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Reinhart Koselleck and Hayden White as Metahistorians: The Critique of Modern Historical Writing toward the End of the Modern Age

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Abstract

My purpose in this essay is to consider how the classic philosophy of history was reinvented as metahistory toward the end of the twentieth century. The German historian Reinhart Koselleck and the American historian Hayden White were its most prominent practitioners. Both scholars responded to the challenge of rethinking problems in historiography in light of the breakdown of the grand narrative of modern history, born of the European Enlightenment. Both rejected the teleological designs of the philosophy of history, yet are of particular interest for their inquiry into alternative conceptions of transcendence in historical interpretation. Koselleck reached toward a science of anthropology from his training in the idealist tradition of German philosophy. White, by contrast, reaffirmed history's ancestral ties to the arts of writing. In juxtaposing these scholars, I highlight historiographical issues they raise about the relationship between the experience of the past and writing about it.

Keywords

philosophy of history, metahistory, Reinhart Koselleck, Hayden White, critique of historicism, conceptual history, historical time, grand narrative

Introduction. The Philosophy of History reconceived

The classic philosophy of history has long been viewed with suspicion by professional historians. Yet theorizing about the nature of history as a field of intellectual inquiry has re-emerged in our times as a search for transcendental perspectives on the nature of modern historical writing. My purpose in this essay is to consider how the classic philosophy of history was reinvented as metahistory toward the end of the twentieth century. The German historian Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006) and the American historian Hayden White (1928-2018) were its most prominent practitioners. They led parallel lives as pathbreaking theorists among late twentieth century historiographers, at a time in which doubts about long-standing conceptions of history had come into play. In this essay, I compare their theories.

The emergence of the classic philosophy of history was coeval with the rise of modern historical writing during the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Philosophers such as Nicholas Condorcet (2012) and Immanuel Kant (2015), and their nineteenth-century successors such as Jules Michelet (1831/2013) and Karl Marx (1975), read the patterns of the past as a direction of change toward a beckoning future, and so gained currency as prophets of the transformative effects of historical change that augured the fulfillment of human destiny. Practical historical scholarship developed out of this intellectual matrix.[1] Over the course of the nineteenth century history acquired a professional identity of its own. Professional historians claimed to base their authority upon the findings of empirical research, but tacitly retained the faith of the philosophers of history that their work was contributing to what would eventually become a unified narrative of history as the story of the progress of humankind in the making of modern civilization. Broadly conceived, that faith was labeled historicism. As the philosopher of history Giambattista Vico (1984) was the first to remark: humankind has created its own human world apart from that of nature. Therefore it can recreate the path of its construction. In the guise of historicism, historians aspired to contextualize all human experience within the continuum of a single timeline, leading out of the past into the present.[2] Such thinking informed the design of textbooks in modern history and courses about the rise of the modern nation-states as agencies of progress, even though the history of the twentieth century was fraught with crises of catastrophic proportions.[3] Given two world wars, the rise of totalitarianism, and the genocide of the Holocaust, the ideal of progress as the loadstar of modern historical writing became an empty promise. Moreover, the practice of history was expanding beyond politics into broadly conceived realms of social and cultural history, as these played out on a global scale. The 1960s were to become a golden age in the expansion and diversification of these new approaches to historical scholarship.[4] Those who would expound upon the nature of history, therefore, faced a paradox. Historical scholarship flourished as never before, though the theory that had once guided historical practice had become remote from the directions that scholarly research was taking.

In the face of this crisis of modern historiography, both Koselleck (1959/2000, 1979, 1985, 1987, 2002, 2018) and White (1957, 1973, 1976, 1978, 1999, 2010, 2014) sought to explain its larger meaning by revisiting issues of theory. Neither was inclined to return to the deterministic schemes of the philosophers of history of the nineteenth century. Rather than looking for intelligible patterns in the realities of the past, they sought to identify the underlying modes of composition through which historians construct their interpretations.

1 Vincenzo Ferrone (2015), *The Enlightenment; History of an Idea*.

2 Georg G. Iggers (1995), "Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term.

3 Mark Mazower (2000), *Dark Continent; Europe's Twentieth Century*; Henry Rousso (2016), *The Latest Catastrophe; History, the Present, the Contemporary*.

4 Felix Gilbert and Stephen Graubard, *Historical Studies Today* (Gilbert & Graubard, 1972).

Both scholars responded to the challenge of rethinking problems in historiography in light of the breakdown of the grand narrative of history born of the European Enlightenment. Both were attuned to the pluralism of historical interests in their own times, and of the myriad ways in which the past might be presented. Both rejected the overarching designs of the classic philosophers of history, yet are of particular interest for their inquiry into alternative conceptions of transcendence in historical interpretation. As opposed to the grand schemes of the philosophers of history, both sought to build their theories upon the most basic intelligible units of historical meaning: for Koselleck, working concepts of historical understanding; for White, tropes of literary expression that inform historical discourse. Koselleck reached toward a science of anthropology from his training in the idealist tradition of German philosophy. White, by contrast, reaffirmed history's ancestral ties to the arts of writing. In juxtaposing these scholars, I highlight historiographical issues they raised about the relationship between the experience of the past and writing about it.

In developing his theory, Koselleck had recourse to Immanuel Kant's notion of transcendental concepts of human understanding as a point of departure for the elaboration of a conceptual understanding of historical interpretation during the modern age.[5] White, in turn, harked back to Giambattista Vico's axioms about the role of rhetorical figuration in ancient mythology as the groundwork of the narratives that shape historical thinking to this day.[6] Koselleck sought to show how history had emancipated itself from its beginnings in the rhetoric of storytelling to become an autonomous science, while at the same time accounting for the new directions that historians were exploring in their research and writing. White, by contrast, returned to history's roots in rhetoric as a way of understanding its ongoing role since antiquity as a form of storytelling. The effect was to internalize the search for larger patterns in historical inquiry in the activities of historians themselves.

