

Reimagining Hayden White: The Politics of Writing History

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Introduction

*I tell my students, "Look, we're here to discuss the meaning of life." The meaning of life is that I'm alive for the time being. I'm in a world which is making contradictory demands upon me. What do I do?*¹

Hayden White, 2008

*Which White?*²

— Richard Vann

Hayden Whites abound: White the revolutionizer of historical thought, White the medievalist, White the cultural historian, White the “kind of Marxist” critic of Western society, White the proponent of a “visionary politics.”³ Arguably, a new White emerged in each text he wrote until his death in March 2018. In response to one question about his disciplinary orientation in 1994, White responded, “I am a writer.”⁴

A new Hayden White also seems to emerge in each reading of one of his texts, evidenced by the slew of interpretations and reactions they provoke. That distinct Whites can be read within and among his texts render a comprehensive study of his oeuvre problematic. It begs the question: How can — and should — we imagine the historical subject, as well as the subjectivity of both writer and reader of history, who may also experience themselves as historical subjects? The question of the subject, which encompasses historical agent, historian, and reader, is latent in White’s oeuvre because of his emphasis on the ethical and political nature of historical writing. For White, the question involves a tense interplay between epistemological possibility and

¹ Hayden White and Robert Pogue Harrison, “‘We’re Here to Discuss the Meaning of Life,’” *The Chronicle of*

² Richard T. Vann, “The Reception of Hayden White,” *History and Theory* 37, no. 2 (1998): 143–61.

³ Ewa Domanska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998).

⁴ Ewa Domanska, Hans Kellner, and Hayden White, “Interview: Hayden White: The Image of Self-Presentation,” *Diacritics* 24, no. 1 (1994).

ethical necessity: the “can” and the “should.”⁵ So does the question of ideology and freedom: if a subject is inevitably “in” ideology, as Louis Althusser argues, how can she be free — a condition necessary for ethical responsibility?⁶

Today, White is most remembered in the history discipline for his critique of naive historical realism, the ideology of the historical profession that purports to discover and objectively relay historical events “as they really happened.” It is for this reason Dominick LaCapra claimed White more than anyone else awoke historians “from their dogmatic slumber,” an invocation of Immanuel Kant’s quote about David Hume in 1783.⁷ However, the extent of White’s impact on practicing historians is difficult to measure, and his work has met resistance in the historical discipline. While White’s writings from the seventies are often taught in graduate historiography courses, his later essays, which incorporate literary theory, are accordingly more valued by scholars of literature and rhetoric than historians.⁸ Perhaps historians are also averse to his later essays because the methodologies they deploy seem to threaten their discipline.

Herman Paul, who wrote the only book-length study of White’s oeuvre in English, characterizes White as an existential humanist. An iteration of humanism, which presumes the primacy, agency, and rationality of humanity, existential humanism asserts human freedom to create meaning in a meaningless world. White’s emphasis on the conscious, willful subject indeed points to a humanist orientation. However, he also critiques humanism for its overemphasis on rationality and its subsequent denial of the irrational elements of human

⁵ I use epistemological as a pairing with the verb “imagine” (rather than “understand”) because for White the question was not of understanding or acquiring knowledge the absolute reality of an external subject (epistemology), but about constituting that subject according to moral or aesthetic positioning.

⁶ I deal with Althusser’s conceptualization of ideology and the subject, expounded in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in Section II. Hayden White largely follows Althusser’s thinking, with key differences.

⁷ Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 74; Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena To Any Future Metaphysics* (South Bend: Infomotions, Inc, 2000).

⁸ Robert Doran, “Choosing the Past: Hayden White and the Philosophy of History,” in *Philosophy of History After Hayden White* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

thought; its guise of objectivity, which deters questioning of humanist political, economic, and social institutions; and its logic of identity and noncontradiction, a form of binary thinking that justifies oppressive, exploitative practices by excluding certain individuals from the domain of humanity.

Those critiques borrow from structuralist and poststructuralist thought, reflecting what Paul identifies as a key problematic in White's oeuvre: the tension between the human will and structuralism, which emphasizes the determinative effects of institutions and language on individuals. While to some degree I agree with Paul that White is a "humanist voluntarist," the term "humanism," or other theoretical labels for that matter, do not capture White's nuanced applications and reiterations of the theory — nor do they account for the dialectic of language, in which what is reiterated is never the same as the original. Indeed, toward the end of his career White rejected the idea of a consistent concept of human identity or "self-sameness," though he continued to preserve the human will.

My approach to White and his writings is dialogical, inspired by White's own intellectual practices. White's preferred mode of expression was the creative essay, of which he wrote at least one hundred during his career. And though his landmark work *Metahistory* might be viewed as an integrated history of historiography in the nineteenth century, it also functions as a collection of critical essays about thinkers including Karl Marx and Leopold von Ranke.⁹ White wrote essays not to develop a comprehensive theory of history, but to figure and refigure his ideas through serious engagement with diverse thinkers and ideas. In accordance with his own treatment of "the historical text as a literary artifact," my analysis probes the style, as well as the

⁹ Herman Paul's collection of White's published writings is the most comprehensive to date, besides a few essays White wrote after its publication. White's papers have not been organized as of the writing of this thesis.

content, of his essays.¹⁰ Having read all of White's post-1960 oeuvre, I closely analyze a key selection of essays, which employ myriad rhetorical and theoretical techniques to unmask myths that academic disciplines and theoretical schools take as objective truths. White's consistent unmasking points to his vision of the free, conscious, and critical subject as the base unit of an ethical intellectual practice and a "visionary politics of interpretation."¹¹

While this thesis focus on White's trajectory after around 1960, Paul paints a compelling portrait of the early White, some biographical details of which I will take the opportunity to sketch here.¹² Before becoming a critical essayist in the sixties, White was trained as a medievalist. Born in Tennessee in 1928, White moved with his family, none of whom had more than a middle-school education, to Detroit, where he later earned his undergraduate degree in medieval history at Wayne State University. He completed his doctoral degree in the same topic at the University of Michigan on the GI Bill after briefly serving in the Navy. Medieval history fascinated the young White "primarily because the world of a Catholic civilization was so alien to [his] experience," but also partially because his favorite professor in college taught Medieval and Renaissance History.¹³ While White engaged with philosophy of history as a medieval and renaissance historian in the fifties and sixties, his radical intervention is considered to have begun with *Metahistory*, with which my study also begins.¹⁴

In this thesis, I explore White's engagement with structuralism, poststructuralism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis to critique Western culture and society. I argue that while White is eager to utilize their methodologies, he resists any comprehensive, "scientific" system for

¹⁰ Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact (1974)," in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

¹¹ Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation (1982)," in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1987).

¹² Herman Paul, *Hayden White* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

¹³ Keith Jenkins, "A Conversation with Hayden White," *Literature & History* 7, no. 1 (March 1, 1998): 68–82.

¹⁴ Paul, *Hayden White*.

theorizing society or humanity. Thus, the only constants in White's writings are freedom (to choose an ideology) and consciousness (of the ideologies we choose between). While perhaps, as Althusser argues, the idea of "consciousness" is inextricable from the "subject," both of which are notions born of the humanist ideology, the problem with humanism, for White, is not about whether it objectively describes individuals in the world — it is about what is useful (the will, consciousness) and what is harmful (the guise of objectivity, binary thinking). White refuses to toss the baby out with the bathwater — especially because he believes that members of Western society are irreversibly attached to the baby.

In this context, White's delicate treatment of what we "can" do meets what we "should" do. While White critiques the intertwined ideologies of liberal humanism and historical realism, as well as the societal institutions and systems they reproduce (and which produced them), he also recognizes that we are "in" those ideologies and societies. In this thesis I explore White's responses to this problematic, which, following Kant, assert a limited choice, or a freedom within determinism. White believes that in making conscious the ideological and material systems in which she lives, the historian — and human — can gradually change them. This continuity-in-change or change-in-continuity, as well as White's emphasis on the peculiarity, yet comparability, of the human identity in a given moment, suggests that his theory does not threaten to eradicate the historian's practice; but rather aims to salvage what is helpful and toss what is not — namely, antiquarianism, conformism, and, above all, ethical and political apathy and inertia.

White's insistence on the freedom of identity of the human subject, and thus the historian, justifies his own multilayered intellectual practices. It also provides a powerful basis for a visionary *individual* ethics of history-writing. However, the intricacy and diversity of his oeuvre,

the very fact that it lacks a comprehensive framework, threatens the political plausibility of his practices in a climate in which cultural elitism and material inequality—two related phenomena White himself condemns—continue to widen the chasm between the academy and practical life. Without an explicitly collective unit of analysis upon which to base what we should do, it is easy to adopt an individualist ethics by default, which packs no lasting political punch—particularly in a society that is increasingly dominated by commodity production and exchange and crippled by material inequality. In order to address those ills, it is necessary to transcend an individual ethics and theorize a collective politics. White’s ethically-charged writings certainly jolt the reader out of her “dogmatic slumber,” but a Marxist or other to-be-determined collective framework is a necessary complement in order to realize White’s demand for a “visionary politics.”

I. The Fetish of Absurdism

In Absurdist criticism, the dualism of Western thought and the elitism of Western social and cultural practice come home to roost.

Hayden White, 1976

By playing with extremes, we are forced to the mean; by torturing one concept with its antithesis, we are driven to close attention to our own perceptions; by manipulating the fictions of artificiality and naturalness, we gradually approximate a truth about a world that is as complex and changing as our possible ways of comprehending that world.

Hayden White, 1972

“The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory,” White’s contribution to a 1976 volume of the journal *Contemporary Literature* examining structuralism and its alternatives, reads like a polemic. The essay presents a genealogy of twentieth-century Western literary criticism, which culminates with the contemporary “Absurdist” criticism practiced by Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and others. White argues that the absurdist moment is the logical conclusion of Western literary criticism, thus situating it within Western culture. He ends the essay with literary flourish, condemning absurdist critics for fetishizing the text while denying the possibility of finding or creating any meaning in writing, leading to a deafening “babble” of voices asserting that there is no point in speaking at all.¹⁵

The essay has been widely regarded as a surprising break in White’s trajectory, since he spent the better part of the decade deploying structuralist linguistics in his critique of historical writing. The nexus of the conflict concerns the structuralist theory, later elaborated upon by poststructuralists, that humans are defined by the language and institutions they inherit, and that the free human subject is just a linguistic concept born of the humanist ideology with no referent

¹⁵ Hayden White, “The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory (1976),” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

in “reality.”¹⁶ Throughout the seventies White perched atop a precipice between the two conflicting notions, using structural linguistics while preserving the free subject as the basic unit of historical writing. It is tempting to construct a narrative of his trajectory in the seventies that eases that tension, which White’s interlocutors have done by characterizing “Absurdist Moment” as a vehement rejection of poststructuralism and vindication of the humanist subject. That is not to say that they accept the theoretical stance and argument they attribute to White in “Absurdist Moment”: in fact, many criticize the essay for being un-self-conscious, reactionary, and reductionist in its treatment of distinct, complex figures.¹⁷

While I agree that the essay is polemic and reductive, I argue that it is self-consciously so. Moreover, it does not constitute a complete rejection of poststructuralist techniques, which White would increasingly incorporate in his own writings after the seventies. Rather, the essay delivers a critique of Western elitism and dualism, which White connects to the poststructuralist “death of the subject” and subsequent denial of human responsibility. White thus indicts both poststructuralism and the humanist ideology from whose seeds it eventually sprouted, interweaving the poles of his theoretical problematic in the seventies. In this section, I argue that the referent of White’s critique is Western culture, rather than any single critical tradition; that

¹⁶ Structuralism and poststructuralism differ, and are obviously complex in themselves. My clumping in this essay mirrors White’s in “Absurdist Moment,” in which he argues that structuralism anticipated poststructuralism; indeed that all of the seeds of the poststructuralist abandonment of the subject and personal responsibility can be found in structuralism. I touch on this in my analysis later in the section.

¹⁷ Murray Krieger, “Introduction: A Scorecard for the Critics,” *Contemporary Literature* 17, no. 3 (1976): 297–326, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1207641>; Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Robert C. Carroll, “Review: Tropics of Discourse,” ed. Hayden White, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 8, no. 1/2 (1979): 162–64; Ethan Kleinberg, “Haunting History: Deconstruction and the Spirit of Revision,” *History and Theory* 46, no. 4 (2007): 113–43. LaCapra argues that in “Absurdist Moment” White treats complex figures like Derrida as mere “caricatures,” failing to closely read and analyze their texts. Along similar lines, Krieger also writes that White “has imposed several shaping structures to control that sequence [of modes of criticism], perhaps to overdetermine it. He sees the causal relationship between one critical moment and the next turn into a repetitive pattern of reaction, counterreaction, and then yet another reaction that is the first one returned in a more sophisticated form, thanks to the lesson of the second — and so on.” Krieger notes that, in fact, the styles of criticism overlapped with each other both temporally and conceptually, hence his description of White’s groupings as “overdetermine[d].”

his complex rhetorical strategy defies the categories of “humanism” and “poststructuralism”; and finally that in the context of his other writings during the decade, “Absurdist Moment” is just that — a moment — characteristic of White’s strategy of “rhetorical dialectic” in which differing extremes are presented in dialogical tension, pushing the reader toward a flexible middle.¹⁸

Δ The Ethical Subject with Limited Choice

Structuralist linguistics is essential to White’s challenge to historical realism, which assumes that historians can objectively discover and write “what really happened” in the past.¹⁹ In *Metahistory* White declares the historical text “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse,” and “generally poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature.”²⁰ He asserts that historical texts have a surface structure present in their plot and argument, as well as a deep structure formed when the historian “prefigures” the historical field. In other words, prefiguration is the process whereby the historian constitutes the agents, locations, and phenomena she will analyze, rendering them recognizable and coherent.

