social sciences help people deal with this challenge? In short, if White opts for "situational" or even "presentist" ethics, then why does he not abandon history and further contribute to the marginalization of historical studies described in "The Burden of History"?

Kellner has made the pertinent point that White's book should probably not be titled *Metahistory*, but *Metahistories*. The book has multiple dimensions, each with its own agenda, horizon and intended audience.[40] Having said this, one might nevertheless argue that the moral significance of historical studies is one of the dominant themes in White's study. "The question for the historian today is not *how* history ought to be studied, but *if* it ought to be studied at all," so White in 1965.[41] His *opus magnum* is an attempt to answer this question, notwithstanding the fact that other purposes are pursued along the way. This is also to say, *pace* some critics of White's book,[42] that *Metahistory* does not primarily aim to analyze professional historiography or ask academic historians to increase their "moral commitment." Instead of taking present-day historical writing as his frame of reference, White wonders if there is any sense at all in which "the general intellectual and artistic life of our time" may need historical reflection.[43]

Metahistory provides a threefold answer. First, following Kant, White argues that all moral positions, including those articulated within "the general intellectual and artistic life of our time," presuppose a vision of the past. The way I live my life depends not only on my moral ideals, but also on how I locate these ideals vis-à-vis the historical process:

> If I conceive the historical process as a spectacle of degeneration (…), I will live history in such a way as to bring about a degenerate end to the process. And similarly, if I conceive that spectacle as 'one damn thing after another,' I shall act in such a way as to turn the age in which I live into a static age, one in which no progress will be possible.[44]

Thus, for instance, a metonymical opposition between reason and imagination constructed by French Enlighteners in the service of a rational ideal of society led Voltaire to regard the past as a time of unreason, the present as a struggle and the future as a period in which a greater rationality would be realized. In Voltaire's philosophy of history, the past served as a dark contrast to (what was destined to become) a splendid future. Leibniz's synecdochic understanding of reason and imagination, by contrast, did not require such an opposition. "When Leibniz surveyed the remote past he saw there precisely the same powers at play which he saw all around him in the present, and in the same proportions."[45] Consequently, unlike Voltaire, Leibniz did not need a break from the past. To White, these examples indicate that a vision of the past helps explaining how a moral vision can be realized.

Secondly, however, all moral visions, whether progressive, conservative or reactionary in nature, require dreams and myths. As outlined in the previous section, White believes that a "fictional construction of the world" ("I have a dream") is part of every moral aspiration, including the Enlightenment quest for greater rationality. If such aspirations are to be prevented from stumbling into irony, White argues, then they are to be articulated within a synecdochic or metaphoric comprehension of reality. They need, to put it differently, a configuration of "reason" and "unreason" that will not tolerate the erroneous idea that human beings will finally become more rational or indulge in the naive thought that today's irrationalities are worse than yesterday's. In a synecdochic or metaphoric mode, history can teach individuals that reason and unreason have always co-existed – and that human beings have to live their moral life *within* this situation. "What Voltaire might have concluded from his consideration of Charles's career," adds White, referring to Voltaire's *Histoire de Charles XII*, "was that unreason is a part of the world and of man, as ineluctable and as irreducible as reason itself, and a power which is not to be eliminated in time so much as it is to be tamed, sublimated, and directed into creative and humanly useful channels."[46]

This brings us to the third answer, which is anticipated in White's 1963 Croce essay. Speaking about what lessons, if any, can be learned from the past, White states that "history alone (and here it surpasses both philosophy and art in its powers of moral suasion) provides us with *living* models of human beings willing to act within

the limits (…) given and teaches us that, potentially at least, we too possess a similar courage."[47] History not only reminds individuals that they live in a world where reason and unreason co-exist, but also tells them that, *within* this far from perfect reality, a courageous moral life is possible. This is why White's *opus magnum* tends to favor a "monumental" historiography, in Nietzsche's sense of the word.[48] It tends to favor a mode of history that "pertains to the active and powerful, to the person who is involved in a great struggle and who needs exemplars, teachers, and comforters, but is unable to find them among his contemporaries and in the present age."[49] Obviously, White does not expect such "teachers" to exemplify how others should live – for that would violate his individual voluntarism. Neither does *Metahistory* support a monumental history that gives "late-comers" on the stage of history the uncomfortable feeling that everything worthwhile has already been accomplished ("Look, great art already exists!"). Rather, White favors historical studies that, in Nietzsche's words, make their readers believe "that the greatness that once existed was at least *possible* at one time, and that it therefore will probably be possible once again."[50] Precisely this is the reason why *Metahistory* reminds its readers of the "golden age" of history, of figures like Tocqueville, Marx and Nietzsche, of visionary thinkers who believed that history, reason, myth and imagination have to join forces in the realization of moral ideals. Their examples aim to show White's readers that it is possible for them to break away from irony – "we have only to reject this Ironic perspective and to *will* to view history from another, anti-Ironic perspective" – and to instill in them a courage to take their lives into their own hands, to learn again to dream and to develop a historical vision that sustains rather than destroys their imaginative faculty.[51]