From these starting points, they went their separate ways into worlds of theorizing apart by adopting different foundational principles of historical composition. For Koselleck, concepts served as abstract ways of grasping the meaning of historical change through time. For White, tropes provided the poetical formulae that set the shape of historical narrative. Both were matrices of the kind of narration that followed from them: for Koselleck the rational transformation of evidence into intelligible historical meaning; for White the poetical figuration of plotlines that shape the content of storytelling. For Koselleck, conceptualization was a new and modern form of conveying the temporality of the human condition. Conceptualization opened historical interpretation to unprecedented possibilities for conveying meaning, permitting the advance of history to a new level of understanding as a science of time. For White, figuration was as old as the mythology that had once flowed from it. The figural narratives of mythology were an ancient form of time-factoring, revealing how humankind went about solving problems over time. As an art of storytelling, the rhetoric of figuration plays into historical interpretation to this day. Koselleck argued for the necessary interplay of research and writing, contending that the experience of life is deeper than anything that language can convey. White set issues of research aside in favor of concentrating on those of composition. All historical writing, he contended, involves representation, which is the only means of communicating an otherwise inaccessible past.[7]

5 Reinhart Koselleck (1985), *Futures Past; On the Semantics of Historical Time*, 30, 37, 203-04, 246, 259, 280.

6 White (1976), "The Tropics of History: The Deep Structures of the *New Science*," in *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Donald Verene, 65-85; idem, (White, 1978), "Fictions of Factual Representation, *Tropics of Discourse*; *Essays in Cultural Criticism*, 127.

7 Koselleck (2018), "Fiction and Historical Reality," *Sediments of Time; On Possible Histories*, 17-23, idem, Koselleck, (2002), "Social History and Conceptual History," *The Practice of Conceptual History; Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, 24-29; White (1987), "Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *The Content of the Form; Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, 45.

Both built upon these foundations to develop comprehensive models of historical writing based upon a calculus of structural pairings in historical interpretation. Koselleck formulated a theory about the inverse relationship between the experience of the past (collective memory) and hope (longing for a transcendent future).[8] White proposed a theory of the integral relationship between form (narration) and content (figuration of the storyline).[9] Within these guidelines, both established unifying platforms for a plethora of ways to interpret the past: for Koselleck, variations in the dynamic interplay of repetition and innovation considered over time; for White, configurations of the many ways in which narratives may be plotted out of linguistic resources. Both arrived at theories of historical composition that are at once comprehensive yet flexible.

Method

This article conducts a comprehensive examination of the metamorphosis from classical philosophy of history to metahistory, juxtaposing the methodologies of two preeminent figures, Reinhart Koselleck and Hayden White. A nuanced exploration unfolds, elucidating the distinct approaches of these scholars towards conceptualization, one of the most complex categories in philosophy, and postmodernism. Furthermore, a meticulous review is undertaken, encompassing the entire body of work produced by both historians. The analysis aims to unveil the intricacies of their contributions, offering a scholarly perspective on the convergence of historical philosophy and metahistory within the discourse of these influential thinkers.

Theorizing history in the context of their times

Koselleck and White came of age during the era of the Second World War and entered into their prime as scholars in a postwar culture that witnessed an explosion of interest in history as both professional discipline and pedagogical course of study in higher education. A comparison of their experiences as young men coming of age in the midst of a world war is suggestive about the route that each would take in making his way into the study of history as a professional vocation. Koselleck had been a soldier, caught up in the errant cause of German imperialism. During combat on the eastern front, he suffered physical injury that maimed him for life, followed by the added psychological trauma of internment for over a year as a prisoner of war in Russia. He later remarked that his personal experience of hardship shaped his perspective on modern history, for all his life he was haunted by the German catastrophe under Nazi rule.[10] He was disposed to think of history in terms of obstacles to smooth transitions, and to harbor suspicion of abstract theories about prospects for the future. After the war, Koselleck returned to the university as a sanctuary in which to reflect on the larger meaning of his personal encounter with history. As he entered the profession, he was influenced by the ideas of the conservative historian Carl Schmitt, whom he had known when he was a student before the war, and to whom he turned for professional and personal support as an aspiring scholar.[11] Although Koselleck later thought of himself as an outsider in the profession in Germany, he complied with traditional expectations within the

8 Koselleck (1985), "'Space of Experience' and 'Horizons of Expectation': Two Historical Categories," *Futures Past*, 267-88.

9 White (1999), "Literary Theory and Historical Writing," *Figural Realism; Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, 3-10, 16-21.

10 Niklas Olsen (2012), *History in the Plural; An Introduction to the work of Reinhart Koselleck*, 12-14;

11 Ibid, 23-26.

profession. He taught at several prestigious universities, and participated in collaborative ventures at the cutting edge of German historiography, pioneering new ways of theorizing history in keeping with new avenues of scholarly research. Early on, he won respect among German historians for his work as a practicing historian of the radical Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. His research as a young historian played into his reflections on modern historiography during his later years. His pathway to international scholarly recognition as theorist of history germinated slowly, leading out of Germany into continental Europe before arriving in the Anglo-American world.

As a young man, White had been a sailor in the United States Navy as the war drew to an end. To my knowledge he never saw combat. He took advantage of the GI Bill to go to college, and so was one among that cohort of veterans who took to their studies with more enthusiasm and diligence than had their prewar predecessors. In an age in which higher education in the United States was expanding rapidly, he had the opportunity as a graduate student to observe both the burdens and opportunities of American historical scholarship.[12] Like Koselleck, White trained as a practicing historian, and wrote a doctoral dissertation about the Papacy at the end of the Middle Ages.[13] But early in his career, he became fascinated with the place of history within the larger context of the humanities, and set about familiarizing himself with the classics of literature as well as of history. It was this broad intellectual reach that led him to reflect on the prospect of new directions in theorizing about history. Reading R. G. Collingwood's *Idea of History* was an epiphany for him (Collingwood, 1946). Against the grain of conventional historical scholarship conceived as a social science in the tradition of Positivism, Collingwood argued that if history was a science it was one of a special kind, giving primacy to the imagination of the historian in telling the story of the past. White saw Collingwood as a renegade from the profession, and identified with him.[14] Like Koselleck, he enjoyed a distinguished professional career, teaching at several respected universities before becoming director of an interdisciplinary program in historical consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Following Collingwood, White challenged the Positivist proposition that the meaning of history inheres primarily in the data collected through research. Most historians, he allowed, pursued scrupulous research without much attention to rhetorical strategies for its communication. Professional historians wrote for one another rather than for the educated public, thereby abdicating their responsibility to contribute to the public forum their well-informed judgments about the meaning of the past for understanding the present.[15] White wondered about the viability of practice to the exclusion of theory. Whereas so much attention had been devoted to method in research, issues about the writing of history had hardly been considered at all. He therefore set himself an agenda for investigating the historians' rhetoric of composition, the linguistic building blocks of their prose about which they themselves might not have been aware. The styles that historians adopt matter, he argued. Their poetical resources hold the secrets of their most profound insights into the meaning of the past for the present. That is why, he suggested, great historical writing may appear in any age, not just at the cutting edge of today's research.

