

Revisiting History in Hayden White's Philosophy

SAGE Open
July-September 2014: 1–7
© The Author(s) 2014
DOI: 10.1177/2158244014542585
sagepub.com



Mehdi Ghasemi¹

Abstract

In his “Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality,” Hayden White writes “What we postmodernists are against is a professional historiography.” This statement inspired me to reexamine a number of White’s oeuvre from the perspective of postmodernism so as to find out in what ways and to what extent White is a postmodernist. In addition, I highlight a number of preoccupations of professional historiography and argue how White deploys the discourse of postmodernism to dismantle them.

Keywords

Hayden White, postmodernism, professional historiography, rehistoricization, optionalism, deconstruction.

Let us wage a war on totality.

Jean-François Lyotard

Postmodernism appears in many varieties and guises, and thus, it is deliberately hard to define. According to McDowell, Hostetler and Bellis (2002),

Trying to define and truly understand postmodernism can be a lot like standing in an appliance store trying to watch three or four television shows at once. It defies definition because it is extremely complex, often contradictory, and constantly changing. (p. 12)

As a result, no single definition of postmodernism has been widely accepted. Owing to this fact, I outline a number of definitions and features of postmodernism that are appropriate to my reading of Hayden White’s philosophy of history in this essay.

Jean-François Lyotard provides one of the most influential definitions for postmodernism. Lyotard (1984) defines postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (p. xxiv). According to Lyotard, in post-modernism, faith in metanarratives has ebbed, and thus, knowledge has not had to seek its legitimation universally but locally (p. 60). Building on Lyotard’s definition, Linda Hutcheon (1989) in her “Incredulity Toward Metanarrative” argues that postmodernism “is characterized by no grand totalizing master narrative but by smaller and multiple narratives which do not seek (or obtain) any universalizing stabilization or legitimation” (p. 186). Based on these definitions, postmodernism rejects metanarratives in favor of mininarratives that are provisional, contingent, and relational and makes no claim to totality, objectivity, universality, and absolute truth.

Because postmodernism maintains that there exists no absolute truth, it follows that there exists no basis for absolute meaning; rather, meanings are individually and/or socially constructed. This implies that there exists no single fixed meaning and interpretation of history, but plurality of readings and interpretations, not to mention that the interests of individuals, groups, and nations can play a significant role in forming their readings and interpretations. In addition, postmodernism sees history as linguistic constructs and man-made discourses, which are not given or natural. These constructs and discourses—which consist of a set of words, selected and assembled by historians into narratives with plots—are pregnant with a galaxy of devices that make them indeterminate and contradictory, ironical and paradoxical. It is worth noting that to revisit and reexamine the historical texts, postmodernism foregrounds ironies and paradoxes that exist within those texts, mainly because ironies and paradoxes, due to their critical and subversive power, can help the readers and researchers to pinpoint the contradictions within historical texts. The implication of this is that postmodernism does not deny the existence of history but invites the readers and researchers to rethink and reenvision it, and this is an attempt to rehistoricize rather than dehistoricize history.

Moreover, postmodernism denies that the historians are objective observers of historical events and objective recorders of historical accounts. Historians record what they wish,

¹Department of English, University of Turku, Finland

Corresponding Author:

Mehdi Ghasemi, Department of English, FI-20014, University of Turku, Turku, Finland.
Email: mehgha@utu.fi



and their own limitations, interests, and biases of any kind ultimately affect and surface in their accounts. In this climate, postmodernism seeks for self-reflexive history wherein readers can be more aware of some of the limitations, interests, and biases behind the historians' writings. Owing to these reasons, postmodernism rejects professional historians and their belief in the scientific status of history and historiography, teleology, totality, certainty, objectivity, universality, and essentialism. In his "Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality," Hayden White (2005a) writes "What we postmodernists are against is a professional historiography" (p. 152). This statement inspired me to reexamine a number of White's oeuvre from the perspective of postmodernism so as to find out in what ways and to what extent White is a postmodernist? In addition, I highlight a number of preoccupations of professional historiography and argue how White deploys the discourse of postmodernism to dismantle them.

