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**THE CONTRIBUTION OF HAYDEN WHITE'S *METAHISTORY: THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE* (1973) TO THE LINGUISTIC TURN OF HISTORY WRITING**

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To define historiography is a problematic endeavour as its inherent dualistic nature flouts any effort to consider it as a proper literary genre or pure science. As English historian C. V. Wedgwood had noted "without the imaginative insight which goes with creative literature, history cannot be intelligibly written" (Szasz 208). A writer of history, especially a narrative historian, makes use of the tools of creative writing as much as he does scientific procedures. Hence any study of historiography must concern itself with both the scientific and the literary aspects of the discipline. Secondly there had been no academic consensus over what a definition of historiography should exemplify: the writing of history, the study of historical methodology, the analysis of the different schools of interpretation on a particular historical topic, or the history of historical writing. This paper on its part would consider historiography as the system of thought that informs history production.

French thinker Voltaire, was the first to use the phrase 'philosophy of history', as the title of his work *La philosophie de l'histoire*. The word 'philosophy' is used in association with 'history', as phrases like 'methodology of history', or 'process of history writing' are insufficient and inefficient in denoting literary leanings of narrative history, which is our immediate concern. Since such phrases better explain the scientific part of history, they are consciously avoided in the effort to determine the relation between narrative aspect of history and objectivity. In the opinion of R.G Collingwood "philosophy is thought about thought" (qtd. in Tucker 27). Accordingly, the work *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* defines 'philosophy of history' as a "meta-thought about history, in other words a theory of history" (Tucker 26). Following these assumptions, this paper would consider philosophy of history as the theoretical frame work of this particular branch of social sciences, attempting to provide a methodology for writing history, and how changes in our perception of history make us reconsider the perceived objectivity of historical accounts.

At this juncture it is necessary to provide a historical background to the changes in our perceptions about writing history by examining the evolution of philosophy of history. Prior to the nineteenth century history was considered a branch of rhetoric, a literary genre. "A Gibbon or a Voltaire was certainly an exception though their work is generally viewed as a kind of *Poetic historiography*" (Doran 3). A close reading of the basic texts upon which the framework of the modern historiography is modelled viz. the writings of Leopold Von Ranke in Germany, Auguste Comte in France, and historians such as Henry Maine or Thomas Macaulay of Whig School in Britain, it is possible to trace a connection between scientific status of history writing and professionalization of the discipline in early nineteenth century. The last forty years saw a departure from the scientific roots of the discipline, as narrativists like Hayden White, Louis Mink and W.B Gallie produced works which sought to analyse histories as verbal fictions rather than as recordings informed by scientific principles.

What we may problematically conceptualize as 'historiography' or at least the modern version of it, had its beginnings in German Universities, with its most famous figure as Leopold von Ranke. Putting forward a case for academically-informed historians, Ranke argued that a "true account of history" was possible, and stressed the need for "going to archives" and "getting the facts right" for "recording history as

it is" (Collingwood 242). Only through research, argued Ranke, could historians arrive at a true understanding of the past. It was crucial to his method that the sources be examined critically to uncover the motives of the author of a document, as well as its status and veracity. Ideally, he wanted works of history to be objective—he often used scientific terminology in this respect—to be written so as to be true to the past rather than to explain the present. Ranke did have his prejudices: "Like many of his contemporaries, including the German philosopher, Hegel, Ranke thought in terms of the state as the key component of modern history; and the Prussian state was clearly his ideal state. This coloured his supposedly objective history. He was of course a child of his time as well as a pioneering historian" (Spalding 153).

The 'Whig School' dominated the professionalization drive of the history discipline in Britain. They were perhaps the first group of historians with academic credentials to write the history of England. Thomas Babington Macaulay, William Stubbs, Edward Freeman, and J.R Green were the major names associated with this school, who led the drive for the scientific orientation of history in their country. The Whig historians emphasised— their later critics were to say they over-emphasised— history's standing as a story, a continuity, a development and by implication a progress towards a free liberal enlightened present (Spalding 226). The reason for such a half-hearted attempt at bringing about objectivity in the discipline lies in the patriotic spirit of the British and their admiration for the Golden Victorian era. The industrial revolution, flourishing trade, naval successes and the general prosperity and success of the age convinced historians that the nation was something special and that its history contained clues to its providential role. Such a concept made them constant prey to anachronism, seeing the past through the eyes of the present (Spalding 302). While their attempts were influenced by this apparently biased world view, the contribution of the Whig School in carrying forward the scientific drive of historiography must be acknowledged.

