

Hayden White and the Burden of History

Anurag Subramani

[https://doi.org/10.33318/jpacs.2016.36\(2\)-6](https://doi.org/10.33318/jpacs.2016.36(2)-6)

ABSTRACT

*In his essays “The Burden of History” (1966), “Interpretation in History” (1972), “The Historical Text as Literary Artefact” (1974), “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” (1980) and “Getting Out of History” (1982), Hayden White discusses the main tenets of his theory of historiography, narrativity and, inevitably, the relationship between the history and literature. In the essays, White argues for a common constructivist character of history and fiction, and rejects the Rankean notion of a ‘science of history’. Drawing support from the historiographical and literary theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss, R. G. Collingwood and Northrop Frye, White suggests historians must acknowledge history’s basis in the literary arts and treat the historical text as a literary artefact in order for the discipline to regain the prestige that it enjoyed in the early nineteenth century. The kind of eclectic history that White advocates is found in Klaus Neumann’s *Not the Way it Really Was*, a text that itself rejects a positivist view of history.*

Keywords: History, literature, narrativity, positivism, Hayden White, Klaus Neumann

INTRODUCTION

[...] a significant number of philosophers seem to have decided that history is either a third-order form of science [...] or that it is a second-order form of art, the epistemological value of which is questionable, the aesthetic worth of which is uncertain. These philosophers seem to have concluded that, if there is any such thing as a hierarchy of the sciences, history falls somewhere between Aristotelian physics and Linnaean biology - which is to say that it may have a certain interest for collectors of exotic world-views and debased mythologies, but not very much to contribute to the establishment of that “common world” spoken of by Cassirer as finding its daily confirmation in science (White, 1978a, p. 30).

In his essay “The Burden of History” (1978), Hayden White speaks of a crisis in the discipline of history that began in the nineteenth century with the historian’s specious claim to occupy the hallowed middle ground that supposedly exists between the arts and sciences, claiming privileges arising from the association with both, conforming to the critical standards of neither. The trajectory of the crisis can be charted as follows: the loss of the historian’s power of prescience, that is, his/her inability to move beyond the studying of the past for its own sake in order to provide that visionary aspect that has generally been seen as the *raison d’être* of the discipline; the methodological naiveté of the historian in his/her unwillingness to use techniques from the arts and sciences; the consequent general revolt against the discipline by artists and scientists following the pattern set by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872); the opposition to the so-called ‘historical consciousness’ by writers from the turn of the century till the 1960s; and the continued claim by contemporary historians of history as a science.

THE PERILS OF ANTIQUARIANISM

The historian, writes White, for more than a century has been making the extravagant claim that the discipline of history is a site where the arts and sciences come together in a harmonious synthesis. While the claim gave the historian the license, on the one hand, to adhere to the critical standards of neither discipline, it also provided him/her with an excuse to avoid the criticism of artists and scientists. White adds,

[...] when criticised by social scientists for the softness of his method, the crudity of his organising metaphors, or the ambiguity of his sociological and psychological presuppositions, the historian responds that history has never claimed the status of a pure science, that it depends as much upon intuitive as upon analytical methods, and that historical judgments should not therefore be evaluated by critical standards properly applied only in the mathematical and experimental disciplines ...when reproached by literary artists for his failure [...] and his unwillingness to utilize contemporary modes of literary representation, the historian falls back upon the view that history is after all a *semi-science*, that historical data do not lend themselves to ‘free’ artistic manipulation [...] (ibid, p. 27).

With the refutation of the nineteenth-century belief that art and science were different ways of making sense of the world, the claim of the historian as a mediator between the arts and sciences no longer held sway. “Everywhere,” says White, “there [was] resentment over what [appeared]

to be the historian's bad faith in claiming the privileges of both the artist and the scientist while refusing to submit to the critical standards [...] obtaining in either art or science" (ibid, p. 28). The re-evaluation of history as the "irredeemable enemy" (ibid) of both the arts and sciences was significant for the development of historiography in the twentieth century. The attainment to the position of hegemony of the sciences sharpened the social scientists' hostility towards history. But, White writes, what was unnerving about the ostracism of history from the first rank of the sciences [in the early twentieth century] was that it was accompanied by a similar hostility of history by artists, in particular writers of fiction. The hostility of the artist towards history arose not only from history's claim to be a science or the unwillingness of the historian to open his mind to the techniques of imaginative writing, but also from what artists perceived to be the loss of the prophetic element in history. White writes that "the charge levelled against the historian by modern writers [was] also a moral one; but whereas the scientist [accused] him only of a failure of method or intellect, the artist indicts him for a failure of sensibility or will" (ibid, p. 31).