White (1978) in his "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" maintains that while emplotting a set of events (e.g., a, b, c, d, e, . . . , n), the historians are required to give meanings to them through describing or characterizing them. In this process, the historians may privilege the "status given to certain events or set of events in the series," shown by White with the capitalized letters:

1. A, b, c, d, e, . . . , n
2. a, B, c, d, e, . . . , n
3. a, b, C, d, e, . . . , n
4. a, b, c, D, e, . . . , n. (p. 54)

Such accounts of history indicate both subjectivity and plurality of narratives that question the existence of one single, monolithic, total, or grand narrative. As an example, White (1966) refers to Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance* and states that "[Burckhardt's] intention was not to tell the *whole* truth about the Italian Renaissance but *one* truth about it" (p. 44, emphasis in original). He continues that "there is no such thing as a *single* correct view of any object under study but that there are *many* correct views" (p. 47, emphasis in original). The stated example followed by these statements clearly show that White denies the existence of one grand narrative as the ultimate Truth with regard to an event—in this case, the Italian Renaissance—and avoids confining history to one definitive monolithic narrative. White's position here is based on postmodernism style of thought that breeds skepticism toward ultimate Truth as well as the objectivity of grand narratives. It should be noted that postmodernism as a way to detotalize and reinscribe the dominant order of hierarchy rejects any totalizing or unifying view of history. This is to say that postmodernism provides a foundation for countering and deconstructing the grand narratives of history that are to substantiate their dominance and legitimation. The deconstruction of grand narratives is thus an attempt to free thoughts from

the hegemony of grand narratives and to clear space for mininarratives, which raise difference, heterogeneity, and multiplicity. Under these circumstances and as a result of replacement of grand narratives with mininarratives, postmodernism is dynamic, ceaselessly oscillating between two poles of "making" and "unmaking," "presentation" and "representation." As Hutcheon (1988) observes, "Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts" (p. 3). These nonstop movements between these poles help researchers to expand their realms of insight and embrace plurality of narratives. Seen in this light, grand narrative accounts of history that claim reference to absolute Truth are not truer than other mininarrative accounts of history.

In his attempt to replace grand, all-encompassing narratives with *petits récits*, which signifies the exigency of plurality of narratives, White (1987) then takes a further step in his *Metahistory* when he writes,

In my view, "history," as a plenum of documents that attest to the occurrence of events, can be put together in a number of *different and equally plausible narrative accounts* of "what happened in the past," accounts from which the reader of the historian himself, may draw *different conclusions* about "what must be done" in the present. (p. 283, emphasis in original)

In this excerpt, White, in addition to stressing the exigency of plurality of narratives, certifies the plurality of readings and interpretations. To this end, White shifts the locus of attention from the historian/author as the prime "author"ity to the text and the interaction between the text and the reader. From my standpoint, this is a postmodern attempt to free history from the shackles of an authoritarian ideology, imposed by the historian/author, through undermining the authority of the author and empowering the readers. White (2000) clearly states the exigency of neglecting the historians'/authors' intentions when he writes, "when we are concerned with the history of historical writing, it is the intentions of the text that should interest us, not the intentions of the writer" (p. 406). Moreover, he highlights the detachment between the author and the text in his interview with Ewa Domanska (1993): "I am inclined to follow people like Foucault and Barthes. So I say, the text in some sense is detached from the author" (p. 16). The detachment of text from the author recalls Roland Barthes's theory of "the Death of Author." Admittedly, the death of author paves the way for "the birth of readers" and naturally the arrival of newly born perspectives that bring about the plurality of readings as well as the multiplicity of interpretations, which are in line with the aims of postmodernism.

The plurality of readings and the multiplicity of interpretations, which aim to liberate us all from the coercive ideas of absolute Truth, bring undecidability to the narratives. This sense of undecidability then makes the narratives in Roland Barthes's term "writerly texts," opening the space for diverse

interpretations to arise, which altogether exhibit a postmodern sensibility. Under these circumstances, the readers are no longer passive recipients and consumers but active participants and producers of meanings from history transcripts. They play a creative role in the process of decoding and constructing meanings as they are required to go through this process of meaning-making, and naturally, the meanings they make may greatly differ from one another. In this climate, postmodernism can be seen as a departure from one single monolithic interpretation and the arrival of miscellaneous interpretations.