There are a set number of tropes that guide prefiguration in the Western historical imagination, or in Paul’s words, the “realm of thinking and dreaming” in which we make sense of phenomena.²¹ The tropes are styles of understanding phenomena, comprehensible to the Western imagination because they are inherited from its specific cultural heritage. In referring to history writing as tropological, White means that its organizational structural and classifications are based more on on conventions and turns of phrase than logical premises or sequences. Thus,

¹⁸ The term is borrowed from Alan Megill, who used it to describe White’s later works in his essay “Hayden White’s Rhetorical Dialectic” in *Refiguring Hayden White*. I will elaborate on the term later in the chapter.

¹⁹ The following section will explore the nature of this ideology, and of ideology in general.

²⁰ Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), ix.

²¹ Herman Paul, *Hayden White*, 81.

history is an *interpretation*, not a transparent *representation* of “what really happened.” There can, then, be conflicting “realisms,” all potentially convincing, and the choice between them is aesthetic. While disguised by a ruse of objectivity, prefiguration is unconscious. However, central to White’s theory is the premise that once the historian becomes conscious of the process in which she renders the historical field understandable, she, as a free subject, can *choose* how to represent “reality,” or prefigure the field based on her moral or ethical position..

Key, though, are the limits of that choice. The historian cannot simply make up facts and arbitrarily assign them significance. On one hand, she must still abide by the evidence-based practices of history, and on the other, she is constrained by the tropes and plots which already exist in the Western imagination. It is possible to choose between styles, but in order for a Western historical discourse to be compelling, it must be recognizable. Borrowing from Giambattista Vico, White asserts that the four tropes in the Western cultural endowment are metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony.²²

Discourse also has a surface structure, which includes the historian’s ideological positioning, her choice of which facts to include, and her interpretation of those facts. While the intricacies of what Hans Kellner calls the “quadruple tetrad” are not necessary for this section, a diagram is helpful to visualize the choice White posits.²³

Trope	Emplotment	Argument	Ideology
metaphor	Romantic	formalist	anarchist
metonymy	tragic	mechanistic	radical
synecdoche	comic	organicist	conservative
irony	satirical	contextualist	liberal

²² See *Metahistory* and *Tropics* for more in-depth discussion of the characteristics of each trope.

²³ Hans Kellner, “A Bedrock of Order: Hayden White’s Linguistic Humanism,” *History and Theory* 19, no. 4 (1980), 223.

Within the quadruple tetrad, there are certain tropes, emplotments, arguments, and ideologies that more naturally align, but the historian is free to switch between different categories.²⁴ Thus the quadruple tetrad enables a limited determinism that preserves the willful subject while acknowledging that language mediates her understanding.²⁵

Why is White so insistent on preserving the human subject who experiences this limited determinism? In *Metahistory*, White argues that because the past has no inherent meaning, the historian should reconstruct it according to his moral system to serve present needs. Even before *Metahistory*, in a 1966 essay entitled “The Burden of History,” White writes, “the contemporary historian has to establish the value of the study of the past, not as an end in itself, but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time.”²⁶ This is what leads Paul to suggest that White’s historical philosophy is existentialist, empowering historians to choose how they prefigure and emplot the historical field.²⁷ Paul is correct in surmising that White above all deems the aim of historical writing to be ethical, which necessitates a conscious subject with a will, able to choose how she creates meaning.

Δ Language and the Willful Subject

²⁴ White argues that the best writers, such as Karl Marx, employ multiple tropes, plots, ideologies, and arguments.

²⁵ This closely relates to ideology, with which White more explicitly engages in the eighties. Section II deals with freedom and ideology, and specifically White’s positioning with regard to Marxists like Althusser and Frederic Jameson and structuralists like Barthes.

²⁶ Hayden White, “The Burden of History (1966),” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 41.

²⁷ Paul, *Hayden White*. Paul refers to White’s existentialist approach multiple times. Note that White did not eschew archives and factual evidence, he just urged historians to be reflective about how they classified, emplotted, and narrated such evidence.

White asserts that “when it is a matter of speaking about human consciousness, we have no absolute theory to guide us; everything is under contention.” Thus, it “becomes a matter of choice as to which model we should use,” and “the moral implications of the human sciences will never be perceived until the faculty of the will is reinstated in theory.”²⁸ In this characteristic Whitean formulation, the ethical imperative precedes the epistemological or ontological claim. However, throughout his career White had to navigate the potentially deterministic effect of language and ideology upon the conscious subject.²⁹ If consciousness is governed by linguistic structures, the subject loses her freedom — threatening White’s system of limited determinism, in which the consciousness subject is free to choose between discursive options. In *Metahistory* and *Tropics* the distinction between consciousness and discourse is slippery. It begs the question: can White, by force of will, preserve the subject even as he accepts and employs critiques of humanism? This is why Paul emphasizes the tension between White’s “humanist voluntarist” orientation and his acceptance of notions that lead to “linguistic determinism.”³⁰

In a close reading of earlier texts by Michel Foucault, White accepts that man, culture, and language are linguistic constructs. Foucault argues in *The Order of Things* that modernity conflated language with representation, inflating linguistic constructions such as “man” and “culture,” which lack referents in the real world.³¹ The linguistic “order of things” privileges language, and thus humans, because humans are uniquely capable of “representing” the world in language. Foucault, White argues, aims to topple the human, elevated by its privileged status in language, from its pedestal, demonstrating that it is just another thing in the world. White finds

²⁸ Hayden White, “Introduction,” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 22-23.

²⁹ In the eighties White’s engagement with Althusser, who asserts that the humanist ideology produces the notion of subject and consciousness, forces him to elaborate his defense of this conception of consciousness and will. Section II deals with this.

³⁰ Paul, *Hayden White*.

³¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things; an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

Foucault's "main claim," that the human sciences are captive to language, "correct and illuminating."³² Such acceptance would seem to threaten the subject, though White might respond that even if the subject is a construct, that does not warrant its abandonment; but rather, a creative rethinking of it.³³ I argue as much in the following sections of the thesis.³⁴

Δ White's Genealogy of Literary Criticism

While I have discussed some of the ways in which White preserved the human will as he experimented with structuralism, scholars have identified "Absurdist Moment" as the most explicit "halt."³⁵ White begins his genealogy of literary criticism prior to World War II with what he calls "Normal Criticism," a critical school that aimed to find and communicate the meaning of literature, which was in some way reflective of its historical context. Then came "Reductivist" criticism, practiced by marxists, psychoanalysts, and sociologists of knowledge, who tended to "reduce" texts to the universal human drives or social conditions they might represent. Reductivist criticism distrusted the academy, viewing it as, if not "nefarious," at least "naive" for failing to confront fascism. Then, in response to the Reductivist attack on the academy, "Formalist" criticism reinflated the literature itself, returning the focus to its internal dimensions

³² Hayden White, "Foucault Decoded: Notes from the Underground (1973)," in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1978), 232, 251.

³³ White also asserts that Foucault aims to "transform prose into poetry" and "defamiliarize" the past, which suggests that he reads of Foucault's project of deconstructing the human as poetic, rather than literal. This might be how he can reconcile Foucault's deconstruction of the human with his own specifically human project. White's reading of Foucault is not the focal point of this chapter, but merely helps to set the stakes for White's reading of "Absurdist" in general. Through that reading, this chapter will expound upon White's intricate treatment of the deconstructed human in its literal and poetic capacities.

³⁴ In any case, the element Foucault and White share that most threatens the human subject is linguistic determinism. Foucault's account of the power language has over humans leads White his essay "Foucault Decoded: Notes from the Underground" to suggest that in fact Foucault's "hidden protagonist" is language itself. However, Paul notes that at multiple points White himself seems to protagonize language, locating it as the subject of the sentence, for example when he imbibes it with "its own forms of technological determinism, represented by the figures of speech without which discourse itself is impossible." In Paul's words, "White was among the first philosophers of history to acknowledge how, in the study of history, discourse is not merely an instrument in the hands of sovereign individuals, but a power in its own right, capable of shaping the historian's thoughts and texts."

³⁵ Herman Paul, *Hayden White*.

and conceptualizing it as an alternative to life rather than a representative of life's universal laws.³⁶

Then came the “Generalized” mode, emerging with existentialism during WWII and extending into phenomenology and structuralism. According to White, such criticism raised questions about *why* one should read, write, and criticize, bringing literature and criticism “under radical doubt.” It asserted that, since meaning could not be *found*, it must be *consigned*, and the entity with the power of such consignment was human consciousness. According to White, Generalized criticism asserted language as “consciousness’ privileged instrument for conferring meaning on a world the inherently lacks it.” However, such elevation of language inevitably led to the major problem at issue in this chapter: language is necessary for the humanistic creation of meaning, yet potentially lacking external referents. The notion of human does not even necessarily have a referent; it is just another linguistic construction. With this logic, we arrive at absurdism.

The deconstruction of language and the notion of humanity it describes is central to Absurdist criticism. According to White’s narrative in “Absurdist Moment,” language “disappoints us” because “it is analyzed and disclosed to be nothing but a system of signs.” Having lost faith in language’s capacity to represent meaning, absurdists — whom White represents simplistically under the umbrella of a looming Derrida — reject “the absurd imposition of meaning upon the meaningless that all of the other tropes (metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche) arise.” Instead, they follow “the absurd impulse to endow the meaningless with meaning,” from which “Derrida’s own antiphilosophizing takes shape.”³⁷

³⁶ Hayden White, “The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory (1976),” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 270-276.

³⁷ White, 276-302.

To White, the absurdists' "hypostatization" of meaninglessness stems from the desire to erase the distinction between "nature" and "culture" that arose with, and in, language. Absurdists aim, he argues,

to reveal the human origin of those ideas and practices which society takes as 'natural'... to show how 'unnatural' they are and... to point attention to a genuinely human social order in which the quest for 'spirituality' will have been laid definitively to rest because 'culture' will be regarded as continuous with, rather than disjoined from, nature.

Absurdists see those so-called "natural" ideas and practices, which include "art" and "literature," as "complicit in the violence which sustains a given form of society." Thus, the "order of things," the natural state, is meaningless, and humans, by way of language, violently imposed meaning to create culture as distinct from nature. While White, more akin to the generalized critics, asserts that we should continue to impose meaning, absurdists, via the hypostatization of meaninglessness, wish to dissolve the absurd distinction.³⁸

Paradoxically, White argues, the deconstruction of language leads to the fetishization of the text and the mystification of the critic. This is because absurdist critics make every phenomenon a text: cultural activities—from burials to economic systems—need language to conceptualize them, or endow them with meaning. Once language is "revealed" to be simply a complex of signs with no referent, we can no longer analyze the cultural activities as if they actually exist, only the language that purports to describe them.

Though in "Absurdist Moment" White does not explicitly define fetish, he defines it elsewhere as "any object or part of the body obsessively sieved upon (cathected) as an exclusive source of libidinal gratification."³⁹ If the text is all that can offer libidinal gratification, the act of criticism itself becomes fetishized and mystified. Central to this is the danger absurdist criticism locates in the text, and the literary text in particular, due to its complicity in upholding oppressive

³⁸ White, 269-271.

³⁹ Hayden White, "The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish (1976)," in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1978), 184.

societal or cultural norms. White argues that there is a “want of confidence in our ability to locate reality or the centers of power in post-industrial society,” which leads every activity to become “questionable, even reading.” Reading and writing continue to be practiced, so they must be justified; they continue to be violent, so they must be controlled. Thus, White argues, only the “privileged” critics claim the authority to write and read, activities which are mystified due to their incomprehensible, potentially dangerous, and uniquely gratifying and “oracular” natures.⁴⁰ As such, he culminates his blistering critique: “the dualism of Western thought and the elitism of Western social and cultural practice come home to roost. Now dualism is hypostatized as the condition of Being-in-general and meaninglessness is embraced as a goal.”⁴¹

How can we reconcile “Absurdist Moment” with White’s structuralist tendencies in the seventies? Did this vehement rejection mark the resolution of White’s theoretical wobbling? LaCapra suggests that White’s rejection of absurdism perhaps stems from “a turn toward secure ‘sanity’ and conventional irony in the face of the ‘other,’ who actually articulates things that are ‘inside’ White himself.”⁴² However, it is difficult to believe that White would “fail to recognize” how his own tendencies are implicated in his analysis — surely with regard his structuralist affiliation, but also concerning the meaninglessness and fetishization of the text that might grow from structuralism.⁴³ White’s other writings from the seventies demonstrate his awareness of the processes of othering, and shed light on his intentions in “Absurdist Moment.”

Δ Self and Other: The Wild Man and the Noble Savage

The projection of threatening elements within one’s own identity onto an “other” is a powerful psychocultural device. To substantiate that statement we need only turn to White’s own

⁴⁰ Hayden White, “The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory (1976),” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 264-5, 281.

⁴¹ White, 282.

⁴² LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, p. 78.

⁴³ LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, p. 78.

writings. In “Forms of Wildness: the Archaeology of an Idea” (1972), White argues that the notion of wildness — often represented in terms of monstrosity or irrationality — is a “culturally self-authenticating device,” which serves both to designate its state of being but also “to confirm the value” of its “dialectical antithesis ‘civilization.’”⁴⁴ In other words, the creation of notions like wildness, insanity, and monstrosity enable and stabilize notions like civilization, sanity, and humanity, which, as discussed earlier in this chapter, are constructions without referents in the “real world.” Put simply, in order to define ourselves, we need to define what we are *not*: the other.