Although the tone for the revolt against history was set by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* and "The Use and Abuse of History" (1874), where he warned that "wherever the 'eunuchs' in the 'harem of history' flourished, art must necessarily perish" (ibid, p. 32), his indictment against history and the historical imagination was taken up by writers of fiction such as George Eliot who warned of the "perils of antiquarianism" (ibid) and André Gide who in *The Immoralist* (1902) celebrated art's "response to the living present" and revolted against "history's worship of the dead past" (ibid, p. 34). The First World War, writes White, confirmed Nietzsche's revolt against history generations earlier. He says everywhere there was the feeling that history had failed to prepare men for the war, adding, the new anti-historicist attitude was best expressed by Paul Valéry, who wrote, "history is the most dangerous product evolved from the chemistry of the intellect" (ibid, p. 36). The anti-historicist attitude continued in the decades after World War Two, exemplified in the works of writers such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. These and other writers suggested only by "disenthraling human intelligence from the sense of history that men will be able to confront creatively the problems of the present" (ibid, p. 40). To realise this new inspired and vibrant historiography, White suggests historians must regain the visionary aspect of their work because "the disinterested study of the past" is neither "ennobling [nor] even illuminative of our humanity" (ibid). He points out that the revolt against history is from all fronts and that,

the burden of the historian in our time is to re-establish the dignity of historical studies on a basis that will make them consonant with the aims and purposes of the intellectual community at large (ibid).

HISTORY - A SCIENCE, NO LESS AND NO MORE

One of the factors that led to the crisis within the discipline in the late nineteenth century was the attempt by historians to make the discipline a science modelled around the methods of the physical sciences. The philosophy that emerged in the nineteenth century that came to view the idea that historical knowledge could only be acquired by observation and experimentation in the manner of the natural sciences is positivism, and much of Hayden White's writing is a

resistance to the positivistic view of history. White's *Metahistory*, (1973) tries to deconstruct the mythology of the so-called science of history. Ewa Domanska suggests *Metahistory*, "seemed to dissolve the difference between fact and fiction and between real and imaginary events, violating the principles established by Aristotle and confirmed in the nineteenth century by Leopold von Ranke's constitution of history as a 'scientific' discipline" (2001, p. 324). She explains White's views in *Metahistory* and his other writings "stems from a revolt against the positivistic approach to history, whose naively realistic understanding of historiography, thinking in terms of binary oppositions (fact versus fiction), advocacy of a correspondence theory of truth and objectivism, and separation of axiology from epistemology, still make history an exceptionally well-protected enclave among the human and social sciences" (ibid, p. 322).

In articulating his alternative vision, White has been influenced by a wide range of theorists. Domanska suggests what links all these individuals – including White himself – is the fact that they were 'rebels' and 'heretics' "changing the legitimate (in their times) ways of thinking about the world and modes of its representation" (1998, p. 174). White's main influences have been Robin George Collingwood, Northrop Frye and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Of particular influence of the individuals has been on White's reading of history as 'constructivist'/'interpretive', and hence closer to the arts than the sciences. It is an idea that finds resonance in the tropes used by Collingwood, Frye and Levi-Strauss – 'constructive imagination', '*mythos*' and 'fraudulent outlines' respectively – to similarly argue for a constructivist view of history. Before I discuss the ideas of these theorists, it is imperative to look at the context in which a positivistic view of history arose.

In 1903, the English historian, John Bagnell Bury, delivered his inaugural address as Regius Professor at Cambridge entitled "The Science of History." In the address, he "celebrated the scientific character of the German critical school, affirmed the positivist call for generalization in history, and condemned history as a literary genre and moral teacher" (Breisach, 1994, p. 285). He ended by uttering the following words, which captures the essence of empirical history: "[history was] simply a science, no less and no more" (ibid). But Bury was not the first historian to make the claim that history was a science; it is, the German historian, Leopold von Ranke, who is widely celebrated as the 'father of historical science.' Ernst Breisach in *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (1983) states, "rarely has a phrase been so often and approvingly quoted as Ranke's declaration that he wanted not to pass judgment on the past, but simply to report '*wie es eigentlich gewesen*' (how it actually was)" (ibid, p. 233). The scientific view of history held by Ranke and his epigoni is the result of the attainment to hegemony of the sciences among the intellectual disciplines as well as the advances made by science's off-spring, technology. It has also been deeply influenced by the publication in 1859, of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, in which he outlines his theory of evolution in nature – a parallel theory of evolution of societies forms the basis of the teleological view of History in general, and of Auguste Comte's philosophy of positivism in particular.

Ernst Breisach suggests that by 1880 the sciences had enjoyed such immense prestige, that scholars were "enthusiastic about the image of a nonmysterious world without essences and spiritual entities and about the scientific method as a way to certain and timeless truth" (ibid,

p. 268-269). He adds “scholars in all fields, including history, felt compelled to emulate so successful an endeavour and transfer its views and methods from the inquiry into nature to the inquiry into human phenomena” (ibid, p. 269). But there were also those like George M. Trevelyan, who “considered the idea of history becoming a science harmful if not grotesque” (ibid). Hence, in the six decades prior to 1914, a battle raged between those who were ready to accept history as a science - Auguste Comte, Henry Buckle, John Bagnell Bury, Hippolyte Taine, Karl Lamprecht - and those who insisted that an objective, ‘colourless’ view of history was not possible and even less desirable - Wilhelm Dilthey, Johann Gustav Droysen, Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood. If Ranke is considered the father of ‘scientific history’, then Comte is the ‘father of positivism’. It was Comte who laid out the methodology to turn history into the science of history.