So, White's final answer to the question posed by what he calls "the crisis of historicism" – is there anything morally significant to be expected from the study of the past? – is that historical studies, in a monumental sense, may inspire the reader to become as courageous a moral actor as is Joseph, in the final chapter of *The Glass Bead Game*: a man who knows better than most how transitory our historical conditions are, how human beings are blinded by instincts, impulses and sinful desires – a man who, nonetheless, affirms this mixture of "reason" and "unreason," trusts in the soundness of his judgment and in the strength of his will, breaks with the Castilian Order and begins a new life, rejoicing in his freedom and looking forward to whatever comes next.[52]

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[1] Parts of this essay are based on my doctoral dissertation, "Masks of Meaning: Existentialist Humanism in Hayden White's Philosophy of History" (University of Groningen, 2006). I gratefully mention Professor White's generosity in making time to respond to my thoughts and intuitions about his work, first during a week-long visit to Stanford University and later at conferences in Turku, Budapest and Groningen. Pretending not to understand why anybody would write a doctoral thesis on Hayden White, he helped me discover "the politics of style" by usually not answering my questions in any straightforward manner, offering more challenging, more thought-provoking reflections on history, philosophy of history and the state of the Western

world instead. I consider Professor White's support a particular privilege and gladly express at this occasion my thanks for his interest in my readings of his *oeuvre*. Two published interviews resulted from our conversations: "Zonder god rest ons niets dan geschiedenis," *De Groene Amsterdammer* 129 no. 43 (2005), 22-25; "Een beslissend moment van geschiedenis: Hayden White en de erfenis van het existentialisme," *Groniek* 38 (2005), 581-591.

[2] Hermann Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game (Magister Ludi)*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston (New York; Chicago; San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 168-169.

[3] Hesse, *Glass Bead Game*, 265.

[4] Hesse, *Glass Bead Game*, 400.

[5] David Harlan, "The Return of the Moral Imagination," in *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 105-126; Hans Kellner, "A Bedrock of Order: Hayden White's Linguistic Humanism," in *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison; London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 193-227. More recently, A. Dirk Moses also emphasized this moral aspect in his "Hayden White, Traumatic Nationalism, and the Public Role of History," *History and Theory* 44 (2005), 311-332.

[6] A variety of crises associated with nineteenth-century historicism is explored in *Krise des Historismus, Krise der Wirklichkeit: Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur, 1880-1932*, ed. Otto Gerhard Oexle (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007). That nineteenth-century historical thought ("classical historicism," as distinguished from "crisis historicism") suffered, rather than caused, a crisis is the argument of my essay, "A Collapse of Trust: Reconceptualizing the Crisis of Historicism," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2 (2008), forthcoming. The *locus classicus* remains, of course, Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme: Das Logische Problem der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922).

[7] The allusion is to Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

[8] See Patrick Dassen, *De onttovering van de wereld: Max Weber en het probleem van de moderniteit in Duitsland, 1890-1920* (Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1999). Weber's influence on the "young" White is the subject of my essay, "A Weberian Medievalist: Hayden White in the 1950s," *Rethinking History* 12 (2008), forthcoming.

[9] Gilbert Allardyce, "The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course," *The American Historical Review* 87 (1982), 695-725.

[10] Willson H. Coates and Hayden V. White, *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism: An Intellectual History of Western Europe*, vol. 2: *Since the French Revolution* (New York etc.: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 448, 3; Hayden V. White, *The Greco-Roman Tradition* (New York etc.: Harper & Row, 1973), ix.

[11] Willson H. Coates, Hayden V. White and J. Salwyn Schapiro, *The Emergence of Liberal Humanism: An Intellectual History of Western Europe*, vol. 1: *From the Italian Renaissance to the French Revolution* (New York etc.: McGraw-Hill, 1966), v,

69; Coates and White, *Ordeal of Liberal Humanism*, 37, 452, 79, 290; White, *Greco-Roman Tradition*, 6.

[12] Russell Jacoby, "A New Intellectual History?," *The American Historical Review* 97 (1992), 407.

[13] Hayden V. White, "Translator's Introduction: On History and Historicisms," in: Carlo Antoni, *From History to Sociology: The Transition in German Historical Thinking*, translated by Hayden V. White (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), xix-xxv.

[14] See Paul, "Weberian Medievalist."

[15] Coates, White and Shapiro, *Emergence of Liberal Humanism*, 5, 194, 5; Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 77.

[16] Paul, "Collapse of Trust."

[17] White, *Metahistory*, 46, 47, 2; 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). White uses the iron law metaphor in an interview with Willem Otterspeer and Michaël Zeeman: "De valse verhalen van de geschiedenis," *NRC Handelsblad*, cultural supplement "Beeldspraak" (June 9, 1989), 4.