In fact, White argues, the “other” is all the more important in times of “sociocultural stress” and transformation, when the definitions which preserve society are weak or threatened. In such times, “it is always possible to say something like “I may not know the precise content of my own felt humanity, but I am most certainly not like that,” and simply point to something in the landscape that is manifestly different from oneself.”⁴⁵ An example of such “sociocultural stress” would seem to be the crisis of authority in western societies and universities White points to as both a cause and a symptom of the idolization of meaningfulness in absurdist criticism. That might place White in the camp that tries to self-define — as humanist, as civilized — with “no compelling criterion of self-definition.” Lacking a criterion, perhaps White, as LaCapra suggests, rejects the threats to the “human” and to “civilization” presented by Derrida and the Absurdist critics.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Hayden White, “The Forms of Wildness: Archeology of an Idea (1972),” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1978), 144.

⁴⁵ White, 151.

⁴⁶ Even White’s “dramatic” language, his “tirade,” fits into his own description of the process of othering in “Forms of Wildness”: “it is certainly much more generally practiced in cultural polemic than any other form of definition... and is not unknown among scholars and intellectuals seeking to establish their claims to elite status against the vulgus mobile.” Furthermore, White suggests that the Wild Man eventually was “interiorized,” and thus potentially “is lurking within every man, is clamoring for release within us all, and will be denied only at the cost of life itself.” White, 152, 154.

But White's own theorization of the process of othering suggests that he is eminently aware of the presence of absurdism in his own thought. Even in "Absurdist Moment" White breaks narrative flow to note that "our discourse has become infected by the sickness of those whose condition we wished to account for," a quote with perhaps double implications, both about societal discourse in general and his discourse in the essay. In the same paragraph, he asserts that the absurdists' "work is too precious to warrant the effort it takes to see through them to the cultural problems which their popularity reveals. But they are not incomprehensible; nor is their work insignificant."⁴⁷ Thus, while he spends much of the essay criticizing the Absurdist's amorality and demystifying them via historical contextualization, he simultaneously recognizes their power. Such complexity suggests there is more at work (or play) than a simple rejection or "return to sanity."

Moreover, White's genealogy of wildness resembles the framework through which he interprets the absurdist critics, who he situates within a legacy of primitivism that manifests in myths and fetishes such as the Wild Man and the Noble Savage. The Wild Man myth as it manifested in the medieval imagination is a conglomeration of elements of Classical, Hebrew, and Christian consciousness. It connotes animalism, unreason, monstrosity, lust, violence, and barbarity. For each of the heritages, according to White, manifestations of the Wild Man served as "imagistic representations of those libidinal impulses which... could not be expressed or released directly." Particularly the Hebrew and Christian consciousnesses construed the Wild Man as soulless or degenerate, thus a source of expression for their repressed, sinful desires and subsequent anxieties. However, in the classical consciousness, desire was less taboo; wildness, represented by such creatures as centaurs, was "a projective image of their fantasy life." In the late Middle Ages, White argues, wildness adopted peaceful, idyllic elements as peasants and

⁴⁷ Hayden White, "The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory (1976)," 281-282.

intellectuals resisted severe, outdated societal structures and turned toward their classical, rather than Judeo-Christian, heritage. The Wild Man became a source of desire, for he was seen as able to unreservedly act on his impulses—an impossibility for people in restrictive medieval society. That duality accompanied the Wild Man myth into the early modern period, where it became fictionalized, interiorized, and used as a political device.⁴⁸

While in ancient and medieval times the Wild Man was a myth, imagined as an external threat that might come in the night, modern thinkers realized the myth's constructed nature. According to White, "when myths are revealed for the fictions they are" they become interiorized. They stop being understood as representative of an external reality and start being understood as "manifestations of cultural neurosis," which are "relegated to the status of mere prejudices." The consequences of this process may be both "beneficial" and "destructive," for the uncovering of the fiction of the myth does "not necessarily touch the levels of psychic anxiety where such images have their origins." With the psychic and cultural anxiety that had produced it still present, the idea of the Wild Man, for example, was de-spatialized and interiorized such that the wildness was situated as potentially present *within* every human — collapsing the external distinction that had once helped to define humanity into an internal duality. Thus, in the modern period, wildness becomes a constant threat from within, and the "human" ever more fragile.⁴⁹

The convergence of wildness' internalization and idealization in the early modern period paved the way for the Noble Savage, which represents the fetishization of the Wild Man in the Enlightenment. The Noble Savage becomes a fetish through the ascription of "superhuman (that is, noble), powers" to the Wild Man. Europeans, White argues, tended to fetishize native peoples

⁴⁸ Hayden White, "The Forms of Wildness: Archeology of an Idea (1972)," 169-176.

⁴⁹ White, 153.

by “viewing them simultaneously as monstrous forms of humanity and as quintessential objects of desire.” White notes that the Noble Savage theme was most vigorously used in late eighteenth century Enlightenment thought, *after* the Wild Man was used to justify subjugating native peoples in the New World. Given that the native people were already subjugated, White questions what cultural or political need the idea of the Noble Savage served.

White suggests that bourgeois thinkers such as Rousseau and Diderot “use the Noble Savage idea to attack the European social system of privilege, inherited power, and political oppression.” In other words, the referent of the Noble Savage, an inherently paradoxical term, is not savagery, but nobility, and thus “humanity in general.” The paradoxical nature of the Noble Savage exposed the “fetishiz[ation of] the European type of humanity as the sole possible form that humanity in general could take.” However, the fetishization of the Noble Savage was double: it represented the bourgeoisie’s rejection of the nobility’s claims to privilege, but also desires for similar privilege. Thus, the Noble Savage, like the Wild Man, reflected a “mixture of love and hate, envy and resentment.” Some form of the Noble Savage continued to appear, White argues, throughout modernity, “always as a criticism of whatever security and peace of mind one group of men in society had purchased at the cost of the suffering of another.”⁵⁰

Δ The eternal moment of fetishization

Such an attack on “humanity” via the fetishization of wildness mirrors White’s account of Absurdist criticism. Just as the myth of the Wild Man was recognized as a fiction in the early modern period, so the myth of realism, the linguistic representation of reality, was deconstructed in the sixties and seventies. As the psychic anxieties the Wild Man addressed were still present, resulting in his interiorization, a roughly analogous process of interiorization occurred in

⁵⁰ Hayden White, “The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish (1976),” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1978), 185-195.

absurdist criticism. For though the absurdists had rejected “meaning,” and particularly its consignment through language, there was still a psychocultural need for it. The consignment of meaning through language — reading and writing, criticism — continued, despite the deconstruction of meaning as a myth. And perhaps given the psychocultural need for meaning, absurdists filled the void with meaning’s supposed opposite: “meaninglessness.” Accordingly, the absurdist critics aimed to deflate the human’s privileged position in the “order of things;” however, paradoxically, they mystified the critic, who had the sole power to theorize meaninglessness. In other words, the text’s simultaneous position as a threat and the sole source of libidinal gratification led to its fetishization, much like the Wild Man.

Furthermore, as Rousseau and Diderot used the fetish of the Noble Savage to attack the European social system, Absurdist used the fetishization of the text — and the entailed denial of the notion of “humanity” — to attack “modern consumptive societies,”

reversing the hitherto unquestioned assumption that ‘civilization’ is worth the price paid in human suffering, anxiety, and pain by the ‘uncivilized’ of the world (primitive peoples, traditional cultures, women, children, the outcasts or pariahs of world history) and asserting the rights of the ‘uncivilized’ against the ‘civilizers’... Whence the celebration by these critics of such anti-social phenomena as barbarism, criminality, insanity, childishness, anything that is violent and irrational in general.⁵¹

This reflects the “primitivism” White ascribes to both Enlightenment thinkers and Absurdist critics. In fact, White describes primitivist thought as an “eternal moment” in Western civilization. Primitivism, which is a radical, anti-societal doctrine, sets “the savage, both past and present, over against civilized man as the model and ideal.” It assumes that humans are “made evil in certain times and places by the imposition of social restraints upon them.” However, Enlightenment-era primitivism still assumed the reality of primitivism and nobility within each human — in other words, they still assumed, to some extent, the existence of the human with

⁵¹ White, “Absurdist Moment,” 269.

both primitive and noble aspects, despite having interiorized these aspects from oppositional entities in the “real world” to *within* the human himself.⁵²

With the absurdists, we find another version of interiorization. Past forms of interiorized primitivism recognized the primitive and civilized elements within each “human,” and set the primitive above civilized. Absurdists, on the other hand, recognize and expose the fiction that there even exists a “human” with both civilized and primitive elements. Their version of primitivism, rather than fetishizing any *positive* characteristic of humans prior to civilization, fetishizes “meaningless,” or perhaps more accurately that which is “pre-meaning.” Hence the absurdist aim to dissolve the artificial distinction between nature and culture, between primitive and civilized. And so the epigraph of this section traces the absurdists’ lineage in Western culture: “In Absurdist criticism, the dualism of Western thought and the elitism of Western social and cultural practice come home to roost. Now dualism is hypostatized as the condition of Being-in-general and meaninglessness is embraced as a goal. And elitism is stood on its head.”⁵³

All of those elements are at play in absurdist primitivism: the dualism of Western thought, i.e., the harsh division between man and nature; the elitism of Western social and cultural practice, i.e., the division of society into nobles and non-nobles, as well as the divisions between cultures of humans and primitives. Instead of employing their fetishes as tools of intracultural critique, as Rousseau did with the Noble Savage, to critique and expose (while maintaining) such dualism, absurdist critics hypostatize the dualism itself in an attempt to dissolve the “order of things” which had elevated man over nature.

With this understanding of White’s ideas of primitivism and culture we can probe his strategy of literary polemic and narrative tragedy in “Absurdist Moment.” Murray Krieger writes

⁵² White, “Forms of Wildness,” 171.

⁵³ White, “Absurdist Moment,” 282.

in his summary of White's argument in "Absurdist Moment" that "fetish breeds fetish."⁵⁴ I argue that there is another level of fetishization at play here. In clumping together and simplifying complex figures such as Derrida and Foucault, White is, in his own words, "taking of a part of a thing for the whole," and inflating it as a threat and a desire. White thus fetishizes absurdist criticism itself, sometimes manifested as the figure of Derrida, sometimes as a "sickness" which has infected White's own discourse. Mirroring the language of Christian consciousness, early modern and Enlightenment figures, and absurdist critics, White points to absurdist criticism's "mutilated condition" and "blindness;" its threat as an "attack" on language and culture. White seems, then, to follow thinkers like Rousseau in employing a fetish — absurdist criticism— to subtly critique his more significant referent: not poststructuralists, but the Western culture that produced them.

As discussed, LaCapra characterizes White's rejection of Absurdist criticism as "a turn toward secure 'sanity' and conventional irony in the face of the 'other,' who actually articulates things that are 'inside' White himself."⁵⁵ White does "turn" in the essay; however, a closer examination of the themes at play suggests that, rather than an unconscious repression, the "turn" represents a self-conscious exteriorization, an intentional redeployment against the Absurdist interiorization. Further, rather than simply a turn toward "conventional irony," White seems to play with tropes here, perhaps with the intention of turning the absurdists' irony against itself. As Krieger notes, White sometimes seems to join reductivist critics in his simplification of the genealogy of absurdism. Indeed, in the language of White's tropology, White's arguments are at times metonymical (causation-oriented) and synecdochic (universalizing) as well as ironic (lacking belief that we can understand and represent reality).

⁵⁴ Krieger, "Introduction: A Scorecard for the Critics," 315.

⁵⁵ LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 78.

In *Metahistory*, White suggests that the way to transcend irony is to turn it upon itself:

It may not go unnoticed that this book is itself cast in an Ironic mode. But the Irony which informs it is a conscious one, and it therefore represents a turning of the Ironic consciousness against Irony itself. If it succeeds in establishing that the skepticism and pessimism of so much of contemporary historical thinking have their origins in an Ironic frame of mind, and that this frame of mind in turn is merely one of a number of possible postures that one may assume before the historical record, it will have provided some of the grounds for a rejection of Irony itself.⁵⁶

In other words, a way to transcend irony is to self-consciously *choose* a trope, as well as a mode of emplotment, an argument, and an ideology. The best historians, according to White, oscillate between them in their attempts to dialectically arrive at an image of the past that serves the needs of the present.

Thus, I argue that we should understand White's polemic attack on Absurdist criticism as a part of this dialectic. Hence the second epigraph of this chapter:

By playing with extremes, we are forced to the mean; by torturing one concept with its antithesis, we are driven to close attention to our own perceptions; by manipulating the fictions of artificiality and naturalness, we gradually approximate a truth about a world that is as complex and changing as our possible ways of comprehending that world.

White writes this in the context of the unmasking of the the Wild Man myth. He argues that thinkers such as Rousseau and Montaigne deployed the Wild Man as a dialectical tool, not a literal possibility. The Wild Man represented one side of a constructed dichotomy between the 'natural' and the 'artificial;' but it was an ironic, figurative tool, not to be taken literally. This is a "beneficial" power of fictionalization, when the fiction is *not* taken literally, but as an element of "the dialectic of thought itself," which leads us "toward the center of our own complex existence as members of civilized communities."⁵⁷

This dialectic is characteristic of White's writings, and indeed noted in one way or another by many scholars of White's work. Paul writes that White's writings are often in tension

⁵⁶ White, *Metahistory*, xii.