According to Collingwood, Comte’s point of departure was the idea that every natural scientist “began by ascertaining facts and then went on to discover their causal connexions” (Collingwood, 1946, p. 128). He adds, “accepting this assertion, Comte proposed that there should be a new science called sociology, which was to begin by discovering the facts about human life (this being the work of the historians) and then go on to discover the causal connexions between these facts” (ibid). Of the first task of ascertaining facts, Collingwood says that according to the positivist philosophy, the historian had to eliminate all subjective elements in his point of view. The second task, he says, would be carried out by sociologists – the ‘super-historians’ – “raising history to the rank of a science by thinking scientifically about the same facts about which the historian thought only empirically” (ibid). He adds, Comte’s programme was similar to the Kantian call for a philosophy of history with the difference that, while the latter conceived of historical processes as something different from natural processes, the positivist project of Comte saw historical processes identical with natural processes and “that was why the methods of natural science were applicable to the interpretation of history” (ibid). Drawing their inspiration from the likes of Ranke, Comte and Darwin, other positivist historians carried on with their individual visions of a scientific history.

One of these historians, Henry Thomas Buckle, called on historians to give up the search for metaphysical essences and forces shaping human action and emulating the natural scientists, and strive to find fixed laws governing human life. In France, Hippolyte Taine argued the past could be explained, “If one ascertained empirically, first, facts and more facts and then established the precise relationship between these facts or group of facts” (ibid). In researching and writing about the historical past, Taine borrowed a lot of his models and concepts from zoology, physiology and psychology. In England, Bury became for some “a prophet of positivism in historiography” (Breisach, 1994, p. 285). In the United States, historians had become ‘awed’ by science by the end of the nineteenth century, and this fascination led to the founding in 1884 of the American Historical Association. Among the founders were many German-educated historians, including Herbert Baxter Adams, who were “full of enthusiasm for a ‘scientific history’ in the German manner” (ibid, p. 287).

FRAUDULENT OUTLINES: THE ART OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

In the nineteenth century, at a time when the positivistic view of history was taking shape, a counter-movement grew that argued for the idea that “interpretation was the very soul of historiography” (White, 1978d, p. 52). In that era, the four major theorists of historiography – Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Johann Gustav Droysen, Friedrich Nietzsche and Benedetto Croce – rejected the “Rankean conception of the ‘innocent eye’ of the historian and the notion that the elements of the historical narrative, the ‘facts,’ were apodictically provided rather than constituted by the historian’s own agency” (ibid, p. 53). White says, “all of them stressed the active, inventive aspect of the historian’s putative ‘inquiry’ into ‘what had really happened’ in the past” and that all four theorists considered history not a science but a literary art, arguing that like all forms of literary arts, historical reality “was as much a ‘making’ (an *inventio*) as it was a ‘finding’ of the facts” (ibid, p. 53-54). The central tropes in Collingwood, Frye and Levi-Strauss’s - ‘constructivist imagination,’ *mythos*,’ and ‘fraudulent outlines’ respectively – theory of history, locate the discipline firmly in the realm of myth or fantasy. White discusses his own ideas for a constructivist view of history in “Interpretation in History” and “The Historical Text as Literary Artefact.”

In the first essay, White argues that all history contains an element of interpretation, and that it is this aspect that immediately calls into question whether the explanation of events by historians can qualify as objective and scientific. White’s view is “often defined as rhetorical constructivism based on the conviction that historical facts are ‘not given’ but ‘made by’ the historian” (Domanska, 1998, p. 322). The central argument in White’s theory of historiography is that in reconstructing the past, historians need to firstly exclude from their account those ‘facts’ which are seen as irrelevant to their narrative purpose and secondly, they must include in their narratives “an account of some events or complex of events for which the facts that would permit a plausible explanation of its occurrence are lacking” (White, 1978d, p. 51). This, he argues, is essentially an exercise in interpretation as it entails the filling in of gaps in the information on “inferential or speculative grounds” (ibid). It is this, that leads White to conclude that historical narratives are “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (White, 1978b, p. 82). White laments that the discipline of history is in a state of crisis because historians have eschewed the interpretive element in history and have lost sight of the discipline’s origins in the literary imagination.