The core idea of the branches of historiography in Germany, France and Britain was that, in order to grant the discipline of history writing the gravity required for a proper branch of knowledge, it was imperative to develop it as an inductive science. The traditional historiography thus cultivated the idea of being a 'true account of past events'. This ideal of objectivity was supposed to be achieved through proper research, evaluation of the sources, adherence to the archival details and avoidance of any personal preference. The aim of a historian was to produce a narrative close to the hypothetical 'true account of events'. So theoretically what separated a historical narrative from an entirely imaginative work was the supposed possibility of validation of a narrative on the basis of this metaphorical true account positioned outside the text. The literary quality of a historical work was largely neglected during analysis as it was considered merely as a form through which the historical truth was transacted. Any criticism of the work was to be conducted as an inspection of 'what it conveyed' rather than 'how'.

It was in this juncture, American historiographer Hayden White published his *magnum opus*, *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973). After the scientific-turn the discipline of history took a "linguistic turn" (White preferred to call it a "discursive turn") with the philosophy of Hayden White. Hayden White criticised "the reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are more invented than found, and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have those in the sciences" (qtd. in Iggers 10). Through his radical philosophy Hayden White reduced the status of history to a form of literature. The very scientific approach that gave history the academic status in the nineteenth century was threatened by this linguistic turn in the philosophy of history and empowered historians like Alun Munslow to consider history as a "narrative discourse that is the *construction* of the historian" (Munslow 8).

At the centre of White's argument was the idea that a historical work is essentially a "verbal

structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they are by representing them”(White 2). White seeks to identify the various components that constitute the above mentioned structures. *Metahistory* distinguishes five levels of conceptualization in a historical work: chronicle, story, mode of emplotment, mode of argument, and mode of ideological implication.

Chronicles represent the temporal arrangement of elements in the historical field (See Appendix section). Chronicles are arranged into the structure of a story by " assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as comprehensible process with a discernible beginning middle and end”(White Meta 5). In White's opinion, historical events are made into a story by the suppression of certain of them, and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motif repetition, variation of tone and point of view and alternative descriptive strategies. During the construction a historian anticipates the questions of the sort "What happened next?", "How did that happen?", "Why did things happen this way rather than that?", " How did it all come out in the end? ", "What does it all add up to?", or "What is the point of it all?". A historian explains his position with regard to these questions using three different strategies: explanation by emplotment, explanation by argument and explanation by ideological implication(28).

<i>Mode of Emplotment</i>	<i>Mode of Argument</i>	<i>Mode of Ideology</i>
Romantic	Formist	Anarchist
Tragic	Mechanistic	Radical
Comic	Organicist	Conservative
Satirical	Contextualist	Liberal

**Figure 2.1: Three column four row table put forward by Hayden White in *Metahistory* as schema for the analysis of historical narratives (White 29).**

White argued that this set of options exhausts the possibilities of historical writing. He refutes the possibility of further, 'scientific', 'correct', 'neutral' way of writing history which could be found outside this grid. Rather historians are 'indentured to a choice' among these options, and cannot *not* choose. He goes on to suggest that no selection of modes within the grid is superior to another as there is no way to qualitatively analyze narratives. The choices made by the historian are not in any way conscious, but a reflection of the internal creative mechanisms of the writer. As Karyn Ball points out in the article *Hayden White's hope, or the Politics of Prefiguration*: "White's account of prefiguration accommodates the speculation that not all aspects of historical description and explanation are conscious or "active" and that tropological grids operate like transcendental principles in precognitively shaping the historian's narratives. If we understand intuition as passive, then its operation resembles the work of unconscious and preconscious associative manner of a covert determinative judgment that induces particulars to answer a general claim" (Doran 95).