In addition to the exigency of the plurality of narratives and the plurality of readings and interpretations, White bears down on the plurality of interests. As White (1978) writes,

no historical event is intrinsically tragic; it can only be conceived as such from a particular point of view or from within the context of a structured set of events of which it is an element enjoying a privileged place. For in history what is tragic from one perspective is comic from another. (p. 47)

Furthermore, in “Literary Theory and Historical Writing,” White (1999a) rewords this idea as such: “[History] is made on both sides of the barricades, and just as effectively by one side as by the other” (p. 13). In these excerpts, in addition to stressing multivoicedness and plurality, White notes that while a historical narrative for a group brings dignity and identity, it can at the same time be considered a *nekbah* and disgrace for another group. Both of these statements are in line with another tenet of postmodernism, which claims that truth is community-based; it is simply relational, local, and perspectival, and whatever we accept as truth is dependent on the interests of the community we favor. Naturally, different groups, nations, and even individuals favor different accounts or narratives according to their own social, national, religious, political, and economic interests, and connections of any type, which rebuts the idea of “disinterested objectivity” in professional historiography.

As seen in all excerpts above, White makes a triangular move from the plurality of narratives to the plurality of readings and then to the plurality of interests. White (1987) in *Metahistory* sketches his pluralistic standpoint as such: “we are free to conceive ‘history’ as we please, just as we are free to make of it what we will” (p. 433). In such a climate, the plurality of narratives, readings, and interests foregrounds polyphony, or in Ihab Hassan’s term “multivocation,” a postmodern feature that maintains that there exist multiple versions of reality or truths as read, seen, and interpreted from different perspectives.

From another perspective, according to postmodern scholars Mas’ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton (1991), history should not be accounted as a solid and fixed narrative but “a contestation of diverse textualizations” (p. 54). This is what White most clearly wants to communicate in a number of his oeuvre, showing that history is not fixed any more but constantly in flux and process, and as a result, it is the history

of “*becoming*” rather than the history of “*being*.” In this way, he interrogates the idea of fixed historiography, exploring the possibilities of situating different perspectives in rewriting history, which releases historiography from being seen as a fixed entity. In his essay, “Literary Theory and Historical Writing,” White (1999a) quotes Frank R. Ankersmit as saying,

The great books in the field of the history of historiography . . . do not put an end to a historical debate, do not give us the feeling that we now *finally* know how things actually were in the past and that clarity has *ultimately* been achieved. On the contrary: these books have proved to be the most powerful stimulators of the production of more writing—their effect is thus to estrange us from the past, instead of placing it upon a kind of pedestal in a historiographical museum so that we can inspect it from all possible perspectives. (p. 7, emphasis in original)

Seen in his light, history and historiography are not final and ultimate but a process that is never completed. To clarify my argument, I would like to liken historiography to a chess game rather than a puzzle. As we know, one single place has been predetermined for each piece in a puzzle, and in case we wrongly place it, the image is not truly created. This is an example for a system of “being” or a closed machinery system. However, in a chess game, we have various moves and options before ourselves, and with each move, a new trend is opened before us. This is an example of the system of “becoming” or an open or organic system.

We can think of White’s synoptic table as a chessboard with each item as a man. To White, any of the modes of emplotment can be combined with any of the modes of argument and any of the modes of ideology, and thus, one can have a history written as “mechanistic anarchist ironic comedy” or “organicist radical metaphoric satire.” This statement clearly shows that historians decide and impose their own modes of emplotment. Postmodernism argues that what we call knowledge is a special kind of text or discourse that puts together words and images in ways that seem pleasing to readers or to members of a nation or a group. In the system of becoming, the historiographers enjoy a sense of “optionalism,” which helps them freely choose among different modes of emplotment. In other words, the optionality of tropology leaves enough room for the use of different modes of ideological and argumentative implications. This is to say that White’s view of emplotment rests on human choices, and admittedly miscellaneous factors can affect human choices. This leads me to conclude that the application of optionalism in historiography paves the way for the interference of human choices in historical writing that rebuts the objectivity of historiography. White (1999a) deals with the interference of human choices in historical writing when he enumerates three topological abductions:

1. Representation in which the preparation of chronicles of events occur. I would like to liken it to cooking in

which the cook prepares the required ingredients and raw materials for his own purpose according to his own cuisine.

2. Transformation in which the historians choose among different types of plot structure to shape the chronicles into a story based on a sequential order. In this part, the cook chops some of the raw materials and puts the ingredients into the pot one or two at a time.
3. Constitution in which the historian establishes meaning whether cognitive, ethical, or aesthetic for the objects, and to me, it is like adding some spice to the dish and serving it. It merits noting that the amount of spice used may change the nature of the work from being “meaningful” to “meaning-full” in Keith Jenkins’s (2008, p. 60) term.