In this way, White positioned himself on the crest of the wave of interdisciplinary studies in theory that during the 1970s became the most publicized arena of scholarly interest. From the publication of his first book, *Metahistory*, he became popular in the scholarly community

12 Tyler Stoval (2018), "In Memoriam Hayden V. White," *Perspectives on History*. See also Herman Paul (2011), *Hayden White; The Historical Imagination*.

13 Robert Doran, "Editor's Introduction," *The Fiction of Narrative; Essays on History, Literature, and Theory*, by Hayden White (2010), xiv.

14 Hayden White (1957), "Collingwood and Toynbee; Transitions in English Historical Thought," in *Fiction of Narrative*, 4-22.

15 White (2010), "The Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History," *Fiction of Narrative*, 136-45.

worldwide for the originality of his take on modern historiography (White, 1973). His contribution to the revival of discussion about the formative power of rhetoric in historical interpretation, dormant in historiography for nearly two centuries, resonated with corresponding interest across the humanities in what might be characterized as the power of discourse to shape the meaning of a past whose realities are no longer a presence. One might say that he announced the coming of the "rhetorical turn" in contemporary historiography, in tune with the flourishing of "French theory" so closely associated with the celebrity of Michel Foucault.[16]

Koselleck and White were well aware of one another. Indeed, they developed a professional friendship. Their commentary on one another's work was polite without being deeply analytical. Koselleck acknowledged the importance of White's contribution to scholarship and assigned some of his writings to his students. He allowed, however, that he had misgivings about White's theory of history, for it seemed to him to be a retreat into the field of rhetoric from which history had emancipated itself in the work of historians during the Enlightenment. White's theory about the rhetorical foundations of historical writing was not really about history at all, he contended, but was rather a contribution to literary theory with applications across the humanities. He pointed to White's neglect of issues about research and evidence, focusing exclusively on those of historical composition.[17] White was more forthright in promoting the value of Koselleck's scholarship, and he played a major role in acquainting Anglophone historians with his work. He wrote a forward to the English translation of Koselleck's *The Practice of Conceptual History* to attest to the importance of his contribution to modern historiography (Koselleck, 2002). But his discussion was essentially a synopsis of Koselleck's key ideas with little critical assessment of them. His one distinguishing comment was mention of Koselleck's observation that the experience of defeat has a silver lining in disposing such an historian to offer counterpoints to dominant historical interpretations.[18] It is worth pointing out that White never attempted a searching analysis of Koselleck's writings, in the manner with which he treated contemporary theorists such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, and Paul Ricoeur, all reflective of the trend toward postmodern thinking about historical discourse. Still, White took Koselleck's work seriously. From his brief and random references to his work, White saw Koselleck as engaged in the rehabilitation of historicism by modifying and elaborating upon its conceptions.

Koselleck on the conceptual foundations of modern historiography

Koselleck thought of history as the rise of a science that has developed since the eighteenth century through the growing sophistication of the historians' capacity for conceptualization, as they refined their methods and entered new domains of historical research.[19] His references to historians hark back into antiquity, with notable discussion of the historical perspectives of Herodotus and Thucydides. But he was especially interested in the transformation of historical thinking during the age of Enlightenment, or more precisely the closing decades of the eighteenth century. This time in history he characterized as the "saddle period," a threshold in historical understanding in which historical scholarship coalesced as an autonomous science

16 Robert Doran (2010), "The Work of Hayden White 1: Mimesis, Figuration, and the Writing of History," in *The Sage Handbook of Historical Theory*, 106-18.

17 Koselleck (2018), *Sediments of Time*: "On the Meaning and Absurdity of History," 184; "Historians in the Plural: An Interview with Carsten Dutt," 261; idem, "Introduction to Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse*," *Practice of Conceptual History*," 38-44 (Koselleck, 2002).

18 White (2010), "Forward," *The Practice of Conceptual History*, by Reinhart Koselleck (2002), ix-xiv; idem, "Guilty of History," *The Fiction of Narrative*, 330, 333; Olsen (2012), *History in the Plural*, 240-41.

19 Koselleck (1985), "*Begriffsgeschichte* and Social History," *Futures Past*, 73-85.

apart from the natural sciences.[20] Historians came to understand time in a new way, and thereby gained an unprecedented capacity to invest the relationship between past and future with transcendental meaning. The new conception of time developed over several centuries, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, a response to the new science and its technical applications, the quickening of commerce worldwide, the consolidation of the political power of nation-states, and through it all, the process of secularization that cast doubts on the teachings of revealed religion. Sensitivity to these long-range factors were given a sense of immediacy by the dramatic disruption of traditional ways of life by the French Revolution.[21] Before the coming of the modern age, Koselleck argued, the human experience appeared to historians to be timeless. The value of history was believed to be contained in the lessons it taught about how to live well despite adversity. But there was nothing new in the human condition. History was believed to proceed under the auspices of a benign Providence, which guided the course of history and ordained how it would end in a Last Judgment. Through the Middle Ages, its coming was prophesied to be imminent. Anticipated without ever arriving, the notion of an end to time became a prophetic tradition of expectation, a never-ending promise of the fulfillment of God's plan for humankind. Time, therefore, was compressed between the now of the present and the not yet of the end of time.[22]