[18] White, *Metahistory*, 51. A few pages later, White makes a similar statement: "The modality of *opposition*, by which things I history are related in thought, has not given place to the modality of *continuity and interchange*, which alone could generate an adequate appreciation of the concreteness, individuality, and vividness of historical events…" (57-58).

[19] Hayden V. White, "Hegel: Historicism as Tragic Realism," *Colloquium* 5 no. 2 (1966), 10-19.

[20] White, *Metahistory*, ix, 38, xii.

[21] See F. R. Ankersmit, "Hayden White's Appeal to the Historians," in *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 253 as well as my "bottom up" reconstruction of White's tropology in "Metahistorical Prefigurations: Towards a Reinterpretation of Tropology in Hayden White," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Archaeology* 1 no. 2 (2004), 1-19.

[22] White, *Metahistory*, 62, 52, 58.

[23] White, *Metahistory*, 67, 92, 108.

[24] White, *Metahistory*, 234-237, 401; Hesse, *Glass Bead Game*, 277.

[25] White, *Metahistory*, 71, 80, 69, 77.

[26] White, *Metahistory*, chapter 9.

[27] White, *Metahistory*, 41, xii, 40.

[28] See Golob's review in *History and Theory* 14 (1975), 81.

[29] White, *Metahistory*, 41, 230, 233, 385.

[30] White, *Metahistory*, 423, 400, 397. Cf. chapter 8 of *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism*, on "The Place of the Irrational in Culture and Society."

[31] White, *Metahistory*, 108, 236, 85.

[32] White, *Metahistory*, 433. Cf. the book's epigraph: "One can study only what one has first dreamed about." Clear evidence of White's desire to reunite "dream" and "reason" in historical studies can also be found in his review article on George Armstrong Kelly's *Idealism, Politics and History: Sources of Hegelian Thought*, published in *History and Theory* 9 (1970), 343-363.

[33] I leave aside the problem that *Metahistory*, in White's own words, "is itself cast in an Ironic mode" (xii). How White's "turning of the Ironic consciousness against Irony itself" (xii) can be understood is the subject of 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 (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2006), 35-44. An extended version of this essay appeared in Dutch as "Tegen zure regen: Hayden White, anti-ironisme en existentialistisch humanisme," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 120 (2007), 74-84.

[34] Peter Novick even refers to White's "existentialist quasi obsession with the historian's liberty of choice. It is not too much to call him historiography's philosopher of freedom." *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 601. Hans Kellner and Ewa Domańska, among others, have also drawn attention to the significance of "freedom" in White.

[35] White, *Metahistory*, 434.

[36] "In choosing our past, we choose a present; and vice versa. We use the one to *justify* the other." Hayden V. White, "What is a Historical System?" in *Biology, History, and Natural Philosophy*, ed. Allen D. Breck and Wolfgang Yourgrau (New York; London: Plenum Press, 1972), 242.

[37] White, *Metahistory*, 283.

[38] White, *Metahistory*, 227.

[39] Hans Kellner, "Twenty Years After: A Note on *Metahistories* and Their Horizons," *Storia della Storiografia* 24 (1993), 115.

[40] Kellner, "Twenty Years After," 109.

[41] *History* by John Higham (in collaboration with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert), reviewed in *AHA Newsletter* 3 no. 5 (1965), 6.

[42] E.g., Jörn Stückrath, "Typologie statt Theorie? Zur Rekonstruktion und Kritik von Hayden Whites Begrifflichkeit in 'Metahistory'," 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), 86-103; Siegfried Kohlhammer, "Die Welt im Viererpack: Zu Hayden White," *Merkur* 52 (1998), 898-907.

[43] This expression, taken from "Burden of History," 48, frequently occurs in White's writings from the 1960s and early 1970s.

[44] White, *Metahistory*, 57.

[45] White, *Metahistory*, 62.

[46] White, *Metahistory*, 64.

[47] Hayden V. White, "The Abiding Relevance of Croce's Idea of History," *The Journal of Modern History* 35 (1963), 118.

[48] White occassionally recommends Nietzsche's critical mode of history, as Moses, "Hayden White," 313, observes, but only to create space for monumental historiography.

[49] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life," in *Unfashionable Observations*, translated by Richard T. Gray (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 96. White lists Nietzsche's reservations about this type of historiography in *Metahistory*, 349-350.

[50] Nietzsche, "Utility and Liability," 101, 98. "[H]e goes his way with more courage," continues Nietzsche, referring to the (male) reader of such monumental historiography, "for the doubt that befalls him in his weaker moments – Is he not, in fact, striving for the impossible? – is now banished."

[51] White, *Metahistory*, 434 (emphasis added).

[52] Hesse, *Glass Bead Game*, 266-267, 406-409.