TOPICS IN HISTORY

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Hayden White, in his *Metahistory* and in the articles collected in *Tropics of Discourse*, has focused the attention of theorists of history on the relation of *how* an historian says something to *what* he says.[1] He has done this in a most striking and efficacious way, and in so doing, he has resorted to the venerable tradition that describes and prescribes modes of writing and speaking — rhetoric. But it is my contention that he has chosen the wrong rhetoric: he has underestimated the integral power and usefulness of rhetoric as a whole in his fascination with one of the five parts of rhetoric. Starting from the observation that many of the historical texts of the nineteenth century have the richness of "literary" texts, he has resorted in *Metahistory* to a "literary" rhetoric, and has reduced rhetoric to its last, and derived, section, *elocutio* or "style." More specifically, he has formulated a "tropics," a master-analysis whose units are the "four master tropes" selected by Kenneth Burke from the very rich classical fund.[2]

He has made the choice of a tropics, I believe, under the influence of an imperialist moment in contemporary intellectual history, a moment loosely described as "literary criticism," which has gained its status through its attempts to augment a theory of literature and literary writing with a general theory of criticism and critical reading. We note that major figures in this moment, such as Paul de Man, have coopted classical rhetoric in their search for an analytic lexicon for critical reading.[3] But the result has been to reduce rhetoric to poetics; where in classical rhetoric poetics had simply contributed insight and technical vocabulary to a general rhetorical theory and practice, this modern poetic rhetoric constricts the range and use of rhetoric to the illumination of a set of problems defined by "literary" canons. To reduce rhetoric to a consideration of "style," and then to reduce the consideration of style to a scheme of tropes, is particularly dysfunctional, I will maintain, in inquiry into history.

1. H. V. White, *Metahistory; Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, 1978).
2. K. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York, 1945).
3. See in particular de Man's "Semiology and Rhetoric," *Diacritics* 3 (1973), reprinted in *Textual Strategies*, ed. J. Harari (Ithaca, 1979).

White's tropical analysis is peculiarly antihistorical, since it focuses on texts, on products, not the events of process. White's position seems to be an extreme nominalist position that texts are, in fact, all that we have, that "history" is simply a group of texts, and that the only commitment of the historian is to his product, the finished text in its textuality. But this tactic shifts the interest from history as discipline and from historians as a community of inquirers, to history as isolate bits of writing; it calls the theorist away from the *context* of historical pedagogical institutions, historical modes of diffusion of research, historical disciplinary allegiances and matrices, to the freely reconstructible, and deconstructible, text.

My counter-suggestion is a more "historical" choice: we must consider history as an institution, a discipline. Further, I shall contend that the discipline of history is argument, and therefore, if we must use a rhetorical mode of analysis to describe how historians argue, we should prefer a topics, rather than a tropics, of historical discourse. I find reinforcement for my premise that the operative historical discipline is argument in Paul Feyerabend's notion of natural science; when science is functioning well, he claims, it is functioning as a freely, indeed anarchistically, ordered argument.[4] And I find further sustenance in Stanley Fish's contention that the discipline of proper literary criticism is argument; for Fish maintains that for a critical theorist to confuse literary criticism with literature, in order to assert the "higher claims" of literariness, is dysfunctional. The critics' success is not obtained in a mimetic fashion, by investigation which imitates literary procedures; rather, the necessity of "making your case" is the criterion and mode of critical advance, progress.[5]

Therefore, I do not have to prove that the formal, "literary" structure of each historical text is a *disputatio*; what I shall maintain is that the structure of the *discipline* is argument, and this invests each well-motivated historical text, whatever the form, with a specific and contemporaneous historical purpose. In other words, history does not simply consider "essentially contested concepts"; history is an essential contest, with the particular responsibility of generating these issues.[6] With this distinction, one evades the convolution of studying how historical texts control historians' behavior, rather than how the historians' activity issues in texts. White's poetics of history is doubly dysfunctional then, because his focus on the text, not the discipline, stipulates the object of his history as ahistorical, and because he must maintain the self-referentiality, the "literariness" of the text. But literature is essentially

4. Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London, 1978).

5. See Fish's forthcoming book, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, especially the chapter "Demonstration vs. Persuasion: Two Models of Critical Activity."