The move toward the secularization of human experience contributed to the re-visioning of history by the late eighteenth century. It marked the emancipation of profane history from the sacred framework in which it had long been enshrined. With secularization, the notion of an overseeing Providence lost its hold on historiography, as humankind became aware of it responsibility for making its own history. This idea became the foundational proposition of the emerging theory of historicism. The study of history told the story of humankind's self-creation. For Koselleck, this revolution in historical thinking generated a new idea about the workings of time.[23] Change was henceforth recognized as the dynamic element in the human condition, as humankind exercised its powers to fashion present realities in ways that furthered its expectations of the future. The modern age was a new era for understanding the historical nature of the human condition.[24] The future, once believed to be preordained and theologically predictable, became open to human possibilities of initiative, creativity, and resourcefulness. Historians noted unprecedented events that followed from these qualities of character. The quickening pace of innovation in all spheres of life led to the perception that the human condition was not only changing but accelerating.

The promise of the new regime of time, Koselleck argued, led into great expectations for the future, while the once prized lessons of the experience of the past came to matter hardly at all, at least in the minds of the most radical historians of the Enlightenment. But the emancipation implicit in this new conception of historical time also introduced uncertainties about what the future might hold. The future became an arena for speculation about ways to perfect the human condition. If hope for a transforming future incited a yearning for an earthly destiny, however, inherent qualities of human nature set limits upon its prospects. Koselleck mentions such factors as a disposition toward contention, hierarchies of power,

20 Koselleck (2002), "The Need for Theory in History," *Practice of Conceptual History*, 5.

21 Koselleck (1985), *Futures Past*: "Modernity and the Planes of Historicity," 5-12; "Historical Criteria of a Modern Concept of Revolution," 39-54.

22 Koselleck (1985), *Futures Past*, "Historia Magistra Vitae," 21-27; "History, Histories, and Formal Structures of Time, 98-104.

23 Koselleck (2002), *Practice of Conceptual History*: "Time and History," 110-14; "The Unknown Future and the Art of Prognosis,"131-47.

24 Koselleck (1985), "'*Neuzeit*': Remarks on the Semantics of the Modern Concepts of Movement," *Futures Past*, 233-58; idem, "The Eighteenth Century as the Beginning of Modernity, *Practice of Conceptual History*, 160-69 (Koselleck, 2002)..

asymmetry in social relationships.[25] For him, inquiry into these deeply engrained elements of human behavior provided groundwork for the makings of a science of anthropology with which to sort out the relationship between human nature and human ambition for fashioning its own future.[26]

For Koselleck, the most important consequence of the modern understanding of historical time was the discovery of the human capacity to conceptualize the temporality of the human condition. It provided historical scholarship with its purpose in the modern world. He noted the way historians by the late eighteenth century were substituting the term *Geschichte* for that of the older term *Historie* to characterize the nature of their work.[27] *Historie* reported upon the vicissitudes of the past in a world in which the human condition itself was perceived to be unchanging. History was exemplary. It taught edifying lessons about the past. The meaning of history lay in the charm of the storyteller and the ethical principles of the story told. *Geschichte* implied that the meaning of history was to be found in change itself, and so of the relationship between past experience and future possibilities. Depending on the weight one attributed to each in shaping decision-making, the historian's judgment about the relationship opened upon a spectrum of possibilities for modern historical interpretation. The new history involved an interplay between experience of the past (habit) and expectation for the future (hope). Experience has the stabilizing authority of heritage; expectation entails risk toward transcendence. Experience leans toward the habits of repetition, in favor of caution over initiative. Expectation anticipates unprecedented events, and so implies volition, choice, and contingency. Conservative historians battened upon the former; progressives the latter. Herein lay the birth of ideology.[28]

The new conception of time involved a spatial as well as a temporal dimension, a synchronic alongside a diachronic perspective. In grasping the diversity of experience in the wider world of a more cosmopolitan age, Koselleck explained, historians came to appreciate that time is experienced differently depending upon one's social milieu. Time, therefore, is relative to social circumstances, and these vary from place to place and within the echelons of society. At any moment in time, one can identify a spectrum of attitudes toward the pace of change. The speed with which political events succeed one another differs from that of social customs, while environmental change proceeds at a still slower pace. Some groups take to change with enthusiasm; others resist. The conceptualization of the relationship between space and time, therefore, contributed to the rise of social history.[29] Experience is spatial and plays out in its diversity. Its conception of time is synchronic. Expectation is temporal and seeks fulfillment on a timeline of anticipation. Its conception of time is diachronic. Koselleck avoided such notions as progress, decline, and destiny in his conceptualization of history. In solving some problems, he argued, others present themselves. There is neither salvation nor redemption in history, only the burdens of human responsibility to work for practical reform. There Koselleck lodged his sense of moral purpose as an historian.

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25 Koselleck (1985), "The Historical-Political Semantics of Asymmetric Counterconcepts," *Futures Past*, 159-97; idem, "Goethe's Untimely History," *Sediments of Time*, 67-73 (Koselleck, 2018).

26 Koselleck (2002), "Concepts of Historical Time and Social History," *Practice of Conceptual History*, 115-18.

27 Koselleck (1985), *Futures Past*: "Historia Magistra Vitae,"27-38; "Perspective and Temporality," 140-45; "On the Disposability of History," 200-02.

28 Koselleck (1985), *Futures Past*: "On the Disposability of History," 206; "Neuzeit; Remarks on the Semantics of the Modern Concepts of Movement," 259-66; "'Space of Experience' and 'Horizons of Expectation'," 287.

29 Koselleck (2002), "Social History and Conceptual History," 20-37, *Practice of Conceptual History*; idem, "Space and History," *Sediments of Time*, 24-33 (Koselleck, 2018).

