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Greek Historiography in the 20th Century: Opening a Research Agenda



Review of Hayden White's, Λογοτεχνική θεωρία και ιστορική συγγραφή [Literary theory and historical writing]

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Hayden White

**Λογοτεχνική θεωρία και ιστορική
συγγραφή**

[Literary theory and historical writing]

Athens: Epekeina, 2015. 320 pp.

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This is an outstanding collection of essays by Hayden White, excellently translated into Greek by George Pinakoulas. It is also the first book-length work introducing White's texts to Greek debates on the theory and history of historiography. The book consists of seven essays and an introduction by White, the translator's preface and a glossary providing the translation of key terms.

The introduction sets out the three major areas that the book investigates. The first is the tropes of figuration – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony – and their role in both setting and challenging the limits of historical discourse. The second area pertains to the relation of these limits to literary language and the need to account for the “mutual implicativeness” of the two fields: the literary dimension of history writing and the realism of literary discourse. Finally, the third area sets this account against the background of a metahistorical discourse reflecting on the margins of history writing, and the ethics and politics of history implied by these margins.

All essays in the volume highlight different aspects of the above themes. In “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” (1980), White raises the question of the nature of narrative as a question of the nature of

culture, but also of humanity itself. As a trans-cultural and transhistorical phenomenon, narrative pertains to the problem of translating knowing into telling. In the case of historical narrative, this translation is made possible when “reality wears the mask of meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience”. Insofar as historical narrative can be completed and “can be shown to have had a plot all along”, as White writes, it inscribes into reality the odour of the ideal. Hence this plot is itself “always an embarrassment and has to be presented as ‘found’ in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques”.¹

White explores these techniques as the basis of key historiographical concepts, such as that of the “period”. In “The ‘Nineteenth Century’ as Chronotope” (1987), he discusses Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the literary chronotope with a view to exploring its application to the ways in which historical time and space are assimilated to historiographical discourse. The concept of the chronotope directs attention to the social, moral, aesthetic, political and economic ambivalences of an age, thus allowing us to think through what was implicit in the age's explicit cultural wagers. At the same time, considering an age as a chronotope allows us to understand these ambivalences as a particular enactment of a generally social condition in which we are as much involved as the objects of our inquiry were.

But narrative techniques are also manifested in figures of discourse, as is argued in the articles selected from White's *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, 1999). In “Auerbach's Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism” (1996), White argues that Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953) provides a figuralist model explicating not only the rela-

tion between literary texts, but also the relation between literature and its historical context. So Auerbach's concept of historical reality remains irreducible to a verbal mirror image of some extraverbal reality; rather it highlights mimesis as a story of the manifold developments of a specific kind of figuration. This story is then to be understood in the context of the debate on representation of reality in history writing, as the essay "Literary Theory and Historical Writing" (1989) suggests. Like literary discourse or figurative language in general, historical discourse is then to be construed "not primarily as a special case of the 'workings of our minds' in its efforts to know reality" but, rather, as a specific 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".²

From this perspective White argues against the view that "the only requirements of historians are that they discover the truth, present new facts, and offer new interpretations of the facts", emphasising the significance of the linguistic form in which facts are presented, the diction and the rhetoric of discourse.³ This contention is exemplified in a brilliant reading of Proust in White's "Narrative, Description, and Tropology in Proust" (1988). In this essay Proust's narrative is read as an allegory of figuration in which the modalities of figuration serve as the key units of strategies of emplotment. The study of these strategies reveals the absence of any ground for the revelation of a kind of "ultimate meaning" relating to the real and serves to "reduce all meaning to nothing but figuration".⁴

The concept of figuration exemplifies a peculiar temporality of historical discourse in White's "Northrop Frye's Place in Contempo-

rary Cultural Studies" (1994). Studying Frye through Kierkegaard's notion of repetition, he discusses a time according to which later events transform the meaning of earlier ones whose fulfilment is to be to be understood "as the product or effect of a kind of reverse causation", that is, a "causation peculiar to historical reality, culture, and human consciousness, by which a thing of the past is at once grasped by consciousness, brought into the present by recollection and redeemed, made new, by being put to a use theretofore unforeseeable by human beings".⁵

In his "Guilty of History? The *Longue Durée* of Paul Ricoeur" (2007), White takes Ricoeur's exploration of history and memory as a starting point for theorising the social and political dimension of historiography – which is to say, its ideological operation – in the modern era. This is a historiographical vision that inscribes into historical consciousness an ethics of care and a politics of responsibility. White approaches Ricoeur's project by focusing on his discussion of the Holocaust. Seen through the prism of memory and forgetting, the Holocaust remains radically unfinished insofar as we are not only obliged to remember it as part of "our" history, but we are required to swear never to allow it happen again. This involvement of historians, according to White, allows us to challenge the division between what Michael Oakeshott described as a "historical past", constructed by the community of historians as a theoretical construct, and a "practical past", which is like a storehouse of memories, ideals, examples, events worthy of remembrance and diverse forms of knowledge about the past of ourselves and our community, a lived past.⁶

