Tropological Compression: Hayden White’s Theory of History

Abstract

Occasioned by Hayden White’s departure earlier this year, this article introduces his approach, method and conceptual framework. The exposé is particularly targeted at a new generation of historians who were not yet born when *Metahistory* was first published, and still infants when the wave of new inspiration entailed by White’s work reached Danish shores at the end of the 1980s. Accordingly, in order to demonstrate the use of the theoretical apparatus by familiar examples, two leading figures of recent Danish Cold War historiography, Bent Jensen and Poul Villaume, are singled out for showing how competing narratives are shaped by differences in emplotment, argument, ideology, and – ultimately – basic figurative language. The latter – embodied in the classical tropes – constitutes the compressed, irreducible forms of the limited number of master narratives that are, on the one hand, opposed to each other, yet on the other hand are complementary as they together indicate how any major politically disputed historical phenomenon can be perceived. The tropes may be construed as playing either of two roles within White’s theoretical system. They serve as shorthand recapitulations of the results of analytical procedures performed on the texts, considered as a field of empirical investigation. Alternatively, they are core element in a metaphysical line of reasoning depicting modern historiography as rooted in rhetorical functions that are ingrained in natural language and hence universal. Even if this interpretation cannot be proven true, it is efficient in a pragmatic way at suggesting which modalities of pre-understanding govern historical discourse and its decoding and assessment by readers.