White on the tropics of grand narrative

Like Koselleck, White identified the beginnings of modern styles of historical writing with the historians of the Enlightenment.[30] Modern narrative was grand narrative, a story with continuity from distant origins to present circumstances, with horizons of the future always in mind. His point was to show that these historians regarded their grand narratives as the fulfillment of the promise of the modern age.[31] All of the prominent historians of the modern age, he explained, aspired to tell the truth about the past in the sense that the events they represented corresponded to the facts they marshalled to tell the story.[32] Yet each told the story in a different way. White sought to identify the hidden poetical keys to historical composition, for he wished to show that all historians draw upon the same rhetorical resources and appropriated a style of writing from its repertoire of possibilities.

Whereas Koselleck had recourse to philosophical conceptualization as the ground of modern historiography, White revived the lost art of rhetoric as his point of departure. He argued that historical writing has a common denominator in language as a mode of communication that is universal. The key to the rhetoric of historical writing, he contended, lies in its deep poetical structures. These are based upon figures of speech (tropes), the most elemental forms of imagination through which the meaning of human experience can be conveyed. All historical composition has its origins in and develops out of these tropes of preliterate understanding.

White also offered a corollary to his theory: historical discourse has no poetics of its own. It appropriates the forms of literature to fashion its narratives. He argued, therefore, that in any age there is an equivalency between the style of an historian and that of a fictional writer. Both draw upon the same resources of language. During the modern age, for example, the literary counterpoint of historicism was realism. The nineteenth-century novelists created fictional characters. But they were cast upon a background that conformed to historical context. As White argued, both the historian Karl Marx and the novelist Gustave Flaubert were realists in their use of narrative. The events of their narratives, and the profiles of their characters, reflect the realities of their times.[33]

As theorist, White saw his task as inventorying and analyzing the varieties of historical writing within a framework of rhetorical possibilities. He traced the gradient of tropological representation from the most immediate toward the most abstract forms for imagining human experience–from metaphor (the most concrete), through metonymy (the most salient), via synecdoche (the most comprehensive) toward irony (the most detached). Figures of speech shape the plotlines of storytelling, and so once served as the matrices of mythology.[34] Ancient myth was a primordial method of factoring historical time. Humans are problem solvers, but need time to meet their challenges. Myths prefigure the kind of narratives that modern historians continue to employ. The tropes that historians adopt provide hidden keys to the forms of their interpretations. Whereas the poets of antiquity composed their stories out of the interplay of plot and character, modern historians pursue an approximation of this interaction as the integral relationship between form and content. There can be no history without evidence, he allowed. But evidence has no historical meaning except through narra-

30 White (1973), "The Poetics of History," *Metahistory*, 45-48.

31 White (1973), ibid, 38-42.

32 White (1978), "The Burden of History," *Tropics of Discourse*, 48-50.

33 White (2010), "The Problem of Style in Realistic Representation," *Fiction of Narrative*, 169-86.

34 White (1973), "The Poetics of History," *Metahistory; The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 31-38.

tion. Facts do not speak for themselves. They acquire meaning only when they become points of reference within the figuration of narrative.[35]

White further proposed that there is more complexity in the figuration of modern historical narrative than in tropes alone. Tropes are foundational in historical interpretation, but historians have recourse to other rhetorical resources in building their narratives. These include their modes of emplotment (romance, tragedy, comedy, satire); of explanation (formal, organic, mechanical, contextual); and of ideology, considered as the matrix of political intention: (anarchist, conservative, radical, liberal).[36] Together these resources constitute a repertoire of possible ways to configure a historical narrative, depending upon the choices historians make among them. Such choices reveal styles of writing that are unique to the authors, yet grounded in a poetics that they share with others.[37] In his scholarship, White classified the most prominent historians of the modern age within this underlying rhetorical framework. To illustrate his argument, he formulated two models of composition that informed the writings of prominent nineteenth-century historians. First, he sorted out leading nineteenth-century European historians in terms of the literary genre that each one favored in his storyline: Jules Michelet romance, Leopold von Ranke comedy, Alexis de Tocqueville tragedy, and Jacob Burkhardt satire. Second and as a separate pairing, he identified prominent philosophers of history with figures of speech that epitomized the narrative they employed: Georg Hegel with synecdoche, Karl Marx metonymy, Friedrich Nietzsche metaphor, Benedetto Croce irony. The interpretation of history at which each scholar arrived bore his personal signature. Yet each drew upon shared resources of literary expression. Each had merit and a claim upon the truth about the past. But there was no objective approach to historical interpretation upon which they could all agree.

Sober Assessments of the misfortunes of the modern age

Both Koselleck and White were sensitive to the reversal of fortune of the idea of progress over the course of the twentieth century, and with it the dissolution of the grand narrative with which its story had been told. Both arrived at sober assessments of the perils of the modern age. For Koselleck, the meaning of modern history should be read as tragedy, the consequence of unrealistic expectations of the prospect of human perfectibility. History in the guise of historicism had been the auspicious god of the modern age. But the most radical among the philosophers of history of the Enlightenment, he argued, had dismissed the experience of the past and given themselves to abstract speculations about what the future might hold. Koselleck addressed the inadequacies of historicism, founded upon the prospect of earthly transcendence, now to be evaluated anew as the disappointment of a "future past." The denouement of the history of the modern age revealed the overweening pride of the expectations of the historians of the Enlightenment.[38] His first book, *Critique and Crisis*, centered upon an indictment of the French Revolution for its degeneration into terrorist politics, and of the most radical thinkers of those times for pernicious speculation about the future based on utopian fantasies that would play into the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century.[39] In the new conditions of the modern age, conflict emerged about how the promise of the future

35 White (1978), "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," *Tropics of Discourse*, 81-99; idem, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *The Content of the Form*, 20-21.

36 White (1973), "The Poetics of History," *Metahistory*, 7-14; idem, White (1999), "Literary Theory and Historical Writing; Marx and Flaubert," *Figural Realism*, 10-11.