⁵⁷ White, "Forms of Wildness," 177.

with one another, represented by his affinity for the essay, “the 25-page outburst of creativity.”⁵⁸ Allan Megill points to White as a “dialectical rhetorician,” someone who understands the impossibility of objective truth and total coherence, but who also believes in progress via approximation. Thus, White “puts to use terms in whose ultimate validity he does not believe. This allows him to continue speaking.” This is an alternative to the paralysis or hypostatization of meaninglessness accompanying poststructuralism.⁵⁹

Such dialectic speaks to the meaning of White’s use of “moment,” which I believe is representative of his figurative style. By describing Absurdist criticism as momentary, White locates it history, thus demystifying it. However, on the last page of the essay, he writes that “the Absurdist critics represent a moment in the critical enterprise that was potentially present all along.”⁶⁰ That dualism is also at play when White uses the term “eternal moment” to describe primitivism. Like “Noble Savage,” “eternal moment” is an oxymoron, suggesting the coexistence of ephemerality and eternity. If we understand the oxymoron in its figurative capacity, we perhaps find that it dialectically balances us between “dogmatic slumber” and feverish polemic in response to the crisis of authority represented by postmodernism. White wrote in a moment when meaning, humanity, and scholarly work were at stake. Though his writing can be read as representative of the polemics of that moment, it can also be read as a poetic play on them, a way of recognizing the stakes and simultaneously nudging the reader toward the purposes behind those stakes — which for White, remained ethical and human — rather than deeper into crisis.

In the following decades, White would continue to engage with poststructuralism. In fact, in the eighties and nineties White employed structuralism and poststructuralism in his sustained

⁵⁸ Paul, *Hayden White*, 16.

⁵⁹ Allan Megill, “The Rhetorical Dialectic of Hayden White,” in *Refiguring Hayden White* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 191.

⁶⁰ White, “Absurdist Moment,” 282.

critique of historical realism its favored representational practice, narrative. That retrospect shines a light, so to speak, on the contents of this section, which focuses on White's use of historical narrative to critique certain elements of poststructuralist thought. Writing in 1992 about narrativity in historiographical writing, White reflects: "It was tempting, therefore, to think of this congeries of discourses, all concerned in one way or another with 'historiography as narration,' as moments of a sequence that could be conceived or at least represented as phases in a single story, a single history." He concludes, however, that "a 'narrative account' of the many discussions of 'historiography as narration' launched during his period would have been open to charges of distortion, reductionism, and inattention..."⁶¹

Perhaps White learned from the critics' responses to "Absurdist Moment," gained self-consciousness, and/or grew to appreciate poststructuralist criticism as it gained prominence in the eighties. At the same time, I have argued that the self-conscious elements of White's writing in the seventies suggests his critique of poststructuralist criticism was more intentional than his critics gave him credit for. In my opinion, "Absurdist Moment" demonstrates how, employed conscientiously, narrative can function as a figural device to situate certain elements of poststructuralist criticism within their cultural context, thus critiquing the dualism and elitism of that culture. Whether this was White's intention at the time, or whether his later critique of narrative would in some sense fulfill his figurative repurposing of it in "Absurdist Moment," remains to be seen.

⁶¹ Hayden White, "Historiography as Narration," in *Telling Facts: History and Narration in Psychoanalysis*, ed. Joseph H. Smith and Humphrey Morris, *Psychiatry and the Humanities*, v. 13 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 285.

Section II: The Ideology of Narrative

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

—Walter Benjamin, 1940⁶²

One can never move with any politically effective confidence from an apprehension of ‘the way things actually are or have been’ to the kind of moral insistence that they ‘should be otherwise’ without passing through a feeling of repugnance for and negative judgment of the condition that is to be superseded.

— White, 1982

In the last twenty years of the millenium, White interrogated the way in which the history discipline emerged from and reproduced the anxieties, desires, and needs of both subject and state. One theme to which he repeatedly returned was narrativity, or the representation of historical events in story-form. Following Barthes, White tied narrativity to the nineteenth-century creation of the historical discipline and its dominant ideology, historical realism. Employing techniques from psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, White scrutinized the historical realist assumption that narrative is an innocent form of representation with no content in itself; hence the title of his collection of essays from the eighties: *The Content of the Form* (1987). Furthermore, by refiguring psychoanalytic concepts such as the “reaction-formation,” White delivered a subtle critique to psychic determinism, the underlying assumption of clinical psychoanalysis. This all points to White’s rejection of any comprehensive or deterministic historical, psychological, or linguistic system.

Δ Narrative, Historical Realism, and the History Discipline

White traces the reign of narrative to the nineteenth century, when history changed from an intellectual pursuit requiring no formalized training to a regulated academic discipline.⁶³

⁶² Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1940).

Professional historians adopted the ideology of historical realism, which aims to convey past events as they “really happened,” and the representational form of narrative.⁶⁴ According to White, narrative is “especially well-suited to the production of notions of continuity, wholeness, closure, and individuality that every ‘civilized’ society wishes to see itself as incarnating, against the chaos of a merely ‘natural’ way of life.”⁶⁵

The notion of a “civilized” society was often used to justify the practices of European nation-states. In fact, White asserts that those who disciplined history, or moved it to the universities and established realism and narrativity as its ethos and praxis, did so “to provide legitimization for those nations whose origins were as obscure as their ethnic composition was uncertain.” Furthermore, the historical discipline also served “to allay... the fears aroused by the uncertainty of origins and the anxieties inspired by the specter of hybridity or mongrelization.”⁶⁶

We can situate the anxieties about hybridity and mongrelization within a dualism that White deems endemic to Western culture. One manifestation of that dualism is the inside/outside binary: in order to affirm a group’s own identity, which cannot be positively defined, the group identifies itself in terms of what it is not, thus othering those who it deems not to belong.⁶⁷ Therefore, in the face of increasing anxiety about the mixing of peoples — including peoples whom had once served as the “other” against which the dominant group in a newly-formed “nation” defined its identity — professional historians were to serve those nations as genealogists served families. In establishing the nation’s legitimacy, the history discipline would

⁶³ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 2. White was not the first to delineate this genealogy of the historical discipline and narrative.

⁶⁴ Of course, they did not consider it an “ideology,” just as most humanists would not consider humanism to be an ideology.

⁶⁵ Hayden White, “Droysen’s Historik: Historical Writing as a Bourgeois Science (1980),” in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 87.

⁶⁶ Hayden White, “Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties (1999),” in *The Fiction of Narrative* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 316.

⁶⁷ Hayden White, “The Forms of Wildness”.

function to confirm “the claim of the dominant ethnic group within the nation to the land it ruled.”⁶⁸ In purporting to relay the past as it really happened, historical realism ordains the systems of the past as “real” and connects them to the present, legitimating its systems and benefactors: nation-states and their dominant groups.

White differentiates the anxieties of the historian from those of the nation-state: while the latter was consumed with legitimating its own existence, the historian grappled with moral and cognitive anxiety about history-writing itself.⁶⁹ According to White, historians were preoccupied with questions of causation, the difference between historical and natural events, and how to objectively survey those events.⁷⁰ Drawing from Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, White asserts that historians harbored a “deep fear that ‘reality,’ and especially social reality, had slipped from the grasp of the instruments of knowledge designed to discover and control it.”⁷¹ Nineteenth century historians’ “passion for the real” was “symptomatic” of that fear, evidenced by their vehement rejection of literary techniques in historical writing.⁷² They harbored a “desire to objectify historical studies” in order to preserve a comforting, fixed realism: to portray the past as it really happened through “innocent” language, the form of which was narrative.⁷³

⁶⁸ White, “Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties,” 316.

⁶⁹ White does not explicitly say *who* disciplined history; presumably there were various agents and elements at play. Regardless of whether there were agents who intentionally created the discipline, his assertion is that it was created to meet the needs or ease the anxieties of the nation-state.

⁷⁰ Hayden White, “Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties,” 317.

⁷¹ Hayden White, “The Discourse of History” (1979) in *The Fiction of Narrative* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); cf. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things; an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

⁷² White, “The Discourse of History”; Foucault, *The Order of Things; an Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. This produced the binary between history and a new category called “literature,” conceived as a “special,” even mystified, kind of writing, which “problematizes its own status as a representation of reality and brings the relationship between language and its referent under question.” Literature “points to the mysterious or uncanny nature of language, its capacity to conceal and distort in the very act of representing and delineating a world given to perception or thought.”

⁷³ White, “The Discourse of History,” 190.

The historical realist employs the narrative form by telling a story about reality as though that story were the configuring principal of reality itself.⁷⁴ Following Barthes, White suggests that narrative, by purporting to objectively relay reality, actually reaffirms a constructed reality supporting the the nation-state and its legal apparatus.⁷⁵ It does so by cultivating various myths: the “transcendental observer,” or the narrator whose objectivity is presumed by lack of all reference to him;⁷⁶ the “sovereign subject,” who confirms the constructed and exclusionary categories and definitions of a stable human subject that reign in civilized society; and the “episodic event” and “post ergo propter hoc” reasoning, which affirms the change-in-continuity paradigm, connecting past to present (negating the possibility of radical change) while maintaining a distance between them (preventing an active response from the reader to the narrativized past). In short, narrativity endorses the “real” constructed by the system to which its writers and readers are subject, thus simultaneously cementing the system’s authority and continuity.⁷⁷

Relatedly, White argues that narrative eases the anxieties of the reader who is subject to a given “politicossocial order.” Quoting Hegel, White suggests that, as opposed to a religious order, the politicossocial order draws authority from “rational laws and customs” to regulate an “imperfect Present,” which “cannot be understood without a knowledge of the past.”⁷⁸ Thus,

⁷⁴ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 2.

⁷⁵ Here, the distinction between narrativization/narrativity/narrative discourse and narrate/narration is crucial. While narration describes or explains specific anecdotes or parts of a text, narrativization treats the entirety of the text as a coherent story that generates a meaning exceeding the sum of its parts.

⁷⁶ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity.”

⁷⁷ Both Barthes and White acknowledge that narrative comes naturally to humans in that it requires no specific training; it is simply a way of making sense of the world that seems to come naturally (though not necessarily more “naturally” than other forms of discourse). The ease with which we narrativize, though, does not take away from arguments about the function of narrative; in fact, it is probably wound up in the function of and impulse to narrativize.

⁷⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2000) 60-63 as quoted in Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” 12.

within the centrally-ordered politicosocial system, the historical agent lives “the conflict between desire and the law”—a conflict that lends itself to narrative representation. This leads White to link narrativity with questions of law, legality, and, more generally, “authority,” which he argues are present in modern narratives but not in medieval annals ordained by God and nature.⁷⁹

Narrative, by imposing a story that questions, but ultimately affirms, the authority of the state, “makes the real into an object of desire.” In narrative, the reality represented “speaks to us, summons us from afar... and displays to us a formal coherency to which we ourselves aspire.”⁸⁰

In focusing on the reader-subject, White follows structuralist and poststructuralist critics who condemn narrative for theatricalizing the past. Citing Barthes, White suggests that “in contemplating the historical past, the reading subject is treated to a spectacle that allows him to exercise his fantasies of freedom under the aspect of a fixed order, or conflict under the aspect of revolution, of violence under the aspect of an achieved peace, and so on.”⁸¹ In other words, the reader, as he would in response to a play, identifies with the agents in the narrative while maintaining a safe distance from them and their particular travails. Furthermore, the presentation of a coherent past reality continuous with the present affirms the coherence of the reader’s own reality, easing her anxiety about fragmentation and instability. Barthes’ criticism, then, is that narrative produces complacent “subjects” who view themselves as distinct from the historical agents they read about, unable to exercise their own agency.⁸² Meanwhile, the “reality” being

⁷⁹ God and nature provide an authority which is not moral, because there is no choice involved. It is impossible to ask ethical/moral questions such as “how should the government function?” or “What gives the government authority?” because if one believes that the system is governed by God or nature, one cannot argue against them: the law of necessity, not morality, reigns.

⁸⁰ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity,” 12-21.

⁸¹ Hayden White, “Droysen’s Historik,” 89.

⁸² White, “Storytelling: Historical and Ideological,” 276; Roland Barthes, “The Discourse of History,” in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

narrativized “wears the mask of meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience.”⁸³

White’s deployment of the “mask of meaning” metaphor points to his central grievance against historical realism: its deceitful claim to objectivity. White views historical realism as the ideology that pretends to be a science under the guise of objectivity. This guise deprives the reader and historian of their ability to consciously choose how to construct meaning. In the following pages, I argue that White does not oppose ideology in general; rather, he takes issue with the blind ideology of which naive historical realism is paradigmatic.

Δ The Ideology of Narrative

In 1980, White calls ideology a “practice of representation” in writing and life. Following Louis Althusser, White proclaims the function of ideology to be “to create a specific kind of reading or viewing subject capable of inserting himself into the social system that is his historically given potential field of potential activity.”⁸⁴ In other words, ideology dictates the way the subject imagines her relationship to “reality,” and thus the modes of explanation and representation she will accept, in a cyclical process of confirmation. Ideologies enable a society to function by “promot[ing] the identification of its subjects with the moral and legal system that ‘authorizes’ the society’s practices.”⁸⁵ That system creates and dictates its subjects’ reality; it becomes “the sole criterion for assessing the ‘realism’ of any recommendation to act or think one way and not another.”⁸⁶

According to Althusser, ideology and the notion of a conscious, willful subject are inextricable. Ideology is the mechanism by and for which society “hails” or “interpellates”

⁸³ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity,” 12-21.

⁸⁴ White, “Droysen’s Historik,” 86.

⁸⁵ White, 86-87.

⁸⁶ White, 88.

individuals as subjects in a process that begins even before an individual is born with the anticipation of the birth by the family. The paradigmatic instance of interpellation is when an individual is hailed on the street, and then turns around, submitting to the subjection. As such, Althusser points to the paradoxical nature of subject as both a free, conscious agent and “a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission.” Individuals take the first definition (that they are free and conscious) to be an objective truth, concealing the second definition (that they are subjected).⁸⁷

This dual subjectivity and subjection are crucial to White’s notion of ideology. Unlike Althusser, White maintains the subject as the basis or cause of history and ideology. Rather than adopting a “subjectless discourse,” as Althusser does, White attempts to redeem the subject by making conscious the processes of subjection. This depends partially on a key difference: Althusser asserts that ideology is transhistorical, an “eternal” structure with no history, whereas White agrees that humans are always “in” ideology but asserts that they relate in different ways to different ideologies. This empowers the subject to consciously choose an ideology, which harks back to White’s limited determinism. Thus, in both ideology and language, conscious choice redeems the subject. This consciousness is key to White’s conception of the narrative ideology, whose positive potential he most seriously entertains in dialogue with the Marxist critic Frederic Jameson.