As stated earlier, in arriving at his own philosophy of history, White was influenced by the ideas of a wide range of thinkers, including R. G. Collingwood. In *The Idea of History*, Collingwood calls positivism “philosophy acting in the service of natural science” (Collingwood, 1946, p. 126). He is especially critical of two aspects of the positivist view of history: firstly, the idea that historians should not taint the facts with their own views; and secondly, he points to a fundamental error in the positivistic philosophy arising, he says, from its misunderstanding of what a ‘fact’ constitutes. He explains that the natural sciences see a fact as something that is observed by sensory perception, adding that if there is any doubt about the facts, it can be repeated by experimentation. Thus, he says, “for the scientist, the question whether the facts

really are what they are said to be is never a vital question, because he can always reproduce the facts under his own eyes” (ibid, p. 133). Historical facts, however, “being now gone beyond recall or repetition, cannot be ... objects of perception” (ibid). He seriously questions whether the programme of the positivists to ascertain the facts by emulating the methods of the natural sciences is even possible, and this leads him naturally to ask whether a ‘science of history’ is possible. Collingwood insists, “the historian was above all a story teller suggesting historical sensibility was manifested in the capacity to make a plausible story out of a congeries of ‘facts’” (White, 1978b, p. 84). The making of a story out of the historical record – Collingwood points out that the historical record is always fragmentary and incomplete – requires what Collingwood calls the ‘constructive imagination’, a tool also used by writers of fiction.

Although White shares Collingwood’s belief that historical narratives are constructed using the faculty of the imagination, he is critical of his idea that the historical events themselves contain the story or complex of stories. He argues instead that the events only contain the story elements. It is the historian who spins the story elements into a narrative by suppressing some of them and highlighting others. In short, he says the historian uses all of the techniques a novelist or playwright would use in the ‘emplotment’ of a novel or a play. White believes that historical events are ‘value-neutral’ and that the type of story the events are finally composed into depends upon the historian – “What one historian may emplot as a tragedy, another may emplot as a comedy or romance” (White, 1978d, p. 58). This idea of ‘emplotment’ of the story elements into a story of a particular kind – tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic – aligns White’s theory of history with the ideas of the literary theorist Northrop Frye.

In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) Frye argues, “when a historian’s scheme gets to a certain point of comprehensiveness it becomes mythical in shape, and so approaches the poetic in structure” (ibid, p. 57). He speaks of different historical myths: romantic myths based on a quest or pilgrimage; tragic myths of ‘decline and fall’; comic myths of progress through evolution or revolution; and ironic myths of ‘recurrence and catastrophe’. He explains that “the fundamental meanings of all fictions, their thematic content, consist ... of the ‘pre-generic plot-structures’ or *mythoi* derived from the corpora of Classical and Judaeo-Christian religious literature” (White, 1978b, p. 83). White explains in Frye’s theory “we understand why a particular story has ‘turned out’ as it has when we have identified the archetypal myth, or pregeneric plot structure, of which the story is an exemplification” (White, 1978d, p. 83). He says “interpretation in history consists of the provisions of a plot structure for a sequence of events so that their nature as a comprehensible process is revealed by their figuration as a *story of a particular kind*” (White, 1978b, p. 58). A specific event from the historical past, says White, can be emplotted in different ways to provide different interpretations of, or to tell different stories about, the same historical event.

Claude Levi-Strauss calls the same process of imposing a story upon historical events as giving it a ‘fraudulent outline’. In *The Savage Mind* (1966), he argues, “the formal coherency of any historical narrative consists solely of a ‘fraudulent outline’ imposed by the historian upon a body of materials which could be called ‘data’ only in the most extended sense of the term” (White, 1978d, p. 55). Like White, Levi-Strauss argues historical ‘facts’ are not ‘found’ or ‘given’ but ‘constituted’ by the historian himself. He adds historical facts are not only constituted, but also

selected by the historian: “confronted with a chaos of ‘facts,’ the historian must ‘choose, sever and carve them up’ for the narrative purposes” (ibid). A narrative or story is finally fashioned from the congeries of facts by the imposition of a ‘fraudulent outline’. Hence, Levi-Strauss’s explanation of history brings it in the realm of the mythical. White writes “this conflation of mythic and historical consciousness will offend some historians and disturb those literary theorists whose conception of literature presupposes a radical opposition of history to fiction or of fact to fancy” (White, 1978b, p. 82). Northrop Frye similarly says “to tell the historian that what gives shape to his book is a myth would sound to him vaguely insulting” (ibid). But the element of myth is evident most clearly in those grand narratives of the West – History, Marxism and Christianity – that are driven by a teleological impetus and which purport to tell a single narrative truth about the past. Arguing for the mythical element in history, White writes,

In my view, history as a discipline is in bad shape today because it has lost sight of its origins in the literary imagination. In the interest of appearing scientific and objective, it has repressed and denied to itself its own greatest source of strength and renewal. By drawing historiography back once more to an intimate connection with its literary basis, we should not only be putting ourselves on guard against merely ideological distortions; we should be by way of arriving at that ‘theory’ of history without which it cannot pass for a ‘discipline’ at all (ibid, p. 99).

PALINGENESIS - THE REBIRTH OF HISTORY

How does White propose the historian relieve contemporary society from the burden of history? The project for the historian as envisaged by White is two-fold: firstly, he must put that sense of purpose back into history, that is, history not an end in itself but history with a vision - “philosophy teaching by examples” (ibid, p. 36); and secondly, history must shed the parochialism that has been the most salient feature of the discipline from the mid nineteenth century onwards, and embrace the eclecticism, which was its defining feature in the early nineteenth century.