37 White (1973), "The Poetics of History," *Metahistory*, 29-31.

38 Koselleck (1985), "Modernity and the Planes of Historicity," *Futures Past*, 18-20; idem, "The Temporalization of Utopia," *Practice of Conceptual History*, 92-93 (Koselleck, 2002).

39 Koselleck (1959/2000), *Critique and Crisis; Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, 5-12, 130-37.

was to be fulfilled. Here Koselleck explained how the Enlightenment's understanding of the relationship between experience and hope had been reversed.

Koselleck challenged the grand narratives of conflict resolution devised by Georg Hegel (2019) and Karl Marx (1975). They forecast the dialectical synthesis of opposing points of view in a transcendent synthesis. In their view, the trend in history would be toward greater harmony, tending toward some future destiny that would culminate in an end to conflict in history. Koselleck rejected the eschatology implicit in such forecasting. He pointed out that it is unrealistic to think that conflicting positions can be so easily integrated, for inevitably one viewpoint prevails over all others.[40] As the counter-Enlightenment thinker Johann von Goethe had earlier observed, tensions between opposing points of view tend to be resolved in asymmetrical ways.[41] One approach prevails over all others in the establishment of hierarchies of social and political power. Pragmatic solutions that address the realities of social and political relationships prove to be more effective, as Koselleck argued in his analysis of Lorenz von Stein's modest expectations of the Prussian reform movement in the mid-nineteenth century.[42] Sensible planning matters. The future is always provisional. Solving present problems plays into the generation of new ones.[43]

For Koselleck, the great expectations of the historians of the Enlightenment became the great disappointments of their twentieth-century successors. Most infamous among these was the German catastrophe under Nazi rule. In a late-life essay, he catalogued the failings of humankind during the twentieth century. In retrospect, he argued, the German catastrophe was only the most salient manifestation among others of a like nature. These included racist imperialism, the rise of totalitarian regimes, the killing fields of the world wars, forced mass displacements of people out of ethnic rivalries, the trampling of human rights by late capitalism, the Nazi extermination of Jews as the most salient among a number of genocides, the sovereignty of nations splintered by warring factions, the high stakes of the cold war between the superpowers that played into local proxy wars.[44] All of these conflicts, he argued, were exemplary of the principle of asymmetry that he had developed in his theoretical writings. Attempts at building harmony among rival groups rarely worked as anticipated. The tenor of violence was deepened by the introduction of terror into the unconscious psyche of ordinary people living under the surveillance of totalitarian regimes. Its insidious effects troubled their dreamwork, and not just among the most conspicuous victims.[45] In the social sphere, he noted that the space of experience was shrinking in the face of the accelerating speed of technological innovation in commerce, transportation, and communication. The platforms of media, first auditory, then visual, contributed to a blurring of the line between reality and fantasy. The prospect of the hyperbolic ascent of technological innovation upon innovation, with the promise of more to come, distanced humankind from the natural world.

Over the array of quickening change during the late twentieth century loomed the threat of thermonuclear annihilation, a new kind of terror of globalizing importance. With the high stakes of mutual self-destruction in the political crises of the Cold War, the doomsday of humankind presented itself as a possible future. He worried that the grim weight of twentieth

40 Koselleck, "The Historical-Political Semantics of Asymmetrical Counterconcepts," Futures Past, 159-97.

41 Koselleck (2018), "Goethe's Untimely History," *Sediments of Time*, 67-73.

42 Koselleck (1985), "Historical Prognosis in Lorenz von Stein's Essay on the Prussian Constitution," *Futures Past*, 55-69.

43 Koselleck (2018), "On the Meaning and Absurdity of History," *Sediments of Time*, 183-86.

44 Koselleck (2018), "Behind the Deadly Line: The Age of Totality," *Sediments of Time*, 225-37; Olsen (2012), *History in the Plural*, 43-47.

45 Koselleck (1985), "Terror and Dream," *Futures Past*, 218-25; "Afterword to Charlotte Beradt's *The Third Reich of Dreams*," *Practice of Conceptual History*, 327-39 (Koselleck, 2002).

century experience was turning the tide against hope for the future. Such a prospect played into his stance on the historians' debate about a modern/postmodern divide. For him, postmodernism as a way of conceptualizing the future of history provided nothing new. Rather discourse about its role as a threshold for historiographical periodization signaled only the depletion of the creative resources for dealing with the problems of the modern age. The energy that had animated the reformers of the Enlightenment had dissipated in the late twentieth century, as in a process of entropy. Amidst the gathering complexity of modern life in the late twentieth century at all levels of experience, the call for planning for the future was welcomed, but in the tacit understanding that most of its long-range projects would never be implemented, and that those that were, would fall short of human need.[46]

White, in turn, analyzed the crisis of historicism in the move from a modern to a "modernist" style of writing, particularly in literature, signaling diminished expectations for finding meaning in history. If his early work focused on an analysis of modern history's devotion to grand narrative, his later writings turned to its dissolution, first in the literary modernism of the late nineteenth century, and subsequently in the postmodern historiography of the late twentieth century. Symptoms of doubt about meaning in grand narrative, he contended, surfaced in the writings of leading novelists of the turn of the twentieth century, such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Ezra Pound, who in their rhetorical strategies dismissed the notion of the all-knowing author, and that of a coherent framework in which a story might be told. Modernists presented the same story from a variety of detached vantage points, and experimented in odd juxtapositions of characters and events. Along the way they dispensed with the notion that the present moment needs to be contextualized in a larger historical narrative. The realism of modern literature gave way to the "de-realization" of its modernist successor. Modernist writers expressed alienation from a past that seemed oppressive in its demands for conformism to social conventions.[47] White argued that modernism as rhetorical style was a reaction against "modernization," conceived as the pursuit of rational technical processes that homogenized the diversity of the human experience. The modernist perspective was presentist and anti-historical. It settled into the sickness of nostalgia for a lost past that in fact had never existed. Without a grounding in historical context, modernist narratives lost the stabilizing boundaries that historicism had once provided. The integral relationship between form and content dissolved, making it possible to tell their stories as a mix of fact and fantasy.[48]