Admittedly, in all these three tropological abductions, historiographers’ personal preferences and national, social, political, and economic interests directly and at different levels interfere in their works; what materials to use, what emplotment modes to use, and what meanings to constitute, not to mention their limitations and deficiencies all and all can affect the nature of their products. Moreover, I would like to argue that the analysis of these tropological abductions is indeed to “wage a war on totality” as it provides White with a possibility to dissect the professional historiography and detotalize it through interrogating its historical knowledge and objectivity. The dissection of professional historiography then helps White (2005a) discover “the resources of *poiesis* (invention) and artistic writing” (p. 152) used in it and its ties with art, the means that endowed it professionalism, and this is a reverse move toward the time prior to emplotment. As White (2005b) states in his “The Public Relevance of Historical Studies: A Reply to Dirk Moses,”

The salvation of professional historiography . . . [is] in reversing or rather amending our notions of history’s importance as a field of study, the revision of history’s so-called “methodology,” and most importantly a return to the intimate relationship it had with art, poetry, rhetoric, and ethical reflection prior to professionalization. (p. 335)

In my view, White’s reverse move toward the time prior to emplotment is a self-reflexive cognition and intuition, which as a process of self-revising and self-monitoring illuminates the artificiality of the professional historiography.

White also proffers the exigency of this reverse move toward the time prior to emplotment in his “The Modernist Event.” In that essay, White (1999b) raises the issue of the invention of plotless and subjectless historiography in the 20th century as well as “the creation of the new genres of postmodern parahistorical representation” (p. 66). However, if then so, it seems that the fragmented style of writing and its nonlinearity, its time distortion and dislocation “explode the conventions of the traditional tale” (p. 82). White’s quest

for the invention of plotless and subjectless historiography is a postmodern intention that deconstructs the concepts of location and time so that the narratives no longer follow a progressive coherent linear plot, which brings about “disintegration” in Hassan’s term and results in the creation of omni-temporality, dislodgment, and “multiperspectival setting” with different variables.

In such a climate, the historian sounds to provide the readers with the unknitted wools of the history garment, making the grounds for reworking and reknitting of its contents, which is to involve the readers in the process of history reknitting, and this is in line with “participation,” a postmodern technique. I also would like to argue that this reverse move toward the time prior to emplotment recalls Charles Russell (1985) who believes that postmodernism asserts and then undermines such principles as order, meaning, and control. White’s (1966) quest for the invention of plotless and subjectless historiography is also stated in his “The Burden of History,” wherein he requires “a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot” (p. 50). No doubt, discontinuity, disruption, and chaos can bring about alternative points of view and multiplicity of interpretations. However, these conditions that raise unresolved paradoxes are insatiable to the professional historians and their fans who seek for continuity as well as absolute and final meaning, but to postmodern thinkers, they provoke new articulations and contradictions and pose the questions that may eventually lead to the answers of different heterogeneous types.

Furthermore, White (2005b) in his “The Public Relevance of Historical Studies: A Reply to Dirk Moses” favors “cultural relativism” (p. 337) as the best policy that can lead to tolerance rather than intolerance to understand the position of the other side. It merits noting that from the perspective of cultural relativism, all groups produce specialized thought, and each group’s thought is equally valid. No group can claim to have a better interpretation of the “truth” than the others. Considering this fact, White then introduces the professional historians as the ones who are afraid of relativists because the relativists might reveal the factitiousness of their works and impugn the authenticity of their products. White (2000) in his response to Georg G. Iggers criticizes the objective position of these historians, adding that “historical facts are invented . . . they do not come ‘given’ or as ‘data’ already packaged as ‘facts’” (p. 398). This fact is also echoed by Linda Hutcheon. As Hutcheon (1988) writes,

What [postmodernism] does say is that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world—and that we create them all. . . . They do not exist “out there”, fixed, given, universal, eternal; they are human constructs in history. (p. 43)

This is an attempt to increase incredulity toward objectivity and genuinity, claimed by the professional historians, and to imply the exigency of fluidity rather than fixity when

dealing with historical events. As White (2005a) writes in his “Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality,”