Much of the revolt against history from the mid-nineteenth century onwards had to do with the fact that the discipline had lost much of the visionary aspect that both intellectuals and the laity expected from it. White, in “Getting out of History”, discusses similar crisis in contemporary Marxism. He says that many modern Marxists have tended to play down the prophetic aspect of Marxism in an attempt to appear more scientific, but that the result has been the loss of the ability of Marxism to inspire visionary politics. A similar loss of moral coloration has been obvious in the discipline of history from the mid-nineteenth century. The discipline of history, White argues, needs 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 the problems peculiar to our time” (ibid, p. 41). He says, “anyone who studies the past as an end in itself must appear to be either an antiquarian, fleeing from the problems of the present” or a ‘cultural necrophile’ “who finds in the dead and dying a value he can never find in the living” (ibid). In “Hayden White: Beyond Irony”, Ewa Domanska suggests White is “one of those thinkers who see historical knowledge as a problem of consciousness, and not merely as one of methodology” (Domanska, 1998, p. 176). She adds like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jules Michelet and Alexis de Tocqueville, “White is conscious that the way one thinks about

the past has serious implications about the way one thinks about one's own present and future" (ibid). White explains the great reflective historians like Huizinga inspired him because they not only studied the past, but also reflected on how the past was to be studied. He says:

I think that, all of the great historians do both history and philosophy of history. They always asked the question how do you do history, what is the best way of doing it, what are the grounds for thinking that one way is better than another, what are the purposes, the social purposes of studying the past? (Domanska, 1993, p. 8).

Of the second project for the historian - being more receptive to the techniques of inquiry and representation of other disciplines - White writes of the importance of a 'palingenesis' or rebirth for the discipline of history after its decline in the nineteenth century. He says historians need to seriously consider the methods and perspective of artists and scientists about how the historical past ought to be brought to life. White draws our attention to the nature of the exchange that characterized the relationship between the various disciplines in the early nineteenth century:

Romantic artists went to history for their themes and appealed to "historical consciousness" as a justification for their attempts at cultural palingenesis, their attempts to make the past a living presence to their contemporaries. And certain sciences - geology and biology in particular - availed themselves of ideas and concepts which had been commonly used only in history up to that time (White, 1978b, p. 41).

He writes that what was impressive about that era was the "willingness of intellectuals in all fields to cross the boundaries that divided one discipline from another and to open themselves up to the use of illuminating metaphors for reality, whatever their origins in particular disciplines or world-views" (ibid, p. 42).

White points out the crisis of history in the middle of the nineteenth century coincided with the discipline's refusal to entertain the techniques of inquiry and representation that the arts and sciences had to offer. During this period historians also somehow became attached to antiquated notions of what art and science were. Both art and science were undergoing drastic changes in terms of outlook and methodology, but the historian somehow clung to antiquated views. Hence, when historians claimed the discipline of history was a combination of science and art, they were oblivious to the fact that their notions of art and science had become anachronistic. What in fact historians were talking about, states White, was history as a combination of 'romantic art' and 'positivistic science', adding when historians spoke of the 'art of history' they "[seemed] to have in mind a conception of art that would admit little more than the nineteenth-century novel as a paradigm" (ibid). He explains,

... when [historians] say they are artists, they seem to mean that they are artists in the way that Scott or Thackeray were artists. They certainly do not mean to identify themselves with action painters, kinetic sculptors, existentialist novelists, imagist poets, or *nouvelle vague* cinematographers ... Thus, for example H. Stuart Hughes argues in a recent work on the relation of history to science and art that 'the historian's supreme technical virtuosity lies in fusing the new method of social and psychological analysis with his traditional storytelling function' (ibid).

White dismisses the idea of history as advocated by people like Hughes saying that while bringing the past to life in a linear chronological story may serve the historian's purpose, it is, however, only one of many modes of representation open to them. In an interview with Ewa Domanska (1993), White maintains that in the representation of the historical past the historian must use different techniques available to him. He writes that such eclecticism would liberate the historian from methodological narrow-mindedness and "force [them] ... to recognise that there is no such thing as a *single* correct view of any object under study but that there are *many* correct views, each requiring its own style of representation" (White, 1978a, p. 47). He believes that such recognition would allow the historian to "entertain seriously those creative distortions offered by minds capable of looking at the past with the same seriousness ... but with different affective and intellectual orientations" (ibid).

Historians, writes White, do not have to represent the past in narrative form, adding "they may choose other, non-narrative, even anti-narrative, modes of representation, such as the meditation, the anatomy, or the epitome" (White, 1980, p. 3). He points out that historians like Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Huizinga and Braudel refused the narrative form because it wasn't the most suitable form for the kind of history they wished to write. Unfortunately, writes White, when historians speak of history as an art, what they have in mind is history that emulates the English novel as it developed in the late nineteenth century, a history that "[eschews] the techniques of literary representation which Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen have contributed to modern culture" (White, 1978a, p. 43). The nineteenth century novel form, he argues, has itself become something of an anachronism, unable to capture the fragmented and ambivalent nature of our existence. It has been superseded by other forms, which are more pertinent to the age like the *nouvelle roman*. White laments that historians do recognize the need to write history using newer literary forms:

There have been no significant attempts at surrealist, expressionistic, or existential historiography in this century [...] for all the vaunted 'artistry' of the historians of modern times. It is as if the historians believed that the *sole possible form* of historical narration was that used in the English novel as it had developed in the late nineteenth century. And the result of this has been the progressive antiquation of the 'art' of historiography itself (White, 1980, p. 43-44).