The volume offers an excellent introduction to key concepts of White's thought developed over a long period of his career. The translation of the essays is elegant and notably attentive to

the ways in which conceptual differences are imprinted in cross-cultural transfers. Particularly useful are the translator's notes that engage with both the pragmatic and theoretical issues raised in the text. The remarkable absence of translations of White's works in modern Greek – and especially his monumental *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, published more than four decades ago – makes the translator's terminological and literary choices as crucial as the very choice to render White's thought in modern Greek terms. At the same time, this absence invites a consideration of this volume as a starting point, which will hopefully stimulate further translations and sustain a wider discussion on what Frank Ankersmit described as the challenge which White put to historians.⁷

Such an enterprise would include not only translating White's texts, but also furthering the critical debate – which has already begun in Greece – on the meaning and implications of these texts. The discursive thread of this debate that seems particularly significant is confronting White's concepts of the ethics and politics of historiography from the perspective of contexts beyond Europe and North America. Subaltern studies offers an exemplary investigation of this perspective. For instance, in his recent essay "Subaltern History as Political Thought", Dipesh Chakrabarty begins a discussion of politics and history with White's remark that "historical facts are *politically* domesticated" insofar as they are effectively dissociated from a vision of history as "sublime", a vision formulated by Schiller in order to designate history as innately disorderly and incomprehensible.⁸ Chakrabarty endorses White's contention that historical reality has no order in itself and that the ideologies of historians "impute a meaning to history", yet one that renders history's "manifest confusion compre-

hensible to either reason, understanding, or aesthetic sensibility". Yet he challenges White's conclusion that this imputation of meaning domesticates historical facts: to the extent that historians give history meaning they deprive it of "the kind of meaninglessness that alone can goad living human beings ... to endow their lives with a meaning for which they alone are fully responsible".⁹ The notion of people taking responsibility for meaning and decisions in the face of the meaninglessness of the world, Chakrabarty writes, is "too much a figment of a particular Western history" that cannot accommodate Indian or South Asian history.¹⁰ And yet, he goes on, there is something about White's notion of "political domestication of historical facts" against an innately meaningless historical process, that speaks precisely about what happens in the narratives of domination and resistance in histories outside Europe.¹¹

The possibilities opened up by White's exploration, following Schiller, of the sublimity of history are then moved beyond his own starting point – bounded within the limits of western historiography – and became expanded by historians who write histories in the periphery of or outside the west. Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* speaks of this expansion as a translation that does not merely transfer western concepts, but takes hold of them and critically transforms them, as it also transforms the languages and traditions in which it is formulated.¹² Such an engagement would intensify what Ankersmit considers as a key contribution of White's writings: an awareness of the kinds of problems "encountered in the effort to tell the truth about historical reality",¹³ including the problem of confronting White from the periphery of contemporary historiographical debates.

NOTES

- 1 Hayden White, "The value of narrativity in the representation of reality," in *The content of the form: narrative discourse and historical representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 21.
- 2 Hayden White, "Literary theory and historical writing," in *Figural realism: studies in the mimesis effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), 1–26, here 7.
- 3 Ibid., 12.
- 4 Hayden White, "Narrative, description, and tropology in Proust," in *Figural realism: studies in the mimesis effect* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1999), 126–46, here 142.
- 5 Hayden White, "Northrop Frye's place in contemporary cultural studies," in *The fiction of narrative: essays on history, literature, and theory, 1957–2007* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 263–72, here 271.
- 6 Michael Oakeshott, "Present, future, and past," in *On history and other essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 38–48.
- 7 Frank Ankersmit, "Hayden White's appeal to historians," *History and Theory* 37/2 (1998): 182–93.
- 8 Hayden White, "The politics of historical interpretation: discipline and de-sublimation," in *The content of the form: narrative discourse and historical representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 72.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Subaltern history as political thought," in *Colonialism and its legacies*, ed. Jacob T. Levy and Iris Marion Young, 205–17 (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 207.
- 11 Ibid., 207–208.
- 12 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and the historical imperative* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007).
- 13 Ankersmit, "Hayden White's appeal to historians."

Harris Athanasiades

Τα αποσυρθέντα βιβλία: Έθνος και σχολική Ιστορία στην Ελλάδα, 1858-2008

[The withdrawn textbooks: nation and school history in Greece, 1858–2008]

Athens: Alexandria, 2015. 295 pp.

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Harris Athanasiades' research makes a valuable contribution to the history of education and, more interestingly, to the history of history teaching. Although a considerable body of articles and papers exist on history teaching in Greek schools, as well as of books on history wars,¹ there was no detailed work on the major "wars" over history textbooks in twentieth-century Greece that fuelled public debates and caused political turmoil.

Athanasiades' work consists of very careful, precise and exhausting research on official documents, decrees, reactions, media coverage, articles, events and reflection in the sphere of public pedagogy on the subject of school history teaching and textbooks. Moreover, he offers a crystal-clear image of the era in each case, providing historical context and perspective and seizing the zeitgeist in a fascinating way.

This book comprises six chapters, entitled as follows: "The nation-killing textbook"; "Irreconcilable Memories"; "A trap-textbook"; "They discarded God and the Nation"; "The Greek nation is the oldest of the European nations"; "The autonomy of Greece was buried alive at