6. Eugene Garver speaks of the generation of W. B. Gallie's "essentially contested concepts" in his "Rhetoric and Essentially Contested Arguments," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 2 (1978), 156-172.

not contest, argument, in that "making a case" is obtrusive and interfering as motive (although literary authors, in various voices, have tediously harangued the reader, to be sure).

First of all, then, the history which both White and I wish to consider is a *traditional* discipline; as traditional, it is inquiry unlike modern natural science, which finds it essential to dissociate itself as much as possible from a good deal of its recent past, as well as all of the distant past. A useful definition of history does not force the theorist to relegate all "prescientific" history to the status of nonhistory, and would possess criteria which will distinguish success from failure in Herodotus as well as Braudel, Tacitus as well as Foucault. Next, as discipline, history is more like law than literature: not only because "literature" (like science) is a modern construct rather than a traditional one, but also because history rules are more similar to legal rules than to literary rules. The units of literary activity are genres, but the conventions which govern historical writing are not simply genre rules, although in specific cases generic canons seem to reinforce historical prescriptions. Historical and legal rules pertain to proof and confrontation, evidence and persuasion; they govern a range of complex activities — investigative, organizational, critical, expressive — ordering them so as to achieve a simple conviction: a goal which could be paraphrased as the establishment of the nature of a civil event. Thus I do not see "rhetoric as philosophy," or as counter-philosophy, but as a civil discipline which, like law, depends on investigative ingenuity as well as expressive force.[7]

Therefore, in order to illumine the processes and evaluate the practice of either of the traditional disciplines of history or law it is necessary to describe the rules of argument which control the expounding of the problems and issues of civil events. In other words, it is necessary to hypothesize the intimate connection of *three* traditional disciplines: rhetoric, history, and law. A case for the intimacy of the connection could begin with the claim that rhetoric shares with history a "legal" purpose: thus in the preface to Book V of the *Institutio oratoria*, the book devoted to argument, Quintilian insists that the purpose of the orator is not simply to "instruct," *docere*, but to "make good your case," *sua confirmare*.[8] And surely one of the strengths of White's *Metahistory* is his insistence on the priority and force of the expressive aims in nineteenth-century historiography, aims at conviction and belief, in fact. But within the rhetorical discipline, it is the lines or places of argu-

7. Compare the claims of E. Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition* (University Park, 1980); H.-B. Gerl, *Rhetorik als Philosophie: Lorenzo Valla* (Munich, 1974). Contrast R. Lanham's *Motives of Eloquence* (New Haven, 1976), whose case for rhetoric as counter-philosophy gives a very rich description of rhetorical purpose and motives.

8. *Institutio oratoria*, transl. H. E. Butler (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), V, Preface, 1-2.

ment, the *topoi* or *loci*, which inform the hegemonic activity of conviction.[9] A reading of either Quintilian's or Aristotle's discussion of the topics discovers very rich texts, since both represent a very straightforward confrontation of the infinite complexity of ordinary language and everyday discourse; the topics provide a central location for inquiry into discursive situation as civil event, the range of motivations and beliefs which invest discursive events. The most important characteristic of the *topoi* is the appeal to a common humanity: the topics, Aristotle claims, enable us "to reason from opinions that are generally accepted about every problem propounded to us"; but note that their simplicity and omnicompetence describe argumentative tactics which *use* substantive premises.[10] A topics studies usage. The *topoi* as lines of argument have rubrics such as "The More and the Less"; a topics constitutes a list of argumentative wrestling holds, while the commonplaces which have been investigated by philologists and literary historians are the products generated by the use of *topoi*: for example, the medieval commonplace "The Book of Nature" illumined in a rich historical vein by E. R. Curtius.[11]

The commonness refers to argumentative access; the *topoi* are useful in casual encounters, Aristotle says, "because when we have counted up the opinions held by most people we shall meet them on the ground not of other people's convictions but their own, while we shift the ground of any argument that they appear to us to state unsoundly." [12] The topics not only delimit a common ground, but act as barriers to the intrusions of the arcane and fallacious. "Common humanity," then, is topically defined in terms of accessibility, of an appeal to tactics the audience and speaker share and command which allow discursive mastery of a range of shared issues. Topics specify our common humanity not as a set of absolute presuppositions of value and goal, and not as a philosophical anthropology; rather, the topics represent a very complex, open-ended list of approaches, responses, which *use* relations. This list enumerates neither the empty formal relations of White's literary tropes, nor the essentialist premises of the logical categories; instead, the topics appeal to an available repertoire of civil behavior.