In *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Jameson posits the redemptive potential of the Marxist meta narrative.⁸⁸ According to White, Jameson privileges

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious / Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981). In what follows, I will treat White’s analysis of the book, which is quite complex and deserves further deep analysis in its own right.

narrative because it both addresses lived reality in all its chaos, imperfection, and injustice *and* imagines “how, in spite of these conditions, things might be otherwise.” In White’s understanding, for Jameson the “important point is whether our transportation into this imagined world returns us to our own ready to do political battle for its transformation or deepens our alienation by adding the sadness of ‘what might have been’ to its dispiriting effects.”⁸⁹

Furthermore, Jameson sees narrative as the “paradigm” that demonstrates how “a unity of meaning can be imposed upon the chaos of history.”⁹⁰ The form of narrative in a novel, then, serves as an analogy for how humans might construct their own narratives. White and Jameson share the Marxist position that, like any other commodity, art must be understood in relation to the modes of production of its societal context. According to White, Jameson asserts the transcendent quality of masterworks of art because they inform a “knowledge” about “the conditions of their own production.” Further, they endure in time because economic-political systems — and their corresponding cultures — build upon each other: each new iteration (i.e., capitalism) contains elements of the system it replaced (feudalism).⁹¹

In White’s understanding of Jameson, the “breakdown of narrativity” characteristic of modernist literature, as representative of the condition of the “culture, group, or social class” that produces it, signifies “a state of crisis.” White claims that this stems from Jameson’s conception of narrative “as a *mode of consciousness* that renders possible a kind of action specifically historical in nature” [my emphasis]. This “historical” kind of action, as White understands it,

⁸⁹ Hayden White, “Getting Out of History: Jameson’s Redemption of Narrative (1982),” in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 154.

⁹⁰ White, 157.

⁹¹ White, 145-152. Accordingly, Jameson portrays modernism as produced by and reproductive of late capitalism; and as a fulfillment of its predecessor, Romanticism, and the modes of production of which Romanticism, in turn, was the cultural manifestation. This is an oversimplification of Jameson’s complex system of relating the literary work to its context, which draws from Louis Hjelmslev’s fourfold model for interpreting the levels of form and content of a text. Also note that I am using “work” to describe literary artifacts as Jameson analyzes them, as he, unlike poststructuralists, still identifies them with the labor of the subject who creates them.

comes from a notion of “narratological causality” in which one apprehends “a past” and “make[s] the present a fulfillment” of its promise. By conceptualizing the present as a “fulfillment,” which implies human agency, rather than just a mechanistic “effect,” Jameson endows narrativization with the power to “sublimate necessity into a symbol of possible freedom.”⁹² In my understanding, the “Necessity” to which Jameson refers signifies “the real” means of production and social configuration humans are born into. Thus, with narrative as a cognitive mode, the necessity presented by the conditions of past and present can transform into a future freedom.

White acknowledges the possibility that there is a narrative mode of consciousness. In another essay White engages with the Marxist theorist Georg Lukacs, who, in White’s words, conceptualizes narrative not as a tool which simply *serves* ideology, but as a *producer* of it; a “*mode of consciousness*, a way of viewing the world.” Such a view of history, which resembles Jameson’s, sees history itself as “dramatic:” thus, the drama of narrative accurately represents its referent. According to White, the latent question here is: “Does life, reality, or history display the same kind of formal attributes as those met with in stories?”⁹³

According to David Carr, whom White cites in the same essay, reality can be realistically represented in the narrative mode insofar as humans experience it as narrativistic and structure their decisions and actions according to potential stories. In White’s words, “Carr argues that human agents prefigure their actions as narrative trajectories, such that the outcome of a given action is at least intended to be linked to its inauguration in the way that the ending of a story is linked to its beginning.” As such, historical narrative is uniquely suited to humans, “that one animal that not only *tells* stories but *lives* them as well.” This conclusion preserves the historian’s

⁹² White, 149.

⁹³ White, “Storytelling: Historical and Ideological,” 277-279.

task as conceptualized by historical realism: to discover and objectively relay the events of the past.⁹⁴ Quite notably, White writes that he is “inclined to credit Carr’s account of the cognitive authority of narrative representations of historical reality and even the view... that narrative is a distinct cognitive mode rather than *only* a form of discourse.”⁹⁵

Such a statement seems to oppose White’s critique of narrative as an ideological instrument of the state — in this case, the capitalist state and its ruling bourgeois social group. However, here it is useful to consider narrativity as an ideology. Indeed, White describes narrative as “a mode of organizing one’s perception of the world, one’s experiences.”⁹⁶ If narrative is ideological, it most dangerous when we are blind to it, and thus unable to consciously embrace or reject it. This does not negate the poststructuralist theory that narrative engenders feelings of continuity and coherence, which legitimate the bourgeois system. In fact, it points to the mutually perpetuating relationship between individual and societal ideology, particularly given the subject’s desire for coherence and continuity.⁹⁷ However, any ideology, not just narrative, is dangerous when it is blindly subscribed to. As such, it is the uncritical view of narrative as an innocent representational form that that White condemns.

However, even Jameson seems to view narrative as innocent insofar as he asserts, in White’s words, “the narrativity of the historical process itself.” While Jameson accepts the notion that history and its structures are only accessible to us in the form of a text, White claims

⁹⁴ White; cf. David Carr, *Time, Narrativity, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

⁹⁵ White, 282. He notes that the view of narrative as a cognitive mode is shared by Carr, Lukacs, Louis Mink, Arthur Danto, Paul Ricoeur, and Frederic Jameson.

⁹⁶ Ewa Domanska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 15.

⁹⁷ White also details various kinds of stories that can be told about a given set of events, suggesting that the category of “narrative” is too general. Following his work in *Metahistory*, he suggests that there are different kinds of stories, such as tragedy, romance, epic, and farce, belonging to our cultural heritage, and the way in which “historical events are endowed with figurative meaning” by a given plot type, as well as what that meaning says about historical reality in general, influence the ideological nature of specific narratives. However, for the purposes of this essay it is enough to note that White does not completely rule out narrativity as a bourgeois ideology — that his view of narrativity is complex and sympathetic to present realities.

that Jameson identifies narrative as the most effective form for historical representation “by virtue of its adequacy to the representation of the structure... of that process.” Thus, Jameson views narrative as both the discursive mode best suited to historical representation and the cognitive mode most effective for what White calls his “visionary politics.”⁹⁸

While White accepts the possibility of narrative as a cognitive mode that enables humans to live *historically*, he differs from Jameson in his refusal to support fully any cognitive or discursive paradigm. According to White, the “ontologically significant status” Jameson bestows upon “narrativity itself” explains why “the fate of narrative in the modern novel is presented as an evidence of the decline of the culture that produced it.”⁹⁹ While White views narrativity as an ontological *possibility* or *choice*, Jameson takes it to be both a sign of culture’s vitality and the tool for the triumph of its liberatory (over repressive) capacity. That is not to say that Jameson believes narrativity — the Marxist master narrative in particular — is the only form that exists; rather, it is the only form suited to the redemption of Western culture.

Thus, I think we can understand White’s divergence from Jameson in two related ways. First, he resists Jameson’s claim that narrative is the cognitive and discursive mode for a visionary politics of society, and the subsequent assertion that the dissolution of narrative in modernist art represents a societal sickness. White does believe society is infected; however, he does not believe narrative is capable of curing it. Instead, White suggests that narrative is best suited to a politics that may no longer be possible.¹⁰⁰ White is making a familiar move here in historicizing the particular form of politics that were once openly connected to Romanticism in

⁹⁸ White, “Getting Out of History,” 165, 147-151.

⁹⁹ White, 157.

¹⁰⁰ The repressed politics “featured ‘representative parties, debate, a willingness to abide by the rules of the game, faith in the workings of a ‘hidden hand’ that would mysteriously conduce to the ‘greatest good for the greatest number’...” Ibid. As I understand him, though, Jameson’s goal is not a restoration of those classical nineteenth century politics.

art and which continue to accord with realism in history — both of which favor the narrative form of representation. Thus he suggests in the essay's final sentence that "the problem may be not how to get into history, but how to get out of it."¹⁰¹

This connects to White's second critique of Jameson's "redemption of narrative," which stems from his suspicion of language. According to White, in Jameson's "brilliant" conceptualization of the production of ideology, he "uncovers the operations of 'the political unconscious' which translates the original opposition between nature and culture into an ideology that permeates — and sustains — a specific social formation." At the "moral" level of cultural productivity, "things, practices, and relationships are marked with the signs of positive and negative, presence and absence... and so on" in a process which dictates the "conditions of possibility" (Jameson's phrase) for the members of a social formation to realize a "full humanity." In White's understanding, in that process "a society narrativizes itself," creating a cast of "characters or roles" possible to play, a "plot" for the development of relations between those characters, and "appropriate sanctions for those who deviate" from the prescribed roles and actions.

Thus, White asserts that while Jameson believes in the capacity of the Marxist metanarrative "to unite all of the individual stories," by definition the societal narrative as it exists and has existed "takes for granted the contradictions inherent in the relegation of a certain portion of its members to the obloquy of mere nature while reserving for itself the title of a full humanity."¹⁰² In other words, narrative tends to rest on exclusive definitional categories (character types, plots, specific kinds of "historical" events). White would argue that if we view ourselves as part of a narrative that includes past, present, and future — albeit a past different

¹⁰¹White, 167-8.

¹⁰²White, 147-158.

from the bourgeois “historical past” of the history discipline — we are subject to the very categories which dictate the direction of that narrative. While Jameson emphasizes our ability to choose a story, or a fulfillment of the past, White would point to the deep structures latent in any narrative that connects the present with the past. Still, he does assert that there are only a certain number of representational and even cognitive modes plausible to humans with a specific Western cultural endowment, of which narrative is one. The question will become whether narrativity is an adequate mode to support a visionary politics, or “the kind of politics that is based on a vision of a perfected society,” quite unlike those classical nineteenth-century politics that modernism has supposedly repressed.¹⁰³

Δ Visionary Politics and the Sublime

White’s visionary politics depends upon the image of a “sublime” past demanding interpretation according to the needs of the present.¹⁰⁴ He traces the notion of the sublime, which originally signified a feeling of awe in response to overwhelming natural phenomena, through a nineteenth century debate that resulted in its “progressive demotion” “in favor of the beautiful.” White follows Schiller, who describes the sublime as a feeling in response to the “uncertain anarchy of the moral world,” which includes “world history.” This sublime feeling in response to history, in White’s understanding of Schiller, “could produce a sense of a specifically human ‘freedom.’”¹⁰⁵ Because the anarchy of history evokes a sublime feeling in humans, history itself can be considered a sublime object.

¹⁰³ Hayden White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation (1982),” in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1987), 72.

¹⁰⁴ The religious/mystical connotations of the sublime are worth exploring, but they are not the focus of this essay. For more see Herman Paul, *Hayden White* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013); F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁵ Friedrich Schiller, *Naive and Sentimental Poetry, and On the Sublime; Two Essays* (New York: F. Ungar Pub. Co, 1967), 205, as quoted in White, 69.

White argues that conservative thinkers like Edmund Burke, in constraining it to the natural realm, intended to “exorcise the notion of the sublime from any apprehension of the historical process.” For Burke, this would ensure that the “beauty” of the “proper” historical process, exemplified by the creation of the “English Constitution,” could be appreciated.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, history and politics were designated to the realm of the beautiful: the well-ordered and charming rather than awe-inspiring. “For both the Left and the Right, the same aesthetics of the beautiful presides over the process in which historical studies are constituted as an autonomous scholarly discipline.” This aesthetics presumes that the historical past is an intelligible, coherent whole, permitting “the historian to see some beauty, if not good, in everything human and to assume an Olympian calm in the face of any current social situation, however terrifying it may appear to anyone who lacks historical perspective.”¹⁰⁷

In opposition, White opines that Schiller “had correctly divined that whatever dignity and freedom human beings could lay claim to could come only by way of what Freud called a ‘reaction-formation’ to an apperception of history’s meaninglessness.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, only a disgust with the past can motivate us to envision a better future. However, it is strange that White invokes Freud’s theory of “reaction-formation” to prescribe our relationship to history, given that it is clinically defined as an unconscious process whereby “the ego secures itself against” the return of infantile impulses through enacting the opposite of what those original impulses demand.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New Haven, Connecticut, 2003), as quoted in Hayden White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation (1982),” in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1987), 68.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ White, 72.

¹⁰⁹ Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (New York: International Universities Press, 1967). This definition of reaction-formation is obviously oversimplified. Since the purpose of this essay is to interrogate White’s use of psychoanalytic theories, rather than deliberate the theories themselves, I also use them in their oversimplified, figurative capacities rather than their clinical implications.

In my understanding, White intentionally asserts the possibility of a *conscious* reaction-formation — a play on the very notion, which supposes an *unconscious* process. In the conscious reaction-formation, the subject vehemently rejects the chaos of the past in order to effect its opposite, meaning, on the present: hence, “one can never move with any politically effective confidence from an apprehension of ‘the way things actually are or have been’ to the kind of moral insistence that they ‘should be otherwise’ without passing through a feeling of repugnance for and negative judgment of the condition that is to be superceded.”¹¹⁰ In this way, White refigures psychoanalytic concepts to assert that a supposedly unconscious process can be consciously utilized to help us construct our relationship to past, present, and future “reality.”