White points out some historians have shown a remarkable ability to innovate by utilising econometrics, game theory, theory of conflict resolution, role analysis and other types of innovations, but that the examples have been too few and far in between, and that it has been done only when the historian sensed "their conventional historiographical purposes can be served in doing so" (ibid, 45). The two examples he cites of the historians' willingness to go beyond the conventional modes of historical representation are the works of the Jacob Burckhardt and Norman O. Brown. Of O. Brown's experiment in *Life against Death* (1959), he says that Brown offers the historiographical equivalent of the anti-novel. In White's analysis of Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), we can see clearly the type of innovation he requires at work in historical discourse:

[He] was willing to experiment with the most advanced artistic techniques of *his* time. His *Civilization of the Renaissance* can be regarded as an exercise in impressionistic historiography, constituting, in its own way, as radical a departure from the conventional historiography of the

nineteenth century as that of the impressionistic painters, or that of Baudelaire in poetry. Beginning students in history - and not a few professionals - have trouble with Burckhardt because he broke with the dogma that an historical account has to 'tell a story,' at least in the usual, chronologically ordered way ... And once he was freed from the limitations of the 'storytelling' technique, he was liberated from the necessity of constructing a 'plot' with heroes, villains, and chorus, as a conventional historian is always driven to do. Since he possessed the courage to use a metaphor constructed out of his own immediate experience, Burckhardt was able to see things in the life of the fifteenth century that no one had seen with a similar clarity before him (ibid, 44).

What White advocates then, is a historiography that is innovative and uses techniques and methodologies from other disciplines. After all, argues White, historians have themselves at one point stated that the study of history does not require a specific methodology nor any special intellectual equipment. He says that only a willingness to innovate and continuously reinvent the discipline and to engage in the project of palingenesis would allow history to avoid the kind of crisis experienced in the discipline in the late nineteenth century. He says, "The methodological ambiguity of history offers opportunities for creative comment on the past and present that no other discipline enjoys" (White, 1978a, p. 47-48).

KLAUS NEUMANN AND THE WAY IT REALLY SHOULD BE

The kind of history White advocates, one that innovates, is self-reflexive and understands that the historical text is a literary artefact, is found in Klaus Neumann's *Not the Way it Really Was* (1992). Robert Kiste in the "Editor's Note" to the text refers to it as an example of a positive trend in Pacific history where young historians are breaking out of the traditional boundaries of their discipline and embracing more eclectic approaches in writing about the past. He compares Neumann's work with David Hanlon's *Upon a Stone Altar: A History of the Island of Pohnpei to 1890* (1988), pointing out both authors "employ a mixture of conceptual frameworks and research methods from social and cultural anthropology, folklore, historical linguistics, oral history, and archival research" (Neumann, 1992, p. vii), as a way of conceptualising a new kind of history. The very title of Neumann's text expresses a spirit that is anti-positivist, being an uncrowning of Ranke's outrageous assertion that he wanted to write history 'as it really was'. In the spirit of White, the text proposes instead, history that articulates the past in a polyphony (in the Bakhtinian sense) of voices and one that is nonlinear and experimental in form and subjective in nature. It is interesting to note that Neumann says much of what he proposed, the stylistic and methodological choices he made, stood "outside the parameters of the discourses that predominate in the discipline at the Australian National University and in its periodical, the *Journal of Pacific History*" (ibid). It is to his credit then, though working in an institution renowned for its conservative approach to history writing, he was able break free of methodological and stylistic constraints, and produce a text that is stylistically innovative and an exceptional work of scholarship.

One of the great strengths of Neumann's text is that it achieves Hayden White's call for a history that muses on the processes of its own creation, history that also contains a philosophy of history. Neumann says, "I do not always neatly distinguish between writing a history and writing

about histories, and I often make the second undertaking become part of the first” (ibid, p. 4). Neumann uses the study of the historical past of the Tolai as an occasion to express his thoughts on the complexities of the history writing process as well as to reveal unsettling truths about the past. Neumann is able to merge history and metahistory by the choice of his organisational style. Phyllis Herda, in a review of *Not the Way it Really Was*, makes the point that Neumann’s “organizational style is reminiscent of Greg Denning’s *Islands and Beaches*” (1994, p. 231), a work that itself undermines traditional historical practices and one in which Denning establishes a rapprochement between history and poetics that an empirical historian would dismiss as a folly of an individual imbibing freely on the theories of postmodernism and post-structuralism. In Neumann’s text there is harmony between content and form and he says as he was writing the book he consciously “wondered how to avoid a separation of the content and the nature of the research from the form in which the results would be presented” (1992, p. 42). Francois Lyotard’s well-known definition of postmodernism, “incredulity towards metanarratives” (1984, p. xxiv) is quite appropriate for Neumann’s work because what he constructs is “a series of ‘mininarratives’, which are provisional, contingent [and] temporary” (Barry, 2002, p. 87).