White's literary critique of modernism monitored the professional historians' repudiation of grand narrative as a storyline of progress, a conception so remote from the realities of the twentieth century as to be unusable. His catalog of its catastrophes was in keeping with that offered by Koselleck. For White, the ultimate modernist event was the Holocaust. White devoted special attention to its place in modern historiography because of its testing of the value of narrative in historical interpretation. In the Historians' Dispute in Germany during the 1980s, some prominent historians dismissed the need for narrative altogether in coming to terms with an event of such traumatic importance. Historians such as Berel Lang and Saul Friedländer argued that submitting its existential realities to narrative threatened to idealize and aestheticize its horrors. The meaning of the Holocaust as history would forever be bound up with the trauma of its victims and could never be communicated without distortion. Such a position was at odds with White's contention that events of the past can have no meaning

46 Koselleck (2018), "Beyond the Deadly Line," *Sediments of Time*, 229-30.

47 White (1999), "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation," *Figural Realism*, 40-41.

48 White (1999), "Auerbach's Literary History; Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism," *Figural Realism*, 87-100.

apart from their place in narrative.[49] While respectful of the position of his adversaries, he argued for the historical significance of narrating the events of the Holocaust as a cautionary tale for posterity.

Remembering the modern age

Koselleck and White contributed to the rising historiographical interest in collective memory toward the turn of the twenty-first century. It suited their reflections on promise and regret in modern historiography. A vision of progress into the future turned into a search for redemption in remembrance of a past that had gone awry along the way. Recollection of the disappointments of "futures past,"–visions of the future as conceived over the course of the modern age–played into Koselleck's thinking about collective memory. He referred to the misfortunes of the modern age as "negative memory."[50] Unhappy experience had come to prevail over once expectant hope. Late in his career, he wrote about the short-lived afterlife of commemorative war statuary. War memorials, he explained, were constructed to perpetuate the sacrifice of soldiers in modern wars. But collective memory as enshrined in such artifacts is protean and quickly loses the emotional immediacy of mourning. He suggested a logic to the way intended meanings fade into collective memories of a different nature, as he illustrated in photographs of German and French war memorials during the nineteenth century. Faith in particular ventures of the nation-state, the projects for which combatants had given their lives, could not exercise their emotional hold for very long. He noted how these grandiose monuments to the sacrifice of the war dead lost touch with the cause that they honored, as its realities disappeared from living memory. Koselleck also remarked upon the remarkable similarity of the iconography of commemoration, whatever the nation and whatever its cause. No memorial, he contended, can hold fast to the original meaning of its commemoration. Gradually its specific intention drifts into abstraction. Interest in the content of the message the memorial was designed to convey in time gave way to that of the form of the monument itself. Eventually, the aesthetics of its design becomes its only legacy. Koselleck's interpretation of nineteenth-century commemorative practices was a prelude to his discussion of twentieth century practice. As mass death in battle was democratized, portrayal of its meaning in memorials became a more challenging task. The remembrance of all the victims of genocide during the twentieth century, of which there were so many in different settings, has defied all attempts at adequate commemoration.[51]

White's take on commemoration followed a different line of interpretation, based upon his appreciation of Erich Auerbach's theory of mimesis: rhetorical strategies for presenting the past as a prelude to the present. Auerbach was interested in the way writers have reconstructed the past through narratives in which events prefigure their eventual fulfillment, as in the way Dante in his *Divine Comedy* casts life on earth as prefiguration of an otherworldly afterlife (Alighieri, 1320/1995). His accent was upon the promise of the present as it augured the future, a prospective on a time yet to come. White employed Auerbach's rhetorical model in reverse mode to show how retrospection from the present creates a "mimetic effect," a genealogical search for simulacra in the past with which to redeem the present in its wayward failings. The effect was to rescue the present through time travel to like circumstances in the past so as to claim a connection between past and present in the search for the meaning of a lost cause.[52]

49 White (1999), "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation," *Figural Realism*, 33-38; idem, *The Practical Past*, 77-92 (White, 2014).

50 Koselleck (2018), "Forms and Traditions of Negative Memory," *Sediments of Time*, 246-49.

51 Koselleck (2002), "War Memorials: Identity Formation of the Survivors," Practice of Conceptual History, 285-326; idem, "Sluices of Memory and Sediments of Experience," Sediments of Time, 216-24 (Koselleck, 2018).

52 White (1999), "Auerbach's Literary History," *Figural Realism*, 87-100.

For White, the mimetic effect is an expression of commemorative rhetoric. The author looks to the past out of fidelity to its once auspicious promise. No one, White allowed, ever imagined that the destiny proposed would in time be realized. But one could remain faithful to a cause despite all the obstacles to its fulfillment along the way. The task of looking back upon the frustrated hopes of the past for the future confirmed continuity of commitment to a lost cause. His argument has affinities with Eric Hobsbawm's notion of the invented tradition, or better still, Walter Benjamin's famous meditation on the angel of history.[53]

Straddling the Postmodern Divide

In their theorizing, Koselleck and White concentrated on the fortunes of modern historiography, roughly the period from the late eighteenth through the late twentieth century. They surveyed its transit from the promise of progress during the era of the French Revolution to the reversal of its fortunes in the traumatic catastrophes of the twentieth century. Their shared interest in this period in history permits a pairing of their interpretations. Their differences turn on opposing attitudes toward the idea of a modern/postmodern divide in styles of historical writing that emerged toward the end of the twentieth century. The idea of the postmodern is a potentially expansive concept, and in my view is best understood in the limited sense of a subversive change in thinking about historical representation. Koselleck saw postmodern thought as a move into deepening abstraction in its devotion to language theory, and its theorists as engaged in the dangerous game of ignoring the concrete realities that historians had always made the object of their investigations. He remained sympathetic to the notion that the protocols of historical writing developed during the modern age endure in a developing science, if in ever more complex ways.