It is no longer a matter of searching in obscure archives for the one new document that will authorize the admission of at least one hitherto unknown “fact” to the normative narrative account of a community’s history. Anyone opening up any topic on “Google” will find an intimidatingly long list of sources, secondary and primary, that could take a lifetime to examine, much less analyse or interpret. (p. 151)

From the above excerpt, it is inferred that White is to avoid the trap that reduces history and historiography to “only one way of being,” and this is in line with the ultimate end of postmodernism and its quest for the dissolution of fixity. In addition, White intends to question the authenticity of one single document coming from a particular archive as the only genuine and legitimate source of knowledge. It is worth noting that in “The Burden of History,” White (1966) speaks of dynamism and states that in a dynamic universe—like dynamic science and dynamic art—history can bring new perspectives to the camp. This standpoint indicates that White considers history a dynamic field, too, and this is to take distance from professional historiography, characterized by causality, totality, and fixity. White’s belief in dynamism in science, art, and history is based on the postulate of postmodernism that aims to reject essentialist objective views while seeing society, history, and culture in transformation.

Furthermore, what the professional historians see as an event that has actually happened in the past is seen by White as a “text” written by human beings. And we all agree that a text is made of language that can be paradoxical, ambiguous, ironical, and indeterminate. It should be stated here that postmodernism denies the fixity of language and its interpretation, mainly because language is itself pregnant with a galaxy of devices that offer optionalism of meanings and pluralism of interpretations. Diction or the choice of words with denotative and connotative meanings; the play of signifiers with a galaxy of signifieds; the presence of different (mis)spellings and puns, which can puzzle the readers, are just a few features of language as a dynamic entity that can add fuel to the fire of indeterminacy and create ambiguity and (mis)lead the readers to various interpretations. Seen in this light, postmodernism thus denies both the ability of language or discourse to refer to an independent world of facts and things and the determinacy or decidability of textual meaning.

It should be noted that postmodernism favors uncertainty and marginalizes fixed meaning, and accordingly, it avoids resolving the contradictions and indeterminacies, which exist in language structures. The presence of contradictions and indeterminacies liberates the imagination from old and fixed meanings and results in hermeneutical plurality. Seen in this light, unresolved paradoxes to postmodern thinkers provoke new articulations and raise questions that may (mis)lead to different answers. As a result, as Ihab Hassan (1987)

notes, interpretation becomes “prejudicial, uncertain, and suspect” (p. 449). In his response to Iggers, White (2000) refers to this fact as such:

Because language offers a variety of ways of construing an object and fixing it in an image or concept, historians have a choice in the modalities of figuration they can use to emplot series of events as manifesting different meanings. There is nothing deterministic about this. The modes of figuration and of explanation may be limited, but their combinations in a given discourse are virtually unlimited. . . . The words, grammar, and syntax of any language obey no clear rule for distinguishing between the denotative and connotative dimensions of a given utterance. (p. 395)

In addition, we should bear in mind that postmodernism subverts the neutral status of language as a disinterested medium of representation, and no doubt, it is already inflected with power relations.

Moreover, we need to take language deficiency in representing the past and its reality into account, which deprives the historiographers from recording the events as they have really been. Here, I would like to refer to two statements in White’s (2000) response to Iggers that recall Jean Baudrillard’s idea of “hyperreality.” According to White, “The representation of a thing is not the thing itself” (p. 396). He continues that “historical knowledge is always second-order knowledge” (p. 398). The former statement may signify that the perception can be different from expression. This difference may partly originate from language as a partial and deficient medium. The latter statement signifies that historical knowledge is based on “hypothetical constructions” and distant from a genuine and objective investigation. According to Baudrillard (1990), postmodernity is defined by a shift into hyperreality in which simulations replace the real, and accordingly, reality is no longer real, but hyperreal. For instance, in painting, the artist puts together different colors to make an image to represent a thing. In history, the historian attempts to put words together so as to record and represent an event, but admittedly in both cases, reality is no longer real, and consequently, what we achieve is not a “reflection” but a “representation” of events that—due to the reasons mentioned—is not genuine.

