



From Narrative to Representation: Historiographical Approaches of White and Ankersmit

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of historical representation in contemporary historiography with special reference to the ideas of Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit. It explores how historical narratives are not merely objective reconstructions of past events but interpretative representations shaped by language, metaphor, narrative structure, and the historian's perspective. The paper argues that historical writing is deeply influenced by literary and philosophical frameworks that determine how the past is understood and communicated. Hayden White's theory of narrative emplotment and tropology demonstrates that historical texts possess literary dimensions akin to those of fiction. At the same time, Ankersmit's concept of representation highlights the distance between the past and its narration. Through a comparative analysis of their ideas, the study evaluates the possibilities and limitations of representing the past in historical discourse.

Introduction

Hayden white and Frank Ankersmit are among the leading theorists who transformed modern understanding of historiography and historical representation. Both challenged the traditional notion of history as a purely objective reconstruction of the past and emphasized the role of language, interpretation, and representation in historical writing. White highlighted the literary and narrative dimensions of history, arguing that historians construct meaningful narratives through emplotment and figurative language. Ankersmit, meanwhile, focused on representation, consciousness, and historical experience, maintaining that historians represent rather than



reproduce the past. Their ideas significantly contributed to postmodern historiography and reshaped debates on truth, objectivity, and the nature of historical knowledge.

The design of history depends upon three major factors: a historian's subjective being (ontological position), the methodology or process for knowing the past (epistemological tradition), and how the historian represents the past (historical explanation). As history took the linguistic term, the deconstructionist historian emerged, who considered history a form of literature and hence historical knowledge a product of linguistic and cultural creation. They placed greater emphasis on modes of emplotment, historical narration, and historical representation.

The present article juxtaposes two great deconstructionist theorists, White and Ankersmit, on various aspects of Historical Representation. Both of them prescribed content (evidence), theory, and literary form in the design of history. But the intent and extent have been different.

Materials and Methods

White studied the works of historians and philosophers. He delved into the works of Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt while discussing the four types of realism in nineteenth-century Europe. While invoking philosophy of history, and repudiating realism, he studied the writings of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Croce.

White sought to highlight the differences between historians' and philosophers' approaches.

“I have tried to show that the works of the principal philosophers of history of the nineteenth century (Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Croce) differ from those of their counterparts in what is sometimes called "proper history" (Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt) only in emphasis, not in content”. (White:1973, p.xi)

It is also evident that White became interested in the writings of Roland Barthes for the development of the analytical approach for narration. And he was also influenced by Vico, Kenneth Burke, and Northrop Frye whose ideas helped him to understand the edifice of literary theory. “White examines what Roland Barthes called the reality effect created by all historical writing”.(White: 2014, p.13) White puts forth an idea of four tropes for incorporation into the literary theory

“White sees his four tropes everywhere, not just in contemporary literary theory or in the nineteenth century. Not only does he depend on Kenneth Burke and Northrop Frye for models, he returns to Vico's notion that our forms of consciousness are “given by language itself”.(White: 2014, p.15)

On the other hand, “Explaining his concept of historical experience, Ankersmit often refers to the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder, Lodewijk Van Deijssel, and Johan Huizinga”.(Domanska: 2009, 182)



Ankersmit became interested in Dennett and Searle and for their ideas on Intentionality. According to them, Intentionality is a natural phenomenon to a scientific understanding of nature. Their views exercised a great impact on Ankersmit's thoughts on consciousness. He asserted,

“In the discourse of philosophy of language are now often reformulated in that of consciousness. We may think here of the writings of Dennett and Searle and of so many others who have dealt with the topic of consciousness since them. And this can be interpreted as a movement toward experience”.(Ankersmit: 2005, pp5-6)

Though the basic theoretical frameworks of these two theorists have also been found to be the same, the underlying structures have been found to be different.

“Hayden White got included in the narrativists later but his approach to narration was different. He was concerned neither with the explanatory character of narration nor with debates between advocates of the covering-law model and narrativists, who disagreed about the status of historical explanation”.(Domanska: 2009, p.176)

Ankersmit has been considered the leading representative of the narrativist philosophy of history, particularly in his later writings.

“Ankersmit distinguishes between two opposing trends in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of history: critical or epistemological and narrativist. Critical philosophy of history is concerned with historical research, while narrativist philosophy of history studies historical writing. According to Ankersmit, narrativist philosophy of history is a philosophy of historical writing which proposes an aesthetic approach to historiography”.(Domanska: 2009, p.177)

Results and Discussion

Use of Narratives and Past

‘The linguistic turn’, brought about an emphasis on the role of language in creating meanings to historical knowledge. Historians like Carr, Danto, Dray, and Peter Munz considered historical narration as a simple extension of historical evidence. Historians such as White, Ankersmit, Munslow, Foucault, and Derrida gave greater importance to historical narration and considered it a construct of the historian's mind.