This process resembles the technique White attributes to Enlightenment thinkers whereby an unmasked myth is figuratively redeployed as a tool or intracultural critique. Following Northrop Frye, White suggests that myth — “a poetic account of origins” — is a source of constant speculation about “the extremes of human possibility.” Thus the Wild Man myth represents “what the medieval imagination conceives life would look like if men gave direct expression to libidinal impulses.” One function of myth, White argues, is to “provide imaginative justifications of our desires” while precluding “the possibility of any perfect gratification of them.” Once a myth is recognized as such rather than taken literally, it can function as “an instrument of intracultural criticism” that reflects upon “the conditions of our own civilized experience.”¹¹¹

This points to White’s tendency to reject any entropic cognitive or historical theory (psychoanalysis and historical realism, respectively) that claims to be a science. In psychoanalysis, the id/ego/superego model and its concomitant complexes and symptoms, if

¹¹⁰ White, 73.

¹¹¹ Hayden White, “The Forms of Wildness,” 175-177.

taken as the basis or origin of all human behaviour, certainly have the aspect of a myth.¹¹² White unmasks those theories as myths, employing the categories, complexes, and symptoms as tools for critiquing and refiguring the world and our relationship to it, rather than accepting them as literal features and processes of the psyche.¹¹³ With this view, White repurposes the process of psychoanalysis, which itself unmasked certain societal myths by “revealing” their basis in inner drives. This refiguring of psychoanalytic explanation relates back to White’s insistence that humans are free to choose modes of discourse and consciousness. Furthermore, it reconciles White’s emphasis on human freedom with his acknowledgement of narrativity as a cognitive mode by adding that it is not the *only* possible mode.

The difference between an unconscious and a conscious reaction-formation also sheds light on White’s treatment of the historical discipline. The rise of historical realism and narrativity in the nineteenth century came with the dissolution of various origins myths (religion, for one), the arbitrary formation of nation-states, and the concomitant fear that reality “had slipped from the grasp of the instruments of knowledge designed to discover and control it.” The *unconscious* reaction-formation to the sublimity of historical reality in the nineteenth century was the assumption of objectivity and the imposition of narrative — an imposition that was then repressed in culture such that narrative was taken as a feature of reality itself. As such, historical

¹¹² In 1978, White critiques Freud, along with Rene Girard and Levi-Strauss, for framing their “contentions” about the “nature” of human practices as sciences when they lack “any falsifiability.” “In this respect, they are exactly like any religious system, or any metaphysical one. This does not make them useless, but it is fatal to the claim of scientificity.” Hayden White, “Ethnological ‘Lie’ and Mythical ‘Truth’: Review of Violence and the Sacred by René Girard,” *Diacritics* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 7. Furthermore, in discussing Jameson’s revitalization of Marxism, White credits him with “see[ing] the importance of Deleuze’s twist on Lacan as residing in the radical critique that it offers to a domesticating psychoanalytical interpretative practice,” Hayden White, “Getting Out of History: Jameson’s Redemption of Narrative (1982),” in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 156.

¹¹³ Notably, this is not necessarily in contradiction, and may in a sense be considered as analogous to, the psychoanalytic method, which can be understood to make known, through analysis, myths about oneself which are accepted at surface level (as the manifestations of complexes) but whose creation is revealed to be the result of unconscious processes.

realism and narrative can be viewed as myths: they turn history into a comprehensible spectacle, which we can vicariously live through from secure positions in the present. They provide “imaginative justifications of our desires and at the same time hold up before us images of the cosmic forces that preclude the possibility of any perfect gratification of them.”¹¹⁴

That begs the question: if psychoanalytic interpretative practices, demythified, serve as a useful critical tool, can narrativity do the same? As I argued in the previous chapter, White does figuratively employ narrative as a tool of intracultural critique, framing “absurdist criticism” as one manifestation of Western dualism and elitism in a historical “moment.” Furthermore, it is possible to conceive Jameson’s “redemption of narrative” as an example of a conscious, figurative redeployment of a once-unconscious and uncritical meaning-making activity. This is not to say that Jameson and White are on the same page ontologically. However, insofar as Jameson surveys the representative possibilities of his cultural endowment and identifies the Marxist master narrative as the only one suitable to justify a visionary politics, his move resembles the conscious choice that White advocates.¹¹⁵

Thus, ambiguity characterizes White’s judgment of narrativity. In 1988 he asserts “the extent to which programs undertaken either to expunge narrativity from serious discourse or to elevate it to the status of an expression of Being, or Time, or Historicity are equally misguided.”¹¹⁶ Hence, we can understand his divergent essays — which polemicize against both narrativity and those poststructuralists who deconstruct it — not as representative of a cohesive

¹¹⁴ Hayden White, “The Discourse of History” (1979) in *The Fiction of Narrative* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); cf. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things; an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). This aligns with Barthes’ association of ideology with myth, and his account of the ideological nature of historical realism and narrative.

¹¹⁵ Though perhaps the fact that Jameson identifies the Marxist master narrative as the only viable option precludes the *choice*, even we are able to self-consciously accept the narrative.

¹¹⁶ Hayden V. White, “Literary Theory and Historical Writing (1988),” in *Figural Realism [Electronic Resource] : Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 22.

theoretical system, but as moments in which White determines the conversation to be blind to the realm of possibilities in the historical imagination. This further speaks to White's commitment to figurative writing, which allows for a play between various theories and representational modes. Perhaps this is why, thirty years later in the last line of his last published essay, White writes: "The truth is — and I speak only figuratively rather than literally — that all images of the past are 'dialectical,' filled with the aporias and paradoxes of representation. And that they can only be 'fulfilled' by narrativization: as stories."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Hayden White, "History as Fulfillment," in *Philosophy of History after Hayden White*, ed. Robert Doran (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 45.

Section III: Modernist Writing and Self-Constitution

Nazi crimes, it seems to me, explode the limits of the law; and that is precisely what constitutes their monstrousness.

— Hannah Arendt

Just as Hannah Arendt asserted that the Nazi crimes explode the categories of Western law, scholars in the eighties found that the trauma of the Holocaust threatened to explode the categories of representation available to Western historiography. Both paralyzingly difficult and gravely important, the task of representing the Holocaust led to a *Historikerstreit* (historians' debate) originating in Germany. In the debate, the critical distance Western historiography had attempted to maintain between past and present collapsed. At stake was not just whether and how the Holocaust *could* be represented, but how any representation would affect what Jürgen Habermas calls the “public consciousness.”¹¹⁸ The debate eventually spread to the United States, where Saul Friedlander invited White to a conference on Holocaust representation.

This would spur White to theorize a class of “modernist events,” of which the Holocaust was paradigmatic. White argues that modernist events, unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, cannot be represented or “worked through” in narrative form because they defy narrative categories. His prescribed “treatment” employs psychoanalysis and modernist and postmodernist literary techniques, though he continues to avoid full subscription to any system, leading, perhaps inevitably, to a lack of a concrete theory of history or the subject.

△ “Probing the Limits of Representation”

According to Friedlander, the Holocaust is “the most radical form of genocide encountered in history: the willful, systematic, industrially organized, largely successful attempt

¹¹⁸ Jürgen Habermas and Jeremy Leaman, “Concerning the Public Use of History,” *New German Critique*, no. 44 (1988): 40–50.

to totally exterminate an entire human group within twentieth-century Western Society.”¹¹⁹

White partially follows Friedlander, arguing that, in contrast to the order, coherence, and continuity that feature in the narrative form, the Holocaust provokes feelings of confusion and horror. With regard to its perpetrators, it shatters our basic ideas about humans as agents whom we can at least understand, if not fully empathize with. With regard to its victims, the experience seems so horrifying that no language seems adequate to facilitate understanding— and particularly not the narrative mode, whose transcendent narrator and coherent relay of events portrays a rational calmness that was presumably antithetical to the victims’ experiences. Thus, the “aesthetics of the beautiful,” which presides over Western historical practices and permits “the historian to see some beauty, if not good, in everything human,” seems a misguided approach.

One key problematic the Holocaust poses to Western historiography is this: insofar as historical realism and narrative have served as a crucial source of Western identity for over a century, what do events that resist narrativization say about Western culture? According to White, for historians “the principal question raised by the Holocaust was its identity as a specifically ‘historical’ event and the best way to inscribe it within, insert it into, assimilate it to the normative narrative account of Europe’s history.” However, simultaneously, historians felt that “the Holocaust was an ‘unusual,’ ‘novel,’ and possibly even a ‘unique’ event in Europe’s history.” The sense that the Holocaust did *not* classify as a historical event, the category which

¹¹⁹ Saul Friedländer, “Introduction,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1992). I rely on Friedlander’s framing because of the sensitivity of the topic, and because the conference he organize initiated White’s intervention. However, Christopher Browning and others have demonstrated the disorganization of some elements of Nazi governance, connecting the Holocaust less to long-term planning than to material conditions during WWII (such as food shortages) and chaos as Germany accumulated land — and peoples — in Eastern Europe. Scholars have also connected the Final Solution with the Nazi’s imperialist project which can be seen as a continuation of European imperialist ideology from the nineteenth century. This will be implicit in the essay, as it is connected to the treatment of the Holocaust in Western historiography, and in particular the way its classification as unique represents the exclusionary Western thought imminent in Western imperialist practices.

formed the substance of Europe's official history, "raised the possibility of having to revise this history radically in order to do justice to the insights into the *real* nature of European civilization which the event had seemingly provided."¹²⁰ For White, the project would be to force Western civilization to critically confront its repressed elements instead of blindly reasserting myths to quell cultural anxiety.¹²¹

Δ "The Modernist Event" and Modernist Writing

White situates the question of Holocaust representation within a larger debate about the the notion of the "historical event" itself. Historical events are the the units which construct the "historical past;" they "can be established as having happened at specific times and places and can be fitted into diachronically organized accounts of a group's self-constitution over time." Thus, like narrative, the historical events that compose it only arise from a particular historical consciousness, which Hegel attributes to a central politico-social system that produces the historical subject. Thus, to qualify as historical, an event or series of events "must also be validly describable as if they had the attributes of elements in a *plot* of a story."¹²²

According to White, the Holocaust is paradigmatic of the kind of modernist event that explodes traditional modes and categories such as narrative and the historical event. Modernist events are particular to twentieth-century processes of industrialization, globalization, and technologization. They include:

Two world wars, a growth in world population hitherto unimaginable, poverty and hunger on a scale never before experienced, pollution of the ecosphere by nuclear explosions and the indiscriminate disposal of contaminants, programs of genocide undertaken by societies utilizing scientific technology and rationalized procedures of governance and warfare...¹²³

¹²⁰ Hayden White, "Truth and Circumstance: What (If Anything) Can Properly Be Said about the Holocaust?," in *The Practical Past* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 25-26.

¹²¹ This is arguably what happened after WWI, at least in dominant political and historiographical thought, after Freud's intervention.

¹²² Hayden White, "The Historical Event," *Differences*, In the Event, 19, no. 2 (September 2008), 10-21.

¹²³ Hayden White, "The Modernist Event (1996)," in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, c2000), 69.

Narrative conventions such as a beginning and a conclusion, coherence and continuity, and human agents whose actions do not explode the scope of their intentions are difficult, if not impossible, to impose on these events. Further, the abundance of information about the events exceeds our ability to isolate them and the subjects who cause and are affected by them.

Therefore, even if we were to concede that certain events are more historical in nature and can be plausibly emplotted in a narrative, modernist events resist such emplotment. Moreover, White claims that modernist events “function in the consciousness of certain social groups exactly as infantile traumas are conceived to function in the psyche of neurotic individuals.” As such, they can be neither forgotten nor “adequately remembered,” and thus cast a “shadow... over the group’s capacities to go into its present and envision a future free of their debilitating effects.”¹²⁴

White argues that modernist and postmodernist techniques of representation, “which explode the traditional tale,” are more adequate modes of representation for modernist events, which explode the traditional event. According to White, “modernist techniques of representation provide the possibility of defetishizing both events and the fantasy accounts of them which deny the threat they pose in the very process of pretending to represent them realistically.” In other words, the “fantasy accounts” are fetishistic insofar as they seek to master the psychic trauma of the Holocaust through narrativizing it, fixating on an intellectual mastery by shaping it to fit familiar categories. The fantasy accounts themselves are also sensationalized and fixated upon in film and other cultural production.¹²⁵

Unlike narrative, modernist techniques of representation “clear the way for that process of mourning which alone can relieve the burden of history and make a more if not totally

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ White borrows Eric Santner’s concept of “narrative fetishism,” which occurs when historians fixate on a narrative account in an attempt to gain intellectual mastery of the Holocaust to relieve their psychic anxiety; see Santner, “History Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 144.

realistic perception of current problems possible.”¹²⁶ Notably, White connects the “process of mourning” with “realistic perception.” According to White, cultural modernism refers to a different kind of history or reality from those “envisaged by nineteenth-century realism,” which confines reality to the characteristics of historical narrative. “This is because the social order which is the subject of this history has undergone a radical transformation — a change which permitted the crystallization of the totalitarian form that Western society assumed in the twentieth century.”¹²⁷

Thus, modernism and totalitarianism were both “immanent” in the cultural and societal structures of the nineteenth century. This perspective, writes White, frames modernism as an anticipation of a new form of historical reality, which included the phenomena of Hitlerism, the Final Solution, total war, nuclear contamination, mass starvation, and ecological suicide.¹²⁸ This gets at White’s critique of Jameson, who condemns modernism and whose master narrative White believes is inadequate to the expression of twentieth-century reality. It also points to the connection White draws between mourning and adequately representing reality: mourning involves some sort of coming to terms with what happened, which can only be done by confronting the reality of that happening. Thus, modernist writing, as the stylistic manifestation of modernist events, provides us with the most adequate techniques for their representation.