Accordingly, the representation of an event does not offer a thorough and total view of the event. In his “The Modernist Event,” White (1999b) enumerates a number of events, occurred in the 20th century, such as the two world wars, the Great Depression, the population explosion, and so on, and claims that “these kinds of event do not lend themselves to explanation in terms of the categories underwritten by traditional humanistic historiography” (pp. 70-71). As White writes, “historians are challenged in both their access to the past and in their representing it. . . . There is no past available to our inspection” (quoted in Pihlainen, 2013, p. 126). Because the past is no longer open to our perception and

inspection, we cannot be certain that any description of it is adequate to it. The unavailability of past raises the question whether we have access to any overall truth about the present. Reading from this perspective, I think, like the past, the present is not “available to our inspection,” either, and thus, the historians today in action more or less suffer from the same limitations of historians in the past. It sounds that the same holes, originating from the fallibilities from which history is and has suffered in the past—namely, deficiency of records, language deficiency, and partiality in representing the events, as well as the fallibility of producers—abound and are still available to us in the present. To testify the existence of holes in the historical representations and the unavailability of overall truth of events, White (1999b) quotes Gertrude Stein saying that an event may be an “outside without inside” (p. 82).

In what ways, however, can the historians remark the existent holes in the Great Whole of History? To answer this question, we should study four types of trope, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, enumerated by White. However, which one of these tropes is of more significance for White? To my surprise, White (1999b) states that “I have no reason to prefer synecdochic historians to ironic ones or vice versa” (p. 12). He speaks as a father who claims that he loves all his children equally; however, I agree with Frank R. Ankersmit (1998) who believes that irony is more prominent in White’s tropology, an access to or a glimpse of past. Likewise, Richard T. Vann (1998) refers to irony as a “super-trope” (p. 151), believing that “White never denied that his own stance was ironic” (p. 152). It should be noted that irony with its critical power provides the ground to question, and this is in line with postmodernism intention as well as White’s who refuses to look at history and historiography as a system of “being.” This way of referring to the past is in line with Hutcheon’s (1988) idea when she writes, “one never returns to the past without distance,” and that distance in postmodernism is “signaled by irony” (p. 39). In addition, this device, according to Hutcheon (1988), is “double-voicings, for they play one meaning off against another” (p. 211).

The emphasis on irony, thus, helps the researchers to remark a number of existent holes in the structure of history as irony has a subversive potential that can remove the text from its totality and essentialized genuinity. For that reason, Umberto Eco (1983) states, “the past . . . must be revisited, but with irony, not innocently” (p. 67), simply because irony can pinpoint the cracks in the walls of castle of history and provide a unique opportunity for researchers to identify the contradictions in it. I would like to argue that White’s acknowledgment of the existence of holes in history is itself another measure to detotalize history.

In this climate, White (1966) believes that the duty of the researchers in present time is to transform the historical studies so as to liberate the present from the burden of history and to make the historical studies fit in the aims of the

community. Seen in this light, history is not seen as a fixed ultimate entity that cannot be touched and that the historians have to accept it as it is. However, the historians should refuse to study the past as an end or ultimate being but contribute to offer some solutions for the problems of the present, which the professional historiography is unable to achieve. Moreover, what White (1966) is reluctant to achieve and certifies it in his “The Burden of History”

is to reestablish the dignity of historical studies on a basis that will make them consonant with the aims and purposes of the intellectual community at large, that is, transform historical studies in such a way as to allow the historian to participate positively in the liberation of the present from *the burden of history*. (pp. 40-41, emphasis is original)

From this excerpt, it is inferred that White attempts to rehistoricize rather than dehistoricize history. Rehistoricization is in fact an attempt to offer a rereading of history that can help to redefine the views of history and fill the readers with new significations. Thus, postmodernism does not deny the existence of the past or subvert history. Rather, it seeks to subvert the grand totalizing narratives of history or the hegemony and authenticity of one narrative over the other ones so as to set the readers free from the burden of history. As Hutcheon (1988) asserts, postmodernism criticizes historiography rather than rejecting history and attempts to reformulate the project of history. She later notes that “Postmodernism does not deny that [history] existed; it merely questions how we can know real past events today, except through their traces, their texts, the facts we construct and to which we grant meaning” (p. 225). Rebutting Andreas Huyssen’s idea that postmodernism relegates history to the “dustbin of an obsolete episteme,” Hutcheon (1988) believes that “History is not made obsolete; it is, however, being rethought—as a human construct” (p. 16). In this climate, rehistoricization enables the readers to reenvision the dominant value systems of history and embrace inclusive collective systems of history, which indeed drives a shift from univocality to polyvocality.