Both White and Ankersmit gave greater weight to the historical narration (linguistic form) than to the evidence. White believed that historical narration (organizing the past as history) is more affected by the historian's ontology (i.e., his beliefs, epistemology, and employment choices). Similarly, Ankersmit argued that historical narration is guided by four major tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony).



White states that we know the past in a coherent and connected manner through the literary narrative only, yet he does not defy the reliability of the facts. He considered historical narration similar to storytelling, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. White gave examples of historians using different modes in their narratives.

On the other hand, Ankersmit perceived history as the combination of facts and narration (precisely as an adjunct of language and theoretical perspective). According to Ankersmit, the categories of historical accounts are a construct of a historian's mind, expressed through language with its concepts and prepositions. He explained the profound meaning of the nature of historical narrative that

“A historical narrative is a historical narrative only insofar as the (metaphorical) meaning of the historical narrative in its totality transcends the (literal) meaning of the sum of its individual statements. Being a historical narrative, therefore, is a matter of degree”.(Ankersmit: 1994, p.41)

Historical Representation

Both theorists expressed their opinions on historical representation, albeit in different ways. According to White, history writing is basically equivalent to fictional novel writing. Both the novelist and the historian depict reality through language. Yet, the historian relies more on the evidence. The novelist relies more on the truth of coherence, while the historian relies more on the fact of correspondence (content or proof).

“Every history must meet standards of coherence no less than those of correspondence if it is to pass as a plausible account of ‘the way things really were’. For the empiricist prejudice is attended by a conviction that ‘reality’ is not only perceivable but is also coherent in its structure. It is in these twin senses that all written discourse is cognitive in its aims and mimetic in its means. And this is true even of the most ludic and seemingly expressivist discourse, of poetry no less than of prose, and even of those forms of poetry which seem to wish to illuminate only ‘writing’ itself. In this respect, history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation”. (White: 1978, p.122)

According to White, if a historian must bestow meaning on a series of historical events, he must select a dominant figurative mode of language before composing a narrative. He argued that the relationships among the events are formed in historians' minds. And these relationships depend on the historian's ontological being.

“Histories, then, are not only about events but also about the possible sets of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure. These sets of relationships are not, however, immanent in the event themselves, they exist only in the minds of the historian reflecting on them. Here they are present as the modes of relationships conceptualized in the myth, fable, and folklore, scientific knowledge, religion, and literary art, of the historian's own culture. But more importantly, they are, I



suggest, immanent in the very language which the historian must use to describe events before a scientific analysis of them or a fictional emplotment of them”.(White: 1978, p.94)

Ankersmit contended that historical narratives, which create meaning, are the representation of the past. This knowledge about the past is created in a certain fashion. Ankersmit’s views on representations are explained in terms of language, consciousness, and experience, which are mutually interdependent. “In the discourse of philosophy of language are now often reformulated in that of consciousness. We may think here of the writings of Dennett and Searle and of so many others who have dealt with the topic of consciousness since them. And this can be interpreted as a movement toward experience. Let us try to imagine how these three notions-experience, consciousness, and language-are mutually related. The most obvious and natural way to think of their relationship is as follows: First, experience brings us into contact with the world; second, consciousness offers us representations of the world as we encounter it in experience; and, third, these representations can be expressed in terms of language”.(Ankersmit: 2005, pp 5-6)

While analyzing the works of Ankersmit placed great emphasis on the historian's intentionality. Ankersmit laid more emphasis on consciousness and experience. He claims that consciousness could not be generated without experience.

“If we think again of these three notions- experience, consciousness, and, language-who would doubt that art has its elective affinity with the first two rather than with language?”.(Ankersmit: 2005, p.6)

Ankersmit considered a historian as a portrait painter.

Many historical theorists have become aware of the figurative dimension of the historian's narrative language. They considered the tropes, especially metaphor, to be the most prominent and effective organizing principles in the historical text. Strong and imaginative metaphors typically support strong and convincing historical narratives or interpretations”.(Ankersmit: 2005, p.36)

Hayden White viewed historical representation as a literary construction in which historians organize past events into meaningful narratives through language, metaphor, and emplotment. According to him, history resembles fiction because both depend upon narrative structure, though historians rely on evidence and factual correspondence. Frank Ankersmit, on the other hand, emphasized representation through experience and consciousness. He argued that historians do not reproduce the past exactly but represent it through interpretation and language. For Ankersmit, the historian is like an artist or portrait painter, creatively reconstructing historical reality from experience and perception.