White follows the method of a bricoleur rather than a proper theorist in his depiction of the 'quadruple tetrad'<sup>3</sup>. The elements in the table are in fact borrowed from other thinkers. Kuisma Korhonen, in his editor's introduction to *Tropes for the Past* points out the influences of White in this regard. Korhonen observes that the plots were borrowed from literary theorist Northrop Frye; the ideological mode from sociologist Karl Manheim and mode of argument from philosopher Stephen C. Pepper. Additionally, White's use of tropes was indebted to the structuralist theorists Roman Jakobson and Claude Levi- Strauss (11).

Not just the elements, the definitions given to them by White had also nothing original about them. Romance is explained by him as a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it and his final liberation from it. Satire, the precise opposite of this Romantic drama is dominated by the apprehension that man is a captive of the world. Comedy and Tragedy suggest the possibility of at least partial liberation from the Fall and offers a reconciliation between. In Comedy temporary triumph of man over the forces is symbolically celebrated in festive occasions. In Tragedy there are no festive occasions, except false or illusory ones. The reconciliations that occur at the end of Tragedy are much more somber; they are more in the nature of resignations of men to the conditions under which they must labor in the world". Satire views the hopes, possibilities, and truths revealed in the other three modes, ironically. Satire presupposes the ultimate inadequacy of the visions of the world dramatically presented in the genres of Romance, Comedy and Tragedy alike.

The Formist mode of explanation found in Romantic historians and stalwarts like Herder, Carlyle, and Michelet considers the depiction of the variety, color, and vividness of the historical field is takes as the central aim of the historian's work. To use Pepper's terms, Formism is essentially "dispersive" in the analytical operations it carries out in the data rather than 'integrative' as both Organicist and Mechanistic explanations tend to be. Organist historian is governed by the desire to see individual entities as components of processes which aggregate into wholes that are greater than, or qualitatively different from, the sum of their parts. The Mechanistic theory of explanation turns upon the search for the casual laws that determine the outcomes of processes discovered in the historical field. Contextualism seeks to avoid both the radically dispersive tendencies of Formism and the abstractive tendencies of Organicism and Mechanism. Contextualist proceeds by isolating some element of the historical as the subject of study. He then proceeds to pick out the "threads" that link the event to be explained to different areas of the work. His impulse is to link all the events and trends that might be identified in the whole historical field in a chain of provisional and restricted characterizations of finite provinces of manifestly "significant" occurrence (White 15-20).

According to White, the ideological dimensions of a historical account "reflect the ethical element in the historian's assumption of a particular position on the question of the nature of historical knowledge and the implications that can be drawn from the study of the past events for the understanding of the present ones" (White Meta 24). The terms White use to identify ideological positions (Anarchism, Conservatism, Radicalism and Liberalism), by his own account, are not to be identified with political parties named after them, but as "a set of prescriptions for taking a position in the present world of social praxis and acting upon it either to change the world or to maintain it in its current state"(21). The ideological argument which influences his way of emplotment of a particular historical narrative may or may not be consistent with his consciously held ideological position. According to White's definition, Conservatives are skeptical of 'forced' changes in the society and prefer a 'natural' rhythm. Liberals are half way in between Conservatives and Radicals and would prefer parliamentary legislations over revolutions. Radicals and Anarchists, however believe in cataclysmic transformations.

The confining of choices available to historians within a quadruple tetrad seems to limit the scope of narrative history. But as Herman Paul argues in his work *Hayden White* "existence of conventions does not exclude the possibility of rebellion"(2041). In fact White seems to endorse such efforts of transcending existing limits when he insisted that such traditions rest on "aesthetic and moral rather than epistemological" grounds (White 46). He has stated that certain "elective affinities" exist between elements in each horizontal row of the table. For example, a Romantic Emplotment is most likely to have a Formalistic argument and Anarchist ideology. According to white," these affinities are not to be taken as necessary combinations of the modes in a given historian. On the contrary, the dialectical tension which characterizes the work of every master historian usually arises from an effort to wed a mode of emplotment



with a mode of argument or of ideological implication which is inconsonant with it" (White 29). In fact, none of the great figures discussed in the book went along with the general tendency to follow 'elective affinity' of elements. White believed that, the ability of master historians to challenge the conventional patterns and create unique blends, were in fact hallmarks of their craftsmanship. They were able to create a level of freedom that enabled them to fully explore the existing possibilities within the available modes. Mathematically, the probable blends of a quadruple tetrad are fixed, and not all the combinations may be conductive in logically emplotting historical narrative. As Herman Paul argues, "historian's freedom that Metahistory so eloquently praised was not an adolescent sort of freedom to do whatever one pleases, but a freedom stemming from deep insight into the