If one examines the structure of the text, one would find a history that is non-linear and which clearly violates conventional practices of history writing – and conventional literature - by not having a clearly discernable beginning, middle and an end. Even within the chapters Neumann chooses not to continuously propel the story forward in a linear fashion, but moves back and forth, sometimes giving an account by participants or eyewitnesses of the events, for instance, those surrounding the murder of German planter Rudolf Wolff, sometimes engaging in a discussion of his own methodology, sometimes discussing aspects of the Tolai historical past and sometimes engaging in a discussion of the influences upon his approach to history writing. The odd-numbered chapters of the book are concerned with the colonial past of the Tolai, especially the central event of the murder of Wolff. The even-numbered chapters “establish the contexts in which this history has been produced and in which Tolai produce their histories” (Neumann, 1992, p. 48-49). It is a forum where Neumann considers his own methods, discusses the influences behind his approach to history writing, and the impulses that drove him to research the historical past of the Tolai and the way he did his investigation. Herda correctly points out it is not the Tolai who are the main subject of the book, but history itself ((Herda, 1994, p. 231). Kiste expresses a similar view when he says “the Tolai history (or histories) is but a vehicle for addressing a larger set of issues about the nature of history and the work of its practitioners” (Neumann, 1992, p. vii).

The style of Neumann’s text clearly demonstrates two influences at work: postmodernist philosophy, which rejects the notion of objectivity in discourse of any kind and which emphasises and celebrates the disjointed nature of existence; and cinematic and dramatic technique. Firstly, one can see the influence of cinema on Neumann in his mention of the name of German film director Alexander Kluges, whose approach to doing history, he says, fascinated him. I will discuss the ideas of Kluges later, but here I want to compare Neumann’s work with some cinematic offerings with which his work shares many points in common. The template for most films is Aristotle’s three-act plot. In fact, the great teachers of screenwriting such as Robert McKee and Syd Field warn students of transgressing this time-honoured template. However, sometimes certain filmmakers opt for an experimental technique, breaking-free of the linear framework

and three-act plot development. One film that comes to mind is Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) in which four different witnesses give their account of one incident. The accounts of the four witnesses are mutually contradictory and the film makes a commentary on the nature of truth and objectivity. Two recent examples have been Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2001). Both films previously mentioned depend on a disjointed narrative and temporal shifts back and forth in the narrative to gradually reveal the story. Time itself becomes a subject in these films. In both films the experimentation with narrative techniques adds significantly to the development of the plot. Neumann's text can be seen as a textual equivalent of these cinematic offerings.

The text opens with an account in first person by an indigenous Tolai who relates the incident of the murder of a German planter. This is followed by Neumann's introduction to the Tolai people and his musing on the subject of history itself. In these musings, speaking of the various events he would examine, Neumann discloses, "for my history I have selected seven clips (my emphasis) from the Tolai past" (ibid, p. 4). After this we have a series of subheadings. He closes the chapter once more with personal musing about history and the type of history he intends to write: "I do not intend to write a history that places a particular sequel to events of the past firmly between a before and an after" (ibid, p. 36). There are times when Neumann, like a filmmaker, cuts to, pans and does a close-up. The stylistic cosmopolitanism one encounters in the text goes hand in hand with another important project Neumann has undertaken in the text – the task of revealing one of the great truths about history, one that orthodox historians know but fail to declare and that is the idea that objectivity is a chimera. All historians grapple with the questions of historical objectivity and historical truth, but Neumann demonstrates its elusive nature by writing a history in which objectivity is difficult to achieve. On the question of objectivity, Neumann writes: "The construction of the Tolai past that I propose is as subjective as other written histories – with the difference that other written histories often vie to be objective reconstructions of the past. I stand by the partiality of my approach" (Neumann, 1992, p. 40). Neumann instead writes history that is polyphonous. In his history, the past speaks to us in many voices. In his history, there is no one 'way it really was'.

Neumann also spends considerable time musing on the many influences on his own philosophy of history. In my discussion of White I mentioned how the philosopher's own work was influenced by and was a synthesis of the positive elements of philosophers before him. Neumann mentions the names of Walter Benjamin and German film director Alexander Kluges as two key influences. Of Benjamin, he says the theorist's two works "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and *Passagenwerk* or *Arcades Project* "represent the most incisive condensation of a truly revolutionary approach to history" (ibid, p. 42). "Theses on the Philosophy of History" Benjamin states that to "articulate the past historically ... means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." Hence Neumann's work is the expression of all the key moments that went into making a historical past. From Kluges, Neumann derives the idea that "there is a real need for ideology", explaining that his "proposal meant that I could use stories as elements for my construction of the past and at the same time subject them to a critique that tries to unravel the conditions" (ibid, p. 43). Speaking of Kluges' influence on him, Neumann writes, "His cinematic rendering of the past provides a vision for producing a history" and calls his

films “literary artefacts” (ibid). Both Benjamin and Kluges provide Neumann with a philosophy behind doing history; however, in search for a philosophy that synthesizes the ideas of the two individuals aforementioned, Neumann does not drown out the voices of the Tolai, rather his personal musings ask questions about the nature of history using the histories of the Tolai as a reference point. The arrangements of the chapters allows for his personal musing as well as the voice of the Tolai to live in harmony - the odd-numbered chapters contain narratives of the Tolai’s historical past, while the even-numbered chapters contain theoretical criticism as well as Neumann’s own reflections on the process of writing history.

