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## A Life-long and Engaging Quest

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### Citation

Veldman, C. (2012). A Life-long and Engaging Quest. *Leidschrift : Met Het Kruis Getekend*, 27(December), 145-148. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/73295>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)  
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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

**A Life-long and Engaging Quest**

*Hayden White: The Historical Imagination*

Herman Paul

Polity Press, Cambridge

2011; 224 pp.; ISBN 978-0-7456-5014-2; £15,99/€21,99

In his widely read *De Constructie van het Verleden*, Chris Lorenz raises firm objections against what he perceives as Hayden White's most problematic ideas about the historical profession. Lorenz accuses White of frustrating the historical practice in his postmodern denial of three central premises that underlie each proper historical study. These are, in short, that the historical past can be known in its unique structure because professional historians apply the right methods to identify the past, that historical narratives can be adequate depictions of past realities, and finally, that facts and fiction can be separated. Hence, Lorenz regards White's premises as a suffocating embrace of relativism since it obstructs a public and rational debate on historical issues.<sup>1</sup>

Lorenz' criticism can be well regarded as representative of the main concerns about the work of Hayden White in the historical field. According to Herman Paul however, Hayden White has often been misunderstood. In his elaborate and accessible book *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination*, Paul offers the first comprehensive study of White's ideas by tracing its course from the mid-1950s onward. Framed chronologically, this work follows the life-long and engaging quest of Hayden White for an answer to his – implicit – question: 'how to live a morally responsible life in a thoroughly historical world?'<sup>2</sup> The formulation of this central question is Paul's greatest merit and is the capstone of his reinterpretation of Hayden White's intellectual heritage. It also makes plain the fundamental difference between Lorenz' and White's approach of the past.

Whereas Lorenz treats White as a philosopher of historiography, Paul introduces White as a philosopher as such, one who is politically engaged and concerned about the relations that people develop with their history. Secondly, Paul emphasizes White's existentialist humanist idea that

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<sup>1</sup> C. Lorenz, *De constructie van het verleden. Een inleiding in de theorie van de geschiedenis* (Amsterdam 2006) 133-136.

<sup>2</sup> H. Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge 2011) 12.

man should be enabled by historians to free himself from burdensome histories in order to contribute to a better world. Paul shows that, during his quest, White retained an unshakable belief in the abilities of man to free himself by endowing self-won meanings to both past and future. These observations had not been possible when Paul had not used the entire oeuvre of White. Hence his third theorem: Hayden White cannot be understood when read outside the context of his entire oeuvre. Indeed, Paul's study contains the most extensive bibliography of White currently available.<sup>3</sup>

In every chapter Paul guides his readers along the different stages of the development of White's ideas. Paul manages to indicate the trunk lines of White's thought and chose the chaptering to support this structure. Hence, the reader of this book will not get lost in the dazzling intellectual adventures of Hayden White, which is in itself a great achievement.

In the chapters 1-2 Paul shows how White developed a plea for the liberation of historiography. Influenced successively by Weber, Croce and Nietzsche, White came to see history as a product of human intelligence and will rather than impersonal or godly powers. To liberate man from the coherent historical narratives that burden him, the historian should indicate the very ambiguity of the past. Only in this way it would be possible to envision a brighter future, devoid of the burden of history. White wanted historians to be committed to progressive politics, since he realized that to live a morally autonomous life, a new social system was required.<sup>4</sup>

White regarded the pre-professional historians of the nineteenth century (Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt) as shining examples of historians committed to society, since their works contained a wealth of historical reflection that twentieth century historians had lost, caged in a disengaged professional irony. Using his well-known tropology, White reveals in *Metahistory* that an historical narrative can be told in very different ways, each of which is, in principle, equally legitimate, and only on aesthetic or moral grounds.<sup>5</sup> Paul hereby stresses in chapter 3 that *Metahistory* must not be seen – as often done – as a guide to analyze historical texts on their formal qualities, but rather as an attempt to expose the author's

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<sup>3</sup> Paul, *Hayden White*, 10-12, 173.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 49.

<sup>5</sup> H. White, *The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore 1973) 1-42, Paul, *Hayden White*, 61-64.

presuppositions regarding the nature of the real behind these texts. White's purpose with *Metahistory* was to show that historical imagination inevitably contains both thinking and dreaming, reason and myth. He therefore argued for a proper place of the utopian dream within the historical imagination.<sup>6</sup>

White's optimism about the formative powers of the historian, however, was challenged by the Foucauldian objection that historians themselves were captives of language. Paul shows in chapter 4 that White barely escaped absurdism by raising the notion of translation. He required a 'linguistic self-consciousness' of the historian, suggesting that he should possess a 'multi-language competence' and hence act as translator of different discourses.<sup>7</sup> In the chapters 5 and 6 the reader discovers how White thus kept his humanist project upright, and how he extended it in later years, when he put forward concepts as 'the sublime' and 'modernist events' to reaffirm his conception of history as intrinsically meaningful. Again White requires the historian to stand up, either to impute meaning to 'the sublime', or to restrain from that, describing modernist events in a Virginia Woolf-like intransitive prose.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, the answer on the central question 'how to live a morally responsible life in a thoroughly historical world' is concisely expressed in White's most recent draft: *The Practical Past*, well thematized by Paul at the end of his book. For White, humanity is served by history in her provision of morally inspirational figures, to be used as self-chosen guides. Or, 'We study the past not in order to find out what really happened there, (...) but to find out what it takes to face a future we should like to inherit rather than one that we have been forced to endure.'<sup>9</sup>

In his epilogue Paul states that taking Hayden White seriously implies a willingness to raise fundamental questions about the nature of man and about White's voluntarist approach of the human subject and his relation to the past. On the edge of his book Paul shortly takes up this challenge himself and alludes to a personal hesitation by citing David Harlan:

Can the threat of irony be broken by simply deciding to break it?  
(...) Kierkegaard or Dostoyevski or any number of other writers  
might have suggested to White that the historian can no more will

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<sup>6</sup> Paul, *Hayden White* 67-68, 92.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, 104-107.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 117, 133-135.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 148.

her way out of irony than the melancholic can will her way out of depression, or the young Luther could reason himself into belief, or even the most fervent and devout believers can call down an outpouring of grace on their upturned faces.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, it could be named ironic that Herman Paul succeeds convincingly in explaining White's thoughts in a structured manner that White himself never succeeded in. Paul's aim to express "what White himself might have wanted to say" is fully in line with the by White rejected Rankean ideal of describing "how it really was", or in this case, "what someone might have really wanted to say".<sup>11</sup> One could wonder whether this rebellious philosopher is still a rebel when interpreted by another voice and cast into a narrative structure of 152 pages. Such an author has, actually, been relocated forever to the realm of myths because his own formative will has been *lost in translation*, a thing that is, in turn, tragic.

Nevertheless, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* must be warmly recommended to every historian as a reliable roadmap into the highly relevant quest of this philosopher.

*Christiaan Veldman*

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<sup>10</sup> Paul, *Hayden White*, 152.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 6-7.