

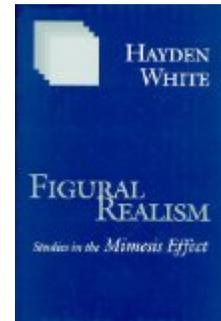
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hayden White. *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. xii + 205 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5997-7.

Reviewed by Johann W. Tempelhoff (School for Basic Sciences, Potchefstroom University for CHE, Vanderbijlpark, Gauteng, South Africa)

Published on H-Ideas (August, 1999)



Exploring the Semblance of Realism in Historical Thought

For more than a quarter of a century Professor Hayden White has been one of the more influential theoretical thinkers in the field of the philosophy of history. Since the publication in 1973 of *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, White, as intellectual and literary historian, has consistently made substantial inroads with works like *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978) and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987). He has been consistent in his ability to initiate constructive debate among historians and philosophers of history. At the same time, he brought creative ideas and a lucid style of writing into the arena of academic historical thought. This is evident from contemporary appraisals of his work. Recently, R. T. Vann described White as “perhaps the premier academic essayist of our times,” partially as a result of the fact that “he uses essays in the fashion of Montaigne, the inventor of the genre—to try things out no less than to inform and to provoke.”[1] It is only a pity that such a respected author published so little in book form over the years. However, what has been published remains a cut above the rest.

In his latest work, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (1999), White, now in his seventy-first year, still proves he is a master of critical and provocative thought. All eight chapters, with the exception of one, were all previously published. This does not, however, have a detrimental effect on the contents. The book presents a cosmic unity of explorative thinking which challenges historiographers as well as critical philoso-

phers of history to take note of a text, rich with ideas.

White’s shift from an ordinary intellectual historian in the 1960’s to a trendsetting thinker in the discipline of history a decade later came about as a result of the so-called “linguistic turn.” His approach to historiography as a fertile field of investigation boosted interest in an area of historical studies where Eduard Fueter and G. P. Gooch[2] were perhaps the last to make really substantial headway. White took historiography a step further. By providing a structuralist base for analysis, he was among the first to signify the importance of language in the process of historical writing. With the advent of postmodernist thought in conservative historical circles in the 1980s, White’s name was frequently cited, particularly in the context of having already questioned certain outdated methodological and theoretical assumptions.[3] Under no circumstance, however, has he ever identified himself as a postmodernist thinker. There has always been a suggestive air of being at the forefront of trends, but on his own terms and not as an apostle of any trendy ideology.

The centerpiece of this collection is an interpretation of the work of the German philologist Erich Auerbach. Auerbach’s investigations into the representation of reality in literature are of particular importance to historians in an era when postmodernity has generated an environment in which traditional assumptions about the discipline are being questioned. According to White, in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Litera-*

ture (1953), Auerbach provides an important key for understanding historical writing. His approach to literary history uses a figuralist model “to explicate not only the relation between various literary texts but also the relation between literature and its historical contexts” (p. 93). White points out that Auerbach’s concept of reality goes beyond “the effort to produce a verbal mirror image of some extraverbal reality.” Instead “Auerbach writes the history of mimesis as a story of the development of a specific kind of figuration” (p. 94) as he interpreted it in a variety of literary texts. His achievement is his ability to employ historicism in order to come to greater theoretical terms with literature. “Historicism,” White explains, “was nothing other than the discovery that human life and society found whatever meaning they might possess in history, not in any metaphysical beyond or transcendental religious realm” (pp. 96-97).

The importance of the chapter on Auerbach’s literary history should be seen against the backdrop of the current debate about the representation of reality in historical texts. As White explains, “historical discourse should be considered not primarily as a special case of the ‘workings of our minds’ in its efforts to know reality or to describe it but, rather, as a special kind of language use which, like metaphoric speech, symbolic language, and allegorical representation, always means more than it really says, says something other than what it seems to mean, and reveals something about the world only at the cost of concealing something else” (p. 7). From this exposition it becomes clear why White uses the term “figural realism,” almost as a symbolic or ideological construct. It becomes an apt description for the understanding of history as token text and transmission agent of the past.

Although some of his interpreters have described White as a postmodernist, *Figural Realism* makes no such suggestion. Instead we read a theoretician involved in the process of trying to understand modernity by means of interpretative techniques. But, perhaps as a result of his intense consciousness of the implications of understanding modernity in a historicist tradition, White is wary of postmodernity. He is also clearly more familiar with the ideology of the modern. And this is precisely where his value as contemporary thinker is located, as evidenced in his statement that “Modernism is still concerned to represent reality realistically, and it still identifies reality with history. But the history that modernism confronts is not the history envisaged by nineteenth-century realism. And this is because the social order that is the subject of this history has undergone a radical transformation—a change that permitted the crystalliza-

tion of the totalitarian form that Western society would assume in the twentieth century” (p. 41).