Accordingly, as a transcendental historian for whom the existence of past is a prerequisite for historical study, Hayden White does not deny the existence of history but invites us to rethink and reconstrue history for the purpose of its “deconstruction” rather than its “destruction.” As White (1999a) writes in “Literary Theory and Historical Writing,” “History can only be read if it is first written” (p. 2). Likewise, White (2005a) remarks, “That events actually occurred in an ‘olden time’ cannot be doubted, since there is plenty of factual evidence attesting to their occurrence” (p. 148). These statements clearly reveal that White, unlike metaphysical historians, is not to deny the happening of objects in the past, but unlike professional historians, he refuses to approach and embrace history as a total, genuine, teleological, unproblematic, absolute, monolithic entity. In contrast, he views history

as decentered, discontinuous, and plural. He is fully aware that historiography is selective in description and inevitably is written from the particular angles and views of historiographers, who are neither infallible nor disinterested. He is also fully aware of the language partiality and deficiency in recording and representing events. Thus, White as a prominent advocate of the postmodernist theory of history attempts to detotalize or denaturalize history through creating awareness that history is a man-made discourse and not an absolute given truth. His approach helps him revisit history, increase incredulity toward and dissolution of dominant metanarratives, and proffer alternative perspectives with regard to history.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professor Joel Kuorti from Department of English, University of Turku, for his insightful critical reading of parts of earlier version of this essay.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

References

- Ankersmit, F. R. (1998). Hayden White's appeal to the historians. *History and Theory, 37*(2), 182-193.
- Baudrillard, J. (1990). The precession of simulacra. In J. Natoli & L. Hutcheon (Eds.), *A postmodern reader* (pp. 342-375). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Domanska, E. (1993). Human face of scientific mind: An interview with Hayden White. *Storia della Storiografia, 24*, 5-21.
- Eco, U. (1983). *The name of the rose* (W. Weaver, Trans.). New York, NY: Harcourt Brace. (Original work published 1980)
- Hassan, I. (1987). Making sense: The trials of postmodern discourse. *New Literary History, 18*, 437-459.
- Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A poetics of postmodernism: History, theory, fiction*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hutcheon, L. (1989). Incredulity toward metanarrative: Negotiating postmodernism and feminisms. *Tessara, 7*, 39-44.
- Jenkins, K. (2008). Nobody does it better: Radical history and Hayden White. *Rethinking History, 12*, 59-74.
- Lyotard, J. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McDowell, J., Hostetler, B., & Bellis, D. H. (2002). *Beyond belief to convictions*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House.
- Pihlainen, K. (2013). The work of Hayden White II: Defamiliarizing narrative. In N. Partner & S. Foot (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of historical theory* (pp. 119-135). London, England: SAGE.
- Russell, C. (1985). *Poets, prophets, and revolutionaries: The literary avant-garde from Rimbaud through postmodernism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Vann, R. (1998). The reception of Hayden White. *History and Theory, 37*(2), 143-161.
- White, H. (1966). The burden of history. *History and Theory, 5*(2), 111-134.
- White, H. (1978). The historical text as literary artefact. In R. H. Canary & H. Kozicki (Eds.), *The writing of history: Literary form and historical understanding* (pp. 41-62). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- White, H. (1987). *Metahistory*. London, England: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. (1999a). Literary theory and historical writing. In H. White (Ed.), *Figural realism: Studies in the mimesis effect* (pp. 1-26). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. (1999b). The modernist event. In H. White (Ed.), *Figural realism: Studies in the mimesis effect* (pp. 66-68). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. (2000). An old question raised again: Is historiography art or science? (Response to Iggers). *Rethinking History, 4*, 391-406.
- White, H. (2005a). Historical fiction, fictional history, and historical reality. *Rethinking History, 9*, 147-157.
- White, H. (2005b). The public relevance of historical studies: A reply to Dirk Moses. *History and Theory, 44*(3), 333-338.
- Zavarzadeh, M., & Morton, D. (1991). *Theory, (post)modernity, opposition: An "other" introduction to literary and cultural theory*. Washington, DC: Maisonneuve.

Author Biography

Mehdi Ghasemi is a PhD student at the University of Turku, Finland. His doctoral dissertation examines a number of Suzan-Lori Parks's plays from the perspectives of postmodern drama and African American feminism, focusing on the terrains which reflect the African Americans' quest for identities.