So overall, what we have in *Not the Way it Really Was* is a history that has the stylistic cosmopolitanism that Hayden White suggests any good history must have. Neumann actively muses on his methodology, the challenges of reconstructing the historical past, and the various influences on his own worldview and style. For the reconstruction of the history of the Tolai, he also employs archival and oral sources (a source often marginalised in many European histories about the Pacific) and hence, gives agency to the subjects of the history, the Tolai. Most importantly, Neumann’s works makes a contribution to the on-going ‘history as a science’ or ‘science as an art’ debate by subverting Ranke’s proposition to capture the past objectively using the scientific method, by presenting a history that is polyvocal and understands its own status as a constructivist art. Kiste is right when he speaks of Neumann’s work as a healthy new trend in Pacific history and I would add for Neumann to write this kind of history working in an institution renowned for its methodological and stylistic conservatism is great credit to him.

CONCLUSION

This paper, in critically appraising the works of Hayden White, has tried to show the deep schism in the discipline of history that developed from the nineteenth century onwards, a situation that owed a lot to Leopold Von Ranke’s call for historians to write history ‘the way it really was’ and to Auguste Comte’s positivist plan for a ‘science of history’. In his theories of history and narratology, White suggests historians, in an effort to salvage the reputation of the discipline, need to pay heed to the techniques and methodologies from other disciplines. He also suggests historical texts need to contain a philosophy of history, that is, a historian needs to write about the past, not because he/she is an antiquarian but because he/she sees his/her work as contributing positively to the future of humanity. Most importantly, White suggests historians need to shun the idea of a science of history and acknowledge the historical text as being a constructivist and interpretive form. The kind of history that White proposes is found in the works of Pacific historians Klaus Neumann, David Hanlon, Greg Dening and Robert Nicole. The strength of these historians has also been their ability to energise the discipline with critical theory, a gesture that has allowed them to present fresh perspectives on the historical past.

REFERENCES

- Barry, P. (2002). *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Breisach, E. (1994). *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brady, I. (1994). "History's Poetics: An Interview with Greg Dening." *Dangerous Liaisons: Essays in Honour of Greg Dening*. Ed. Donna Merwick. Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press. 7-21.
- Brady, I. (2006). "On Greg Dening's *Islands and Beaches*." *Texts and Contexts: Reflections in Pacific Islands Historiography*. Eds. Doug Munro and Brij V. Lal. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 213-224.
- Burckhardt, J. (1944). *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. London: Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- Collingwood, R. G. (1946). *The Idea of History*. London: University of Oxford Press.
- Dening, G. (1980). *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas, 1774-1880*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Domanska, E. (1993). "Human Face of Scientific Mind: An Interview with Hayden White." *Storia della Storiografia* 24: 5-21.
- Domanska, E. (1998). "Hayden White: Beyond Irony." *History and Theory*. 37. 2. 173-181.
- Domanska, E. (2001). "Hayden White." *Postmodernism: the Key Figures*. Eds. Hans Bertens and Joseph Natoli. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers. 321-326.
- Frye, N. (1957). *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.
- Gide, A. (1966). *The Immoralist*. Trans. Dorothy Bussy. London: Cassell.
- Herda, P. (1994). "Review of *Not the Way it Really Was*." *The Contemporary Pacific*. 6:1, Spring 1994. 231.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1962). *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Liebeschütz, H. (1954). *Ranke*. London: George Philip and Sons, Ltd.
- Lytard, J. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Neumann, K. (1992). *Not the Way it Really Was*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1993). *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*. London: Penguin.
- O. Brown, N. (1959). *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*. Middletown,

Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.

Said, E. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage.

Seeley, J. R. (1914). *The Expansion of England*. London: Macmillan and Co.

White, H. (1978a). "The Burden of History." *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 27-50.

White, H. (1978b). "The Historical Text as Literary Artefact." *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 81-100.

White, H. (1978c). "Historicism, History and the Figurative Imagination." *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 101-120.

White, H. (1978d). "Interpretation in History." *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 51-80.

White, H. (1986). "Getting Out of History." *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Modernism Through Poststructuralism*. Ed. Robert Con Davis. New York: Longman. 146-160.

White, H. (1973). *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press.

White, H. (1980). "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *On Narrative*. Ed. J. T. Mitchell. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1-23.