In “Formalist and Contextualist Strategies in Historical Explanation,” White sounds a warning to theorists who haphazardly indulge in the usage of historicism as device to comprehend literature. He is aware of the fact that the “new historicists” are intent on refiguring, in Louis Montrose’s terms, “the socio-cultural field within which canonical...literary and dramatic works were originally produced” (qtd. in White p. 54). They then want to situate their works inter alia “in relationship to contemporaneous social institutions and non-discursive practices” (pp. 54-55). But, although White has no apparent qualms with the exploration of a “culturalist fallacy” and the apparent search for “historical idealism” (p. 56), he explains the “new historicists” have tended to advance the “notion of a cultural poetics and, by extension, a historical poetics as a means of identifying those aspects of historical sequences that conduce to the breaking, revision, or weakening of the dominant codes—social, political, cultural, psychological, and so on - prevailing at specific times and places in history” (p. 63). His critique is then: “(T)hey [the new historicists] appear to have turned to history less for information about the literature of which they are students than for the kind of knowledge that a specifically historical approach to its study might yield. What they have discovered, however, is that there is no such thing as a specifically historical approach to the study of history but that there is a variety of such approaches, at least as many as there are positions on the current ideological spectrum; that, in fact, to embrace a historical approach to the study of anything entails or implies a distinctive philosophy of history; and that, finally, one’s philosophy of history is a function as much of the way one construes one’s own special object of scholarly interest as it is of one’s knowledge of history itself” (pp. 64-65).

For the historian there is much to learn from White’s approach. His interpretation of a text makes the reader aware of the multi-layered realities hidden behind the representation of the written word. As he says, “the history that is the subject of all ... learning is accessible only by way of language; our experience of history is indissociable from our discourse about it; this discourse must be written before it can be digested as history; and this experience, therefore, can be as various as the different kinds of discourse met with in the history of writing itself” (p. 1). Language is the one aspect of content which cannot be ignored in historical discourse (p. 5). Gone are the days when a mechanistic scrutiny of a text was the

only requirement. For the historian there is now much more, in terms of the theoretical skills of literature, to master. White explains: "In the passage from a study of an archive to the composition of a discourse to its translation into a written form, historians must employ the same strategies of linguistic figuration used by imaginative writers to endow their discourses with the kind of latent, secondary, or connotative meanings that will require that their works be not only received as messages but read as symbolic structures" (p. 8).

In the final chapter, "Form, Reference, and Ideology in Musical Discourse," White ventures into a field of experience which is seldom explored by historians—that of the auditory senses. It is an area of investigation, closer to aesthetics than plain critical hermeneutics would suggest. He is quite aware of the fact when he states that "the effort to historicize the relation between works of art and their sociocultural context(s) can take the form of an essentially aestheticizing or a more openly politicizing analysis" (p. 149). It is here where ideology and narrativity subtly find a protective encapsulation of serenity and imperializes the feelings of the individual. This happens, he suggests, because "Ideologies are apprehended as generic class or group fantasies addressed to the imaginary dimensions of consciousness where infantile dreams of individual wholeness, presence and autonomy operate as compensatory reactions to the actual, severed, and alienating conditions of social existence" (p. 156). White's constructivist appraisal of the elements which go to make up the aesthetic and critical appraisal of music as artistic and cultural artefact of the senses, features a number of prominent thinkers in the field. Having consulted their works he is aware of the potential pitfalls if and when literary theory is imported to enhance musicology. He concedes that it is unlikely literary theory and criticism (essentially verbal discourses) will deal effectively with the principal problems of musical criticism and theory (p. 176). Yet there is an area of consciousness—perceived in the musical context as the technical discourses of the great composers—which have been transmitted to the present by means of technical codes (a language of complex notations). It is constantly being interpreted by successive new generations of musicians, with a sense of what it probably originally was

intended to sound like. Is it possible that there are interpretative elements of historical consciousness that historians have overlooked in the process of aestheticising audio memory? White's exploration of the field opens yet more opportunities for incisive research. In an introduction on the sleeve note to "The Beyondness of Things," a masterpiece of contemporary music, the composer John Barry recently explained why he wanted to account musically for the process of experiencing vision and flight by aircraft between the United States and Britain: "Both these visions, past and present—'The Old Country' and 'The New World'—harbour so many dreams, memories and reflections beyond the norm: The Beyondness of Things." [4] The artist/craftsperson as interpreter seldom needs more than a basic medium for creating an awareness of reality, be it ideological or existential. What is important is the critical intent of creative thought. *Figural Realism* for this specific reason deserves to be read by historians in search of rejuvenating a sense of theoretical enlightenment.

Notes:

[1]. R. T. Vann, "The Reception of Hayden White." *History and Theory* 37(2), May 1998, 144.

[2]. E. Fueter, *Geschichte der Neueren Historiographie*. 3rd ed. (Verlag R. Oldenbourg, Muenchen, 1936) and G. P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* 2nd ed. (London, New York, and Toronto: Longmans Green, 1952).

[3]. J. Appleby, E. Covington, D. Hoyt, M. Latham and A. Sneider, *Knowledge and postmodernism in historical perspective* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 393-4 and W. Kansteiner, "Hayden White's critique of the writing of history." *History and Theory*, 32(3), 1993, 275-76.

[4]. Sleeve note by John Barry to the CD recording: *The Beyondness of Things* (Decca, London, 1998, 460 009-2 LH).

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-ideas>

Citation: Johann W. Tempelhoff. Review of White, Hayden, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*. H-Ideas,

H-Net Reviews. August, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3325>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.