Paul, Herman: *Hayden White*. London: Polity Press 2011. ISBN: 978-0-7456-5014-2; 204 S.

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The career of Hayden V. White – philosopher, historian, and cultural critic – has the air of an ending. If the titles of past publications, Metahistory (1973), Content of the Form (1987), and Figural Realism (1999), signalled a radical intention to run together levels of thought kept apart merely, he claimed, by convention, The Practical Past, the name of White's forthcoming collection, heralds a virtual hanging up of the sword.[1] As he admits, 'genuine historians are chary of philosophy of history for their own good reasons, and there seems to be little chance of bringing them onto common ground in the foreseeable future.'[2]

This considered, Herman Paul's 'Hayden White' is a timely summation and reinterpretation of White's work, achieved through a concise study of its context and careful rereadings of the key texts. Principles to follow when reading White's writings come thick and fast in the introductory paragraphs. Among these is White's aversion to the 'rigid system thinking' of a Russell or Frege, the analytical tradition that dominated in the 1960s (p. 8). Many will recall White, firstly, as the author of Metahistory's introduction, fifty pages whose terminological edifice is not without a whiff of systematic ambition, and, for this reason perhaps, part of a text no longer endorsed by its writer. This, Paul suggests, is a highly misleading position from which to read White's oeuvre, even if it has some resonance with his early work. Instead, Paul argues, White is concerned largely with the extent to which the moral and political imaginations are intertwined with the representation of history.

The first two chapters bear the fruits of Paul's 2006 Ph.D. theses on White's early work (1955–1973)[3] and reveal a perhaps surprising propensity in its subject for scientific modes of thought. With his doctoral work White undertook 'a socioscientific study of the long term causes of the papal schism of 1130' (p. 17), inspired by Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, Arnold J. Toynbee and Carl

Hempel. Paul notices interesting parallels between White's use of Hempel's „covering law model", deployed as an explanatory principle, and Metahistory's tropology. Chapter Two moves to territory more familiar to White's readers. It deals with White's 'liberation historiography' (p. 35), by which Paul means White's coupling of an 'existentialist fascination for freedom with a Marxist inspired political vision' (p. 36).

Chapter Three is a contribution to the debate around White's seminal Metahistory. Paul argues that the body of the work was written in the 1960s and prior to White's engagement with structuralism. The introductory essay, however, written after the text which it prefaced, was an expression of a terminology that White would develop fully in the early 1970s. Paul's other major conclusion, earned through a close reading of the text, is that the tropes 'refer to modes of realism, rather than to features of narrative texts' (p. 69). By this Paul means that they function in the mind of the historian as grounding assumptions about the nature of reality, rather than as literary devices present in the historian's text.

Chapter Four and Five deal with White's studies of narrative, the structuralist flavour of his writings in the 1970s, and his relationship with contemporaries. White, it is argued, tried to find a position that simultaneously incorporated the ideas of the „linguistic turn" but preserved at its centre the free subject. This determined his position toward such renowned contemporaries as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida as one of limited endorsement: he was willing to applaud, for example, Foucault's deconstruction of a particular species of humanist subject but not the complete immolation of the category of the subject. The conclusion to Chapter Four of-

[1] Hayden White, Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe, London 1973; Id., The Content of the Form. Narrative discourse and historical representation, London 1987, Id., Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect, London 1999; Herman Paul, Personal Communication, 19th August, 2011.

[2] Hayden White, 'The Practical Past', in: Historein, Vol. 10 (2010), pp. 10–19, p. 18.

[3] Herman Paul, Masks of meaning. Existentialist humanism in Hayden White's philosophy of history, Groningen 2006.

fers a solution to the puzzle of White's political commitments.

Chapter Five focuses on White's writings from his time at the University of California in the 1980s. After unpicking White's enigmatic phrase 'the content of the form', which became the title of a collection of his essays from this period, Paul addresses the question of White's antirealism. This aspect of White's work is brought into line with the central thesis about White's moral and political commitment. Paul deals with White's use of 'the sublime' in the same fashion, arguing that it 'repeated in a new register White's old utopian dream of human self assertion in the face of political oppression, conservative traditions, and religious intolerance' (p. 119). White received a great deal of criticism for advancing such a daring set of theses, with the likes of Roger Chartier, and Carlo Ginzburg berating him for, at best, sweeping aside the grounds for criticising undesirable historiography, and at worst, implicitly justifying fascist views on the past. Paul relates how White responded, albeit in typically oblique fashion, to these arguments and went on the offensive himself against conceptions of historiography that he thought to be irresponsible.

Chapter Six tells the story of White the 'archmodernist' (p. 129). Crucial to this is the concept of the „modernist event", this being as close to a positive programme as we are likely to read in White. As Paul describes, White was exercised by the class of historical event that he identified as specific to modernity: paradigmatically the Holocaust, but also such moments as the Challenger disaster of 1986 and the devastation of Manhattan's twin towers in 2001. White argued that these events pushed traditional, nineteenth century, modes of realism to breaking point. What was needed was a new style or set of techniques that were capable of adequately representing them, and this is precisely what historians would find if they looked to the modernist literary canon.

Paul's study is generally probing of rather than critical toward its material. However, Paul seemingly having learnt the power of the rhetorical question from his subject, concludes by firing off a series of his own: 'How convincing is [White's] humanist and quasi existentialist understanding of the human subject? How persuasive is his voluntarist approach to human agency? Is there a sense in which White may have fallen victim to the myth of anthropocentrism?' (p. 152) While this study is unlikely to be surpassed in the near future in its scholarly attention to detail, another might make as much progress having started on the more critical path suggested here. It might contest whether White's „unburdened" subject be necessarily coupled with, what Frank Ankersmit has identified as, White's Kantian line of reasoning toward historical representation.[4] The contemporary „posthumanist" moment asks that the anthropocentrism of this Kantian legacy be called into question in all areas of the humanities, the philosophy of history no less.

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[4] Frank Ankersmit / Hans Kellner / Ewa Domanska, Refiguring Hayden White, Stanford 2009, pp. 34–53.