Herman Paul argues in his work *Hayden White: Key Contemporary Thinkers* -

(Hayden White) only wanted historians to realize that there are no obvious reasons why a history book needs to resemble a Sir Walter Scott novel more closely than a modernist work by Virginia Woolf. Whatever the genre they prefer, historians always adopt a mode of representation. They always construct a version of the past and cannot help but impose their own assumptions upon the reality of the past. In that respect, they resemble authors of fictional literature (2062).

A historian, however is not an innocent victim of his circumstances, for his conscious use of figurative language complements this subconscious selection of modes. As Herman Paul goes on to argue "the realism that historians seek to achieve is not only imagined, in that realm of the historian's mind where dream and reason meet; it is also made by means of figurative language (Paul Hay 2395)." The difference is that fiction writing process requires more active participation of the imaginative faculties of the writer, in contrast to more subtle subconscious selection and prefiguring of a historian.

On primary view it would seem that White has set constrictive boundaries to the craft of historian by limiting his selection within the 'quadruple tetrad'. Such an ambitious effort to define the whole canon of the genre, and all future projects in the tradition, as permutations and combinations sanctioned by this table, would seem contradictory to the concept of freedom White championed for his fellow historians. What would relieve White from this charge is that he did not envision this table exclusively for historians. What White conceived was not the underlying frame work of a particular genre, but a structure that set the 'limits of imagination' itself. A Structuralist at heart, he did not wish to permit the anarchic free play of elements, but sought to construct an ultimate all-inclusive structure. Even though elements showed certain 'structural affinities' towards other elements within a horizontal row of the table, no combination is deemed a theoretical impossibility, nor a combination is considered superior to another.

A historian, arguably, has no obligations to stick on to the narrative strategies of the fiction writer; still the psychological inclination to do it is quite understandable. Human mind has an innate tendency to make sense of things and happenings around it. Using its imaginative faculties, the chaos is made into appealing structures. The way how mind enables events to function as the elements of a story, is instinctive. A well constructed story will have much more impact on the reader more than say, a chaotic collection of historical facts and dates.

While discussing the ideal of objectivity, American historian Peter Novick in his work *The Noble Dream*, says that a historian can hope for nothing more than plausibility. (qtd. in Chakrabarty 99) 'mere plausibility' is no less a problematic ideal than 'pure objectivity'. There are no set rules to determine 'what is plausible' and 'what is not'. Any discussion on plausibility would therefore fall back to the bare minimum of a historical narrative: chronicles and established historical facts. For example, a historical account which denies the occurrence of Jewish Holocaust is 'not plausible' compared to a narrative that accepts the existence of such a well documented historical event. But once the narrative process takes over, objectivity becomes the first casualty, as a historian tries to emplot the events, within an 'aesthetically-appealing' story

mode.

In a nutshell, there are no valid reasons as to why a nineteenth century narrative model of Walter Scot must be considered more objective to the modernist techniques of Virginia Woolf in writing history. Any new model works under the same constraints as demonstrated by the 'quadruple tetrad' of White. Moreover, such innovative models will have to compete against the aesthetic appeal of a traditional well formed story. Narratives following modernist techniques such as magical realism or stream of consciousness method will be restructured as stories with a beginning middle and end in the reader's memory, and will be turned into a 'proper story format' on subsequent narrations. For literary works such a 'reduction' is not problematic as they principally aim to communicate only with its immediate reader. Unlike literature, history has to make sense to masses, as it seeks to inform a community about its collective history in its parts and whole. Hence it would be safe to assume it would be impossible to find a narrative model that could guarantee the reach of 'proper story format' widely used by historians. Hence the importance of traditional historical narratives written according to the nineteenth century narrative models cannot be refuted irrespective of their failure to present a 'truthful account of history'.