History and Philosophy

Here, White and Ankersmit differ significantly in their views. White advocated similarity between the historiography and philosophy of history.



“I have argued elsewhere that the conventional distinctions between historiography and philosophy of history obscure more than they illuminate of the true nature of historical representation. The historian shapes his materials, if not in accordance with what Popper calls (and criticizes as) a framework of preconceived ideas”.(White; 1978, pp.101-102)

He considered historical research a matter of facts and historical writing a matter of interpretation. Ankersmit opined, “The distinction is similar, though by no means identical, to the distinction in philosophy of science between observation statement and theory”.(Ankersmit: 1994, p.34)

He asserted that epistemology is not crucial to the philosophy of historical writing, but it is of prime importance in the philosophy of historical research. But later in his career, he placed greater emphasis on the philosophy. His later work, “Sublime Historical Experience” (2005), presents clear-cut evidence of his firm leaning towards the philosophical trend in history writing.

“The main topic of this book, therefore, is to contribute to the resuscitation of the notion of experience from its apparent death, to explore and to explain the parallelism of the relevant development in both historical writing and in philosophy, and, more specifically, to show what lessons historical writing can teach the philosopher”. (Ankersmit: 1994, p.7)

Ankersmit accepted that the philosophy of language has clearly overshadowed the philosophy of history. He proclaimed his recent work as an effort to resurrect the glory of the philosophy of history, using the abstract concepts of moods and feelings.

“This is a rehabilitation of the romanticist's world of moods and feelings as constitutive of how we relate to the past. How we feel about the past is no less important than what we know about it-and probably even more so. ‘Sentir,c'est penser, as Rousseau liked to say, and this is where I fully agree with him”. (Ankersmit: 1994, p.10)

Ankersmit explored that

“All of historical writing is to be situated in the space enclosed by these complementary movements of the discovery (loss) and the recovery of the past (love) that constitute together the realm of historical experience. The past and the present are related to each other as man and wife in Plato's myth of the origin of the sexes, as referred to in the second epigraph of this book. The sublimity of historical experience originates from this paradoxical union of the feelings of loss and love, that is, of the combination of pain and pleasure in how we relate to the past”. (Ankersmit: 2005, p.9)



Conclusions

With recent deconstructionist historians coming to the fore, discussions have turned to the philosophy of history and the philosophy of language. Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit are two deconstructionist historians who have given new dimensions to the field of historical methods.

It is further argued that the philosophical inquiries of both philosophers added new dimensions and expanded the open-ended discussion. This doctrine has interacted with various concepts in the philosophy of history, such as Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Existentialism, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There have been several manifestations and reflections of this concept in the philosophy of history, the philosophy of science, and the philosophy of language.

Both the theorists brought creative ideas in a very lucid manner. Both of them held earlier historians to task for not representing history correctly. White reprimanded the historians for presenting an incomplete picture of the record.

“The late R.G. Collingwood insisted that the historian was above all a storyteller and suggested that historical sensibility was manifested in the capacity to make a plausible story out of a congeries of “facts” which, in their unprocessed form, made no sense at all. In their efforts to make sense of the historical record, which is fragmentary and always incomplete”.(White, :1978, p.83)

Ankersmit also rebuked the historians for the same lacunae.

“The most crucial and most interesting intellectual challenges facing the historian are found on the level of historical writing (selection, interpretation, how to see the past). The historian is essentially more than Collingwood’s detective looking for the murderer of John Doe”.(Ankersmit: 1994, p.35)

According to White, History is a literary narrative that makes the past coherent like a story with all events seemingly connected; however, he blamed that today history as a discipline is in bad form because to make it more scientific and objective it has suppressed literary imagination, the most significant source of strength. According to Ankersmit, History consists of two levels: one, the factual statement of the past based on documents; and the second, the historian’s weaving of events into a narrative structure. Ankersmit stated that, though history was held to be scientific, one should avoid the opposite extremes of science or of literature. White emphasized literary imagination, whereas Ankersmit stressed aestheticism.

White believed that history is no more miniature a form of fiction than the novel, as a form of historical representation. At the same time, Ankersmit considers historical writing to be figurative painting, and the historian a portrait painter.

In conclusion, both Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit redefine historical representation by emphasizing its interpretative and experiential dimensions. While White foregrounds the literary and figurative structures



embedded in historical narratives, Ankersmit highlights the role of historical experience and consciousness in connecting historians with the past. Together, their perspectives challenge the notion of history as a purely objective reconstruction of facts. Their theories ultimately broaden the understanding of historiography by presenting history as a dynamic interplay of language, representation, and experience.

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