What are those techniques? White quotes Erich Auerbach’s famous interpretation of a passage from Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, which includes many of modernism’s stylistic

¹²⁶ Hayden White, “The Modernist Event (1996),” in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, c2000). Santner and LaCapra also discuss modernist and postmodernist techniques of representation in their contributions to *Probing the Limits*, and are certainly White’s interlocutors in this discussion; however, since White was already discussing modernist techniques of representation in his contribution to *Probing the Limits*, when he had not yet read their essays, rehashing their arguments is not necessary to frame White’s analysis.

¹²⁷ White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” 50-52.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

characteristics. White recapitulates Auerbach's exegesis in a list with interspersed quotes, which I reproduce in full, given its precision.¹²⁹

1. The **disappearance of the 'writer as narrator of objective facts;** almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the *dramatis personae*;
2. The **dissolution of any 'viewpoint... outside the novel** from which the people and events within it are observed....';
3. The predominance of a **'tone of doubt and questioning'** in the narrators interpretation of those events seemingly described in an 'objective' manner;
4. The employment of such devices as *'erlebte Rede* [free indirect discourse, my clarification] stream of consciousness, *monologue intrieur* for 'aesthetic purposes' that **'obscure and obliterate the impression of an objective reality completely known to the author...'**;
5. The use of new techniques for the representation of the experience of time and temporality, e.g., use of the 'chance occasion' to release 'processes of consciousness' which remain unconnected to a 'specific subject of thought'; obliteration of the distinction between 'exterior' and 'interior' time; and **representation of 'events,' not as 'successive episodes of [a] story,' but as random occurrences.** [my emphases]

White applies this interpretative paradigm to multiple texts — including Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, Saul Friedlander's *The Years of Extermination*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.¹³⁰ Moreover, White argues that modernist writing reconstitutes the identity of its writer, which is essential for the work of mourning.

Δ Intransitive Writing, the Middle Voice, and Obsessional Neurosis

In his 1970 essay "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" Barthes asserts that modern writing is *intransitive*. An intransitive verb is one that does not have a direct object. If "to write" is a transitive verb, it has a direct object: I write *a text*; I write *a poem*. According to Barthes, earlier literary styles utilized "to write" as such. In those styles, "the agent is not interior but anterior to the process of writing: here the one who writes does not write for himself, but as if by proxy, for

¹²⁹ White, 50-51; Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis; the Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 491.

¹³⁰ Hayden White, "Truth and Circumstance: What (If Anything) Can Properly Be Said about the Holocaust?," in *The Practical Past* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014); Hayden White, "Historical Discourse and Literary Theory," in *The Practical Past* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014); Hayden White, "The Practical Past," in *The Practical Past* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

an exterior and antecedent person.” This describes the transcendent narrator White identifies in historical realism. On the other hand, as an intransitive verb, “to write” loses its direct object, which represents a “change in mentality” of the subject: *I write*.¹³¹

That is not to say the direct object — the text — is no longer important. Barthes situates the relationship between the subject and object in the context of voice. He argues that modernist writers write in the ancient Greek “middle voice,” which is simultaneously active and passive. The classic example of a middle voice verb is sacrifice: if a priest sacrifices a lamb for me, from his perspective, his position or voice is *active*, since he is acting on another, and the act does not impact him personally. On the other hand, if I sacrifice a lamb on my own behalf, I am acting on both the lamb and *myself*. And so it is with writing in the middle voice: “the subject is constituted as immediately contemporary with the writing, being effected and affected by it.”¹³² In White’s words, “The writer does not ‘write herself’ in such a way that her ‘written self’ could be separated from her ‘writing self.’ It is only in writing and by writing that the writer can be said to exist at all.”¹³³

White sees this doubleness as “liberative” in its capacity to transcend “the kinds of oppositions that we are forced to draw . . . in any version of realism.” Those oppositions include “agency and patiency, subjectivity and objectivity, literalness and figurativeness, fact and fiction, [and] history and myth.”¹³⁴ White cites Derrida, who argues that the “distributing” of the middle voice “into the active and passive voice” constituted philosophy’s first act, so to speak, and

¹³¹ Roland Barthes, “To Write: An Intransitive Verb? (1970),” in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 18-19.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Hayden White, “Writing in the Middle Voice,” in *The Fiction of Narrative* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

¹³⁴ White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” 49.

philosophy has thus “itself been constituted by this repression.”¹³⁵ In other words, the repression of the middle voice in Western philosophy led to the logic of contradiction and conceptual opposition, which is particularly limiting to the representation of experiences of the modern world. Thus, White sees Derrida as part of “a modernist conception of the project of philosophy, founded on the recognition of the differences between a distinctively modernist experience of the world... and the notions of representation, knowledge, and meaning prevailing in the inherited ‘realist’ cultural endowment.”¹³⁶

White views acts from the position of the middle voice as “informed by a heightened moral consciousness on the part of the subject performing them.” This is because writing in the middle voice dissolves the opposition between subject and object. For example, the historian, in using the middle voice, collapses the separation between past and present, and thus abandons her disinterested, “objective” distance. In this way, modernist writing “transforms the writing subject’s relationship to the world.”¹³⁷ We can see, then, how the middle voice is the perfect position from which to do the “work of mourning” necessary after traumatic events like the Holocaust. Indeed, White asserts the need to integrate some understanding of the traumatic event

¹³⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David Allison (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 130, as quoted in White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” 49.

¹³⁶ White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” 49-50. How can we reconcile this portrayal of Derrida as representing the “modernist” project with White’s earlier characterization of Derrida as the absurdist anti-philosopher who hypostatizes meaninglessness? The most obvious answer, which probably contains some truth, is that White evolved and changed his mind. However, I suggested in the first section of this thesis that there was more at play in White’s critique of Derrida than the complete rejection others characterized it as. White’s critique of so-called “absurdist criticism,” I argued, is directed more toward the dualism and elitism of Western culture, which manifest in some elements of poststructuralism, than toward poststructuralism itself. Thus, White critiques those elements of poststructuralism which he finds most nihilistic, fetishistic, and elitist as products of Western culture, at once situating them historically and demystifying them *and* bringing to light the cultural dualism and elitism he sees to have caused them. Meanwhile, White is eager to employ those elements of poststructuralism which he finds most useful for his own project. In fact, it is arguable that White’s divergent readings of Derrida represent his commitment to the ethos of middle-voicedness. If in each act of writing, the modernist writer (Derrida) constitutes himself anew, White’s reading of different Derridas in different texts reflects a perspective open to fragmentation and difference rather than fixated upon metaphysical systems.

¹³⁷ White, “Writing in the Middle Voice.”

into what Eric Santner calls one's "posttrauma" identity in order to defetishize both the event and the avoidant fantasy accounts that neutralize it. Thus, if the very act of writing in the middle voice constitutes the subject's identity, it would seem to serve as an ideal mode for reconstituting a damaged identity — of a subject, nation, or culture — after a traumatic event.¹³⁸

While White advocates the idea of the middle voice as a *liberative* mode of writing, he also problematizes it by comparing it to "obsessional neurosis," an ostensibly *constrictive* complex theorized by Freud. Obsessional neurosis is associated with the process of "Turning round upon the subject's own self," one of four "modes of defense" humans in civilization enact against primal instincts.¹³⁹ In this process, the subject who feels the impulse to hurt an external object unconsciously turns his violent impulse inwards, making himself the object to be harmed. In one potential scenario, the subject projects his own subjectivity upon an external subject who he hopes will harm him, identifying with that subject's active position. This turning does not signal the middle position; rather, it renders the original subject masochistic, thus still gratified by the situation through his identification with the new subject. Freud invokes the middle voice to describe the subject's position when his *aim* changes from active to passive — when he no longer projects agency onto the external subject and then identifies with it, but rather acts as both the external subject and the internal object; as both torturer and tortured. Here, according to Freud, "the desire to torture has turned into self-torture and self-punishment, not into masochism. The active voice is changed, not into the passive, but into the *reflexive, middle voice*."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ This, of course, assumes that reading can also be constitutive in some sense: though I do not have space to fully elaborate a theory of the reader, suffice to remember White's understanding of the historical text as creating reader-subjects who are produced by and reproduce its ideologies.

¹³⁹ Those modes are: repression, sublimation, "reversal of an instinct into its opposite," and "turning round upon the subject's own self."

¹⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes (1915)," in *On Metapsychology*, ed. Angela Richards (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 123-125, as quoted in White, 258-259. Quotes are from White, but paraphrasing and analysis is based on both White's and my own reading of Freud's essay.

The identification of the middle voice with a constrictive, unconscious process of self-flagellation seems contradictory to White's characterization of the middle voice as liberative. However, Freud's notion of the middle voice in obsessional neurosis applies to general subjectivity, not to the act of writing. Certainly there are parallels, given that the subject who writes in the middle voice constitutes herself as she writes. However, in my opinion, White's earlier interpretations of Freud apply here insofar as White refigures Freud's unconscious complexes to be intentional acts of meaning-creation. Indeed, given that White posits modernist writing as *liberating* from the kinds of metaphysical structures inherent in realist writing, it seems that, unlike the unconscious rituals of the obsessive-neurotic, modernist writing in the middle voice is conscientious. This is evidenced by White's understanding of modernist (and postmodernist) writers' "open[ness] about the 'constructed' nature of their versions of history" and "willing[ness] to make of their own modes of production elements of their contents."¹⁴¹ In a word, the self-reflexivity of the middle voice is not an unconscious, obsessive self-flagellation, but a conscious self-constituting activity that "transforms the writing subject's relationship to the world."¹⁴²

Furthermore, White argues that it is the very "psychopathological techniques" of modernist and postmodernist writing that are adequate for the realistic representation of traumatic modernist events.¹⁴³ In this way, we can see middle voice writing not as an enactment of an unconscious neurosis, but as a critical technique for recognizing and addressing the neurosis stemming from the initial trauma(s). Our experience of the world is the initial trauma;

¹⁴¹ Hayden White, "Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties," 311.

¹⁴² Hayden White, "Writing in the Middle Voice"

¹⁴³ Hayden White, "The Modernist Event (1996)," 82.

modernist and postmodernist writing enables us to confront and work through it.¹⁴⁴ Thus, in translating psychoanalysis from its clinical capacity to a broader theory of representing our relationship to the world, White transforms its unconscious processes to conscious techniques.

White also juxtaposes his depiction of Freud's use of the middle voice with a discussion of its specifically moral dimension. He notes that Barthes, following J.L. Austin, compares the act of writing in the middle voice to those moral acts of "performative" speech such as "promising" or "swearing an oath" or "judging": "The promiser exists only in the act of promising, the oath-taker only in the act of taking an oath, and the judge only in the act of judging." White ends the essay with the question: "And it only remains to ask whether such speech-acts as 'promising,' 'oath-taking,' and 'judging' are as obsessively neurotic as modernist writing must, on the basis of Barthes' and Freud's analyses, be considered to be."¹⁴⁵

White's choice structural choice emphasizes his ethical intentions, distinguishing him from Freud, who is in some sense anti-ethical. For example, during the Great War Freud critiqued "civilization" for psychological overspending, so to speak, in service of an overly ambitious ethics or morality.¹⁴⁶ Like White, Freud aims to reveal an illusion, and like White, Freud sees civilization the source and platform of morality or ethics. While Freud does not advise a complete abandonment of civilization, his "ethics" is more oriented around living some kind of (more) natural truth. Or at least that's how White understands him. In a 1999 essay White points to Freud, along with Nietzsche and Foucault, as harboring a "hostility toward the various

¹⁴⁴ In what follows, I explain what I understand White to make of this. However, it is worth mentioning that we could connect the relation between the middle voice, modernist writing, and obsessive neurosis to Jameson's critique of modernism itself as a sign of a decaying subject and society.

¹⁴⁵ White, "Writing in the Middle Voice," 261-262.

¹⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Reflections on War and Death* (New York: Moffat, Yard and company, 1918). This is obviously oversimplified; there are many possible readings of Freud, and many different Freuds expressed in his prolific oeuvre. However, for White's purposes here, Freud seems to serve as a representative of an anti-ethical stance, as I will demonstrate.

techniques of self-subjection or ‘self-binding’ deemed necessary in all societies for the moral, and not merely physical, ‘well-being’ of individuals considered normal members of a group.”¹⁴⁷

In sum, in situating the middle voice of modernist writing in the ethical sphere of a conscious subject, White enacts a triple critique: first, of the historical realist ideology that accuses modernism of being amoral and ahistorical; second, of the psychoanalytic concept of a psychically determined subject whose self-reflexivity is unconscious and constraining; and third, of the “anti-humanistic” elements of poststructuralism which tie the deconstruction of the notion of human “essence” to a rejection of human ethics and responsibility.

Of course, White in many ways agrees with those ideas he attributes to Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault: in particular, he follows them in critiquing the myths and practices involved in constituting “normal members of a group.” I have already explored how White utilizes postmodernist techniques to challenge the Western historical-philosophical orthodoxy.¹⁴⁸ White asserts: “From a postmodernist perspective, our view of history is and can only be ideological through and through, with objectivism being the ideology that happened to enjoy a precarious position of hegemony at the moment.”¹⁴⁹ White, like postmodernists, does not eschew ideology in general, nor does he eschew myth. White’s call for the incorporation of mythos into history, in fact, accords with his project of making myth and ideology conscious, and thus freeing humans to choose how they represent and construct meaning from the world.

While his original focus is modernist writing, White later suggests that postmodernist writing also takes the middle voice position and seeks to represent the reality of both past and

¹⁴⁷ Hayden White, “Posthumanism and the Liberation of Humankind,” *Design Book Review* 41/42 (Winter/Spring 2000), 12.

¹⁴⁸ Postmodernism and poststructuralism, closely related and at times interchangeable but certainly not the same, of course raise questions about periodization, which I do not have space here to discuss. I use postmodernism rather than poststructuralism in these paragraphs to mirror White’s language, which seems to refer to literature/culture as postmodernist and literary criticism as poststructuralist.