*Metahistory* may be considered as a contribution to the philosophy of history (though White himself hated the distinction between history and its philosophy) and as a response to the practice of writing history in nineteenth century. As David Carr observes in his essay *On the Metaphilosophy of History*, "A large part of *Metahistory* is devoted to examining texts that are usually considered not "works of history" at all, but works of philosophy. He (White) deals with as many philosophers of history as historians... White, of course finds, the elements of his "theory of the historical work" in the writings of philosophers as well as the historians, namely explanation by formal argument, employment, and ideological implication. Thus, it is important that Hayden White be recognized for his analysis and evaluation of history in the nineteenth century, and not only for what he says about historians" (Ankersmit 16). White's philosophy of history in turn, sought to liberate individuals from the clutches of the history. By accepting the absence of a true narrative account of the past, we are able to become free from the limiting past. Hayden White's philosophy equips an individual with the knowledge that no version of history is qualitatively superior to another. Man doesn't have to accept an inherited history as it is; this knowledge enables him to actively construct history. Such independence is at once liberating and frightening. As White would suggest the selection of narrative is based only on moral and aesthetic grounds. This creates, White remarks, a delicate balance. "By constructing our past, we assert our freedom; by seeking retroactive justification for it in our past, we silently slip ourselves of the freedom that has allowed us to become what we are" (qtd. in Ankersmit 5).

Hayden White for his part denies any attempt on his part to "erect some ultimate metaphysical system rather than a kind of hypothetical "let us see what happens when we subject some of the commonplaces of contemporary historiography to criticism by discourse theory"<sup>4</sup>. *Metahistory's* contribution was to bring in sensibility of another discipline into historiography, rather than to undermine the effort of historians to produce better accounts. Analysis of the literary aspects of a historical narrative was seldom undertaken before *Metahistory*. Histories are considered to be influenced by prejudices and preferences which are for the most part, external to the text. A better reading of text according to the criteria set down by *Metahistory* enables insight into the imaginative process that goes behind the construction of a historical narrative. It opens up to the reader an additional dimension grossly overlooked. *Metahistory*, on its part, demands a close reading of the text at hand to figure out the pre-conditions of its construction, rather than making sense of the work on the basis of an 'external' historical context.

Production of a 'true account of history' was the perceived objective of the scientific drive of history. If a true objective account is impossible to accomplish, a discussion needs to be undertaken on what the function of a historian should be in the changed scenario. As a historian remains our major source

for making sense of past and imparting the wisdom of ages into the present, the ethics of his profession should remain our major concern. Any discussion on ethics of the profession, till now, was concerned with the degree of objectivity a historian brought into his account. If objectivity is a theoretical impossibility, our convictions regarding the ethics of the discipline will also need updating. Furthermore, any discussion hitherto on the merit of a particular narrative of history will have to include delineation of the narrative strategies adopted by the historian, and its impact on the meaning of the account.

Another significant aspect discussed in this study is the implication of this philosophy in the individual's life. As Hayden White sums up in his paper "The Burden of History":

In choosing our past, we choose a present; and vice versa. We use the one to justify the other. . . By constructing our present, we assert our freedom; by seeking retroactive justification for it in our past, we silently strip ourselves of the freedom that has allowed us to become what we are (14).

By accepting the absence of a true narrative account of the past, we are able to become free from the limiting past. Hayden White's philosophy equips an individual with the knowledge that no version of history is qualitatively superior to another, provided they deal with the same set of 'historical facts'. He doesn't have to accept an inherited history as it is; for this knowledge enables him to actively construct history. Such independence is liberating and frightening. As White would suggest the selection of narrative is based only on moral and aesthetic grounds.

The study does not consider these inherent restrictions of the discipline as a limiting factor. On the contrary, the study considers theoretical impossibility of 'one true account of past events' as a liberating strategy. The text argues for more narrative histories informed by the linguistic turn of the discipline. This paper proposes further studies to determine strategies to prevent ill-researched, manipulating or propagandist narratives exploiting the possibility of multiple historical narratives. Furthermore it offers more scope for further studies regarding the possibility of using the existentialist aspect of the theory of Hayden White in individual psychology.

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