Whereas Koselleck dismissed postmodernism as a concept with little meaning, White accepted the idea of a postmodern history as a logical response to the growing role of new technologies of communication in the culture of our times, even though it unsettled the quest for historical objectivity. He suggested that postmodern thought surfaced in the intellectual life of the late twentieth century because of the revolution in electronic communication as it played into mass media. Its force in reshaping contemporary culture produced an overload of imagery, and so greater awareness of the multiform ways in which the representation of the past can be fashioned. Doubts about the reality of the past as a stable historical referent led to postmodernism's detachment from it, thus denying continuity between past and present. The past was transformed from matrix into de-contextualized heritage upon which scholars could draw to suit their purposes. The idea of time travel displaced the historicist notion of a continuous pathway from past into present. The need for causal explanation was excised from historical interpretation. Free play between past and present superseded notion of a temporal structure that situated both.[54]

For White, postmodern thought raised further doubts about the possibility of objectivity in historical scholarship. Just as the texts composed by historians are open to interrogation, so too are the texts they adduce as evidence for their interpretations. Texts, White affirmed, are "paradigms of culture."[55] But so too are their source materials. Both are cultural productions, neither of which has stable grounding. White proposed that historical research, like historical composition, harbors a fictive element. To take a documented reference at face value is to engage in rhetorical fundamentalism. The notion of lifting a document out of the

53 Eric Hobsbawm (1984), "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. By Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, 1-14; Walter Benjamin (1968),"Theses on the Philosophy of History" In *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, 253-64.

54 White (2010), "Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties," *The Fiction of Narrative*, 304-17.

55 Ibid, 311.

past into the present as objective evidence is an illusion. Texts retrieved out of the past have deeper origins, problematizing their authority. The researcher may not know the conditions under which textual evidence was produced without further interrogations of its sources. As a referent to a past reality, a text hides its own forms of representation, and there is no guarantee of its objectivity. Its content is relative to the rhetoric through which it is conveyed. In pointing out the obscurity that underlies source material, White headed into genealogical regression. The past can have no fixity, he allowed, and the form in which it is recalled is based upon the historians' need to relate its meaning to present realities. One finds what one is looking for. Accordingly, White argued that the lens through which the historian filters the past is not only fictive, but also ideological.[56] In postmodern discourse, one speaks of the uses of the past for the present, no longer the past for its own sake. The historians' task becomes inherently anachronistic–the imposition of present-mindedness upon the past in the act of interpretation, once considered a misreading of the past and as such the bugbear of historicism.

White, therefore, was cast by his admirers as a pioneer in the application of linguistic theory to historical discourse, in which the analysis of texts displaced that of empirical facts as the basis of the search for meaning in the past. Historiography was returning to its ancestral beginnings as an art of storytelling. Each, therefore, had a different kind of appeal as a theorist of history: Koselleck as a sophisticated interpreter of modern historiography, building upon yet remaining true to its conceptual foundations; White as herald of a postmodern way of thinking about modern historical writing.[57] For contemporary historiography, one might argue, they resurrected the venerable debate about history as science versus history as art, reconsidered in light of historical practice during the modern age.[58]

Conclusion. On the Nature and limits of metahistory

Koselleck and White provide comprehensive interpretations of the search for historical meaning during a time in history that is now passing amidst an onslaught of cultural change, however one labels it. But theory, like practice, is time-bound. Their theorizing responded to the interests of practicing historians of the late twentieth century, who had come to acknowledge the inadequacy of the tacit theoretical underpinnings of modern historiography. Their analysis of historical practice was retrospective, and they stopped short of addressing the driving historical force of today's cultural trends, such as the revolution in gender relations, the globalization of historical interpretation, the effects of climate change, as well as advances in biotechnology and the coming of artificial intelligence as scientific achievements with far-reaching consequences for our species. Accordingly, the French historiographer François Hartog has used Koselleck's theory as a springboard to advance his own thesis that history in our times favors the present over the past as its primary referent for understanding historical time, and so our present age has entered a new "regime of historicity" beyond the "modern regime" of the late eighteenth century identified by Koselleck.[59]

Metahistory as elaborated in the theories of Koselleck and White nonetheless highlighted the growing complexity of making sense of historical writing during the modern age. Modern historical writing, they argued, lay claim to a mode of transcendence beyond that of earlier expressions, but of a more modest nature than that proclaimed in the classical philosophy of history. The patterns historians identify do not inhere in the past itself, but rather reside

56 Ibid, 313.

57 Keith Jenkins (1997), ed., *The Postmodern Reader*.

58 H. Stuart Hughes (1964), *History as Art and as Science: Twin Vistas on the Past*, 1-21, 68-88.

59 François Hartog (2015), *Regimes of Historicity; Presentism and Experiences of Time*, 15-19.

in the narratives that historians employ in giving form to the content of writings. Poetical tropes, like philosophical concepts, are matrices of narrative interpretation. The patterns they subtend are not linear designs of the course of history, but rather narratives that historians devise to lend structure to their interpretations of the past. It is in these structures that historical narratives convey the existential timefulness of the human condition.

Modest too was the claim of Koselleck and White for the value of metahistory vis-a-vis the honest labors of ordinary historians who do not ruminate much on theory. In his last book, White pointed out the significance of Koselleck's take upon the historical meaning of the experience of the past as a wellspring of popular culture.[60] Its heritage has served as the basis for a practical history attuned to the needs of the public at large for interpreting a time in history that was passing from a professional into a popular mode of understanding, the sort of historical writing that returned time and again to prominent figures and defining events of the past of enduring appeal in the popular imagination. Meanwhile, White commented, professional historians remain free to carry on their research at the cutting edge of history, setting the stage for new kinds of metahistorical theorizing.

Given the outsized attention that they have received in contemporary discussion about theorizing modern history, Koselleck and White have established a place for the return of the philosophy of history in the historiography of our times, but with a different purpose in mind. The historiography of the modern age had presented their work as a search for what ultimately was an objective certainty about the realities of the past. For the metahistorians Koselleck and White, elements of subjectivity in pursuing that quest are inescapable. Historians not only discover the meaning of the past in their research. They create it in their writings as well.

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60 White (2014), *The Practical Past*, 10, 15, 101.

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