¹⁴⁹ Hayden White, “Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties,” 308-311.

present.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, he argues that postmodernist history “invites us to assess [the past] from the standpoint of its utility for the present.” For White, this follows from the recognition of the constructed nature of any kind of meaning. Freed from the hegemony of objectivity, we can represent history in myriad ways. White argues that this should be history’s project: not determining *one* myth of truth or societal origin, but “multiplying possible accounts of both origins and evolutionary patterns,” a practice of which Foucault’s methodology is paradigm.¹⁵¹ The conscious writing — and reading — of history would seem to avoid the blind mythification and fetishism which White deconstructs throughout his work.

¹⁵⁰ This is an oversimplification - “Modernism” and “postmodernism” are broad categories which seep into one another.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Conclusion: The Political Potential of the Open Subject

While White appreciates the postmodernist view of history, his moral and political project is not postmodernist insofar as it revolves around the human subject — a “construct” declared dead by Foucault and Barthes.¹⁵² In one essay, White refers to himself as “post-humanistic” in contrast to Marx, Nietzsche, and Foucault, who are “anti-humanistic.” According to Althusser, the ideology of humanism dictates our relationship with the world through the assumption that there exists a “universal essence of man.”¹⁵³ White rejects the notion of a “universal essence” as far back as 1972 when he condemns “the alienation and oppression of other men” endemic to Western civilization, which created “a false consciousness, or self-alienation, necessary to the myth that a fragment of mankind might incarnate the *essence* of all humanity.”¹⁵⁴

Herman Paul is correct that White is existentialist: the only constants he posits are human freedom and consciousness, which enable the human to construct meaning. In other words, the human is free to consciously choose between limited options.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, we can circle back to *Tropics*, in which White writes that it is a matter of choice how we conceptualize consciousness, that “such choices should be self-conscious rather than unconscious,” and that he chooses to believe in the willful subject in order to reassert “the moral implications of the human sciences”¹⁵⁶ Almost forty years later, White unites the primacy of the will with his rejection of a

¹⁵² Hayden White, “Foucault Decoded: Notes from the Underground (1973),” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1978).

¹⁵³ Louis Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso Editions/NLB, 1982). As opposed to humanism, Marxism presumes the idealism of the concept, rather than the subject.

¹⁵⁴ White, “The Forms of Wildness,” 180.

¹⁵⁵ This suggests that Frank Ankersmit and others are right in characterizing White as neo-Kantian. Frank Ankersmit, “White’s ‘New Neo-Kantianism’: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Politics,” in *Refiguring Hayden White* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵⁶ Hayden White, “Introduction,” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 22-23.

“self-identical substance of identity”: “Identity can be established only by an act of imagination in the service of the will-to-be as well as the will-to-exist.”¹⁵⁷

This relates to White’s position regarding his main referent: Western culture. White openly identifies as a member of Western culture, an heir to its cultural endowment, and a critic adamantly committed to its betterment — not its dissolution. In 1978, White indicates his intention “to continue to speak about culture as against nature — and, moreover, speak about it in ways that are responsible to all the various dimensions of our specifically *human* being.”¹⁵⁸ Whether White asserts the nature/culture distinction because he thinks it is impossible to evade or undo, it is not completely clear. In any case, White identifies himself as inextricable from Western culture, and resists the kind of dissolution he at times accuses poststructuralists of attempting to effect.

That is not to say that White sees “Western culture” as a stagnant term. Like individual identity, White understands what we call “culture” to constantly change. White writes: “Every historical entity — by which is meant any entity conceived to be continuous through change or changing in continuity — has to be conceived as changing both on two levels of existence: appearance and substance. But if both levels are changing, then the very idea of identity (or self-sameness) must go wanting.”¹⁵⁹ “Western” is a construct which, for White, has not yet outlived its usefulness because of its immanence in both the public imagination and the modes of production. However, the very concept of a Western identity — the idea of the “west” and the “rest” — has two referents: the congeries of people and thoughts and texts and modes of production to which it ostensibly refers, and the “oppressed, exploited, alienated, or repressed part of humanity” it excludes. White continues to use the concept, but he, like Marx, Nietzsche,

¹⁵⁷ Hayden White, “Afterword,” in *The Practical Past* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 101.

¹⁵⁸ Hayden White, “Introduction,” in *Tropics of Discourse*, 23.

¹⁵⁹ Hayden White, “Afterword,” 101.

and Freud, aims to critique “whatever security and peace of mind one group of men in society had purchased at the cost of the suffering of another.”¹⁶⁰

In his analyses of a wide variety of Western cultural and societal manifestations, White attempts to map a route for the gradual refiguration of what we call “culture.” I think Barthes, White’s most cherished influence, provides an apt metaphor for White’s project of refiguring our notions of *human* and *culture*.

A frequent image: that of the ship *Argo* (luminous and white), each piece of which the Argonauts gradually replaced, so that they ended with an entirely new ship, without having to alter either its name or its form... by dint of combinations made within one and the same name, nothing is left of the *origin*: *Argo* is an object with no other cause than its name, with no other identity than its form.¹⁶¹

White would refigure the metaphor to emphasize the agency and ethical responsibility of the Argonauts. Thus, in White’s project, perhaps we can conceptualize ourselves, humans, as Argonauts, eternally refiguring our definitions of *human* and *culture* in a process whose only constant, besides those words, is freedom. White acknowledges the tensions in this notion of humanity from the perspective of Western metaphysics: “But what if it is possible that human beings are both free and determined, responsible and not responsible, at one and the same time for their actions? To think in this way is, of course, a scandal for the philosopher and foolishness for the man of common sense. And yet . . . [his ellipses]”¹⁶²

Δ The Practical Past

¹⁶⁰ Hayden White, “The Forms of Wildness: Archeology of an Idea (1972),” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1978), 180.

¹⁶¹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 46. I originally saw the metaphor referenced in Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2015).

¹⁶² Hayden White, “The Historical Event,” *Differences*, In the Event, 19, no. 2 (September 2008), 22. White also said “People live in contradictions. Lives are made up of contradictions. So you need a theory of the representation of life lived in contradiction” in a 1998 interview — see Ewa Domanska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 20.

Of course, even as he seems to reject Western metaphysics in the 2000s, White is still “in” Western culture. And its binaries, however constructed, have material and psychological impact. The widening chasm between the academy and practical life looms particularly large for White. This leads him to adopt Michael Oakshott’s distinction between the “historical past” and the “practical past.” According to White, while the historical past “exists only in the books and articles written by professional investigators of pasts and written for the most part for one another rather than for the general public,” the practical past is what we “carry around in our heads in the form of memory, imagination, snippets of information, formulas and practices that we perform by rote, and vague ideas about “history” that we draw on in the course of a day.”¹⁶³

To apply that language retrospectively to White’s career, his aim was always to bring the historical past closer to the practical past: to make the historian’s work practical rather than antiquarian. It ties to his attempt to incorporate contradiction, mythos, irrationality, and the other myriad elements of human experience into the writing of history; to eradicate “the belief, crippling to history’s aspiration to serve as a ‘practical’ discipline, that the imagination has no place in historical research, thinking, or writing about the past.”¹⁶⁴

Following Oakshott, White asserts that the practical past, as opposed to the historical past, informs “tasks as various as running for president of the United States, justifying a policy of war or economic adventure, planning a party, or arguing a case at law.” I should note that White acknowledges the limited extent to which the historical past can impact these activities too, depending on who is performing them. But far more determinative of “what ordinary folk regard

¹⁶³ Hayden White, “The Historical Event,” *Differences*, In the Event, 19, no. 2 (September 2008), 10.

¹⁶⁴ Hayden White, “The Practical Past,” in *The Practical Past* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 12.

as ‘the present’” are the films, literature, museums, and other cultural production that inundate us daily.¹⁶⁵

One might note, however, that all of those aforementioned activities are planned and performed by one or a few individuals. Though perhaps he could apply it to a collective political vision, White theorizes the practical past as a tool for an individual ethics: as a way of informing how we as individuals do our best in our given society. That makes sense insofar as we develop political positions on an individual basis. However, it does not support his self-proclaimed visionary politics. In fact, I think it is this tension between individual ethics and collective politics, exacerbated by the culture of “advanced capitalism,” which causes a deep pessimism that pervades his later writings.

Δ Pessimism, Postmodernism, and Advanced Capitalism

In 2007 essay, White defends what “realists of the Right” have pejoratively deemed a “utopian” political vision: “Those of us who believe that fundamental changes in our social system — by which I mean, of course, the capitalist social system — are not only desirable but are also necessary for survival are now told that we are crazy if not criminal, that, in a word, we are, well, utopians.”¹⁶⁶ Though he did not elaborate on those “fundamental changes” in his published works, White had always been, politically at least, a “kind of Marxist.”¹⁶⁷

Thus, is not surprising that cultural and political developments in the last thirty years of his life distressed him. Having called for “postmodernist histories” — or multiple accounts of national origins and philosophical truths — after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, White condemns those

¹⁶⁵ Hayden White, “The Historical Event,” *Differences*, In the Event, 19, no. 2 (September 2008), 10.

¹⁶⁶ Hayden White, “The Future of Utopia in History,” *Historiein* 7 (2007), 16.

¹⁶⁷ Domanska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism*, 19.

“who presume that the victory of the West in the Cold War not only confirms the validity of capitalism as the sole possible way of life from now on but also invalidates any belief in the desirability of a thought that would go beyond the present and dare to think a future beyond the orgy of consumption and waste called advanced capitalism or ‘the free market economy.’”¹⁶⁸

This tangible distress contrasts White’s more generalized critiques of exploitation and oppression earlier in his career. In 1999, White even questions the possibility of individual freedom, lamenting that “with the right technology and a willingness to subordinate everything to the imperatives of commodity production and exchange,” anyone “can be conditioned to do or think or, what is more important, desire anything whatsoever.”¹⁶⁹

Frederic Jameson famously theorizes the period starting from the fifties or early sixties, presumably continuing through the present, as “late capitalism” — or “multinational or consumer capitalism” — with “postmodernism” as its cultural dominant.¹⁷⁰ Characterized by visual depthlessness and lack of emotional affect, postmodernist culture is reproduced in postmodernist critical theory with the fragmentation of the subject and the abandonment of hermeneutics and other traditions that aim to find or create meaning. According to Jameson, to enact cultural and political change humans must “grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion.”¹⁷¹

I bring up Jameson here briefly — his complex theorization merits its own essay — because his linking of postmodernist theory to late capitalism poses a key problematic for White: if the cultural dominant (postmodernism) stems from and reproduces the modes of production (multinational consumer capitalism), how can we effect change? White condemns multinational

¹⁶⁸ Hayden White, “The Future of Utopia in History,” *Historiein* 7 (2007), 16.

¹⁶⁹ Hayden White, “Afterword,” in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. Victoria E. Bonnell, Lynn Hunt, and Richard Biernacki, Studies on the History of Society and Culture 34 (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1999), 316.

¹⁷⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism [Electronic Resource]* (Durham: Duke University Press, c1991), 36.

¹⁷¹ Jameson, 54.

consumer capitalism for its material inequality and its ethical hopelessness; hence his strikingly pessimistic pronouncement that anyone, intoxicated by commodities and mired in postmodernist irony, “can be conditioned to do or think or, what is more important, desire anything whatsoever.”

We might recall White’s 1976 proclamation that in “absurdist criticism... the elitism of Western social and cultural practice come[s] home to roost.” This refers to what White regards as the poststructuralist suspicion of writing, privileging of the critic, and designation of “master readers” and “slave readers,” or “readers endowed with the authority to dilate on the mysteries of the texts and readers lacking that authority.”¹⁷² I argued that the referent of White’s critique was Western society itself more than poststructuralist critics. However, Jameson raises a key question about that distinction: can we separate the cultural dominant, such as postmodernism, from the (capitalist) society which has adopted it?

I think not, and White would concur. A defining feature of capitalist society, particularly the current multinational consumer variety, is material inequality, which is enmeshed in a mutually-perpetuating relationship with exploitation of the working class and commodity production and exchange. Material inequality widens the chasm between theory and practice: even as White proclaims to have a radical politics, his intricate theorizing is ever more inaccessible. In an ideal scenario we could all appreciate his subtle maneuvering, which to me, after closely reading his entire oeuvre, feels “true.” However, White himself argued that we choose our theoretical positioning in part based on its effectiveness in relaying and justifying political beliefs. The material and psychic threat that multinational capitalist society poses to humanity demands a collective political positioning, lest White’s compelling open subject be swallowed by the modes and relations of production.

¹⁷² Hayden White, “The Absurdist Moment in Literary Criticism,” 382.

White asked in 1976: “Why should reading matter? And why should critics criticize with words when those who possess real power criticize with weapons?”¹⁷³ By unmasking myriad myths throughout his career, in my opinion White demonstrated that reading does matter. But his point about weapons reveals his underlying attention to material human conditions. Perhaps his growing pessimism can be attributed to the fact that, despite his ingenious and subtle elaboration of an open subject, that subject cannot withstand the crushing weight of multinational consumer capitalism. Having realized his freedom of identity through the intellectual practices I have elaborated in this essay, White is the embodiment of the subject he theorizes; yet even he found himself mired in pessimism later in his career. This points to the very difficulty of his intention to be both critical and sincere. In the end, White is too critical to adopt any collective framework, focusing instead on an individual ethics, which does not suffice as the sole basis of a visionary politics. However, his essays, charged with moral and political sentiment, might propel us toward a collective framework for envisioning past, present, and future.

¹⁷³ Hayden White, “The Absurdist Moment in Literary Criticism,” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 382.

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¹⁷⁴ *For the most comprehensive list of White's published writings, see Herman Paul's Hayden White: The Historical Imagination. Below are only the publications I cite in the essay.

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