The priority of invention, of finding arguments or topics, over judgment, the critique of validity in inference, is in itself a *topos* of rhetorical discipline,

9. The important text which characterizes rhetoric as primarily argument is C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *La Nouvelle rhétorique: Traité de l'argumentation* (Paris, 1958), 2 vols.

10. Aristotle, *Topica*, in *The Works of Aristotle*, transl. W. D. Ross (Oxford, 1928), I, 100a.

11. E. R. Curtius, *European Literature of the Latin Middle Ages*, transl. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1967); see the collection of articles on Curtius and the tradition of topical study in *Toposforschung: Eine Dokumentation*, ed. P. Jehn (Frankfurt, 1972), esp. Jehn's introduction, "E. R. Curtius; Toposforschung als Restauration," vii f.

12. *Topica*, 101a.

since it authenticates a common capacity, subverts learned privileges which are earned in difficult, specialized training. Further, the priority of invention is a *topos* in history as well, with White's hero Giambattista Vico providing an ingeniously layered expression. Vico's definition of his "New Science" not only takes up his pedagogical claim that discovery, invention — as opposed to mere syllogistic cleverness — is the first priority in the education of youth, but also claims a "sensory topics" as historical, as a necessity of early civilization, the first organization of civil discourse which thus achieves civilized potential. The use of the topics in academic *ricorsi* by the new scientists, then, must repeat the *corsi* of human events.[13] And recently, Feyerabend has replicated the Vichian distinction when he identifies the history of science with discovery, the philosophy of science with judgment, and then proceeds, in a Vichian mode, to point out that the rational criticism evolved by philosophy of science is bankrupt in its methods, and negative in its impact on natural science.[14]

Feyerabend's notion that discovery is "historical" can be authenticated in several ways. "Common," as it defines the places, makes no substantive claims to ahistoricity, to eternity and universality. The quality of the values the topical arguments aim to establish represents a neat historicity, since the topics are used to establish the import of civil events for specific needs; the specificity relates honestly to the argument of the current occasion. Quintilian's distinction between the theoretical knowing he associates with philosophy and the argumentative capacity he attaches to rhetoric is a distinction between a knowledge kept from application by isolation as the subject of a learned discussion, and an investigation for immediate, social use: indeed, he subordinates theory by diminishing its pretensions and relevance.[15] Rhetorical practice is embedded in occasion, rhetorical analysis reveals usages, occasion.

This topical discipline which defines "common humanity" as common tactical capacity has refreshing moral implications for the historian. The later books of Aristotle's *Topics* present a list of strategies and rules which will keep discussion civil, and help avoid empty contention. The peculiar rhetorical training of arguing on both sides allows, for example, in the use of the topic "The More and the Less," a case to be made for richness and copiousness or

13. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, transl. T. Bergin and M. Fisch (Ithaca, 1968), sections 495 f.; see Peter Hughes, "Creativity and History in Vico and His Contemporaries," in *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, ed. G. Tagliacozzo and D. P. Verene (Baltimore, 1976), 168-169.

14. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 165f.

15. *Institutio oratoria*, V, xiv, 27f.; Aristotle, in insisting on the preliminary nature of the topics — the three uses are training, casual encounters, and preparation for philosophical discussion — insists on the versatility and immediacy of the topics, *Topica*, 101a.

economy and elegance as virtues, and allows generosity to be exercised. Compare the thematic, and not tactful, moralism of some of the practitioners of "history from the bottom up" who oppose their history to the "traditional" history of "great events"; often their self-gratulatory justifications are not coherent with their appeal to an elite audience, or with their impenetrable prose and masses of technical calculations. The justification may take the form of a condescending harangue to the nonelite, but both technique and harangue are marked by jejune argument.

Rhetorical generosity extends to providing both a sophisticated and a naive argumentative discipline. It is telling that the best introduction to the topics is Quintilian's section on argument, where he eschews the easy solution of the rhetorical handbooks, the compilation of a list of commonplaces, as too lengthy and exhausting, and chooses instead to concentrate on the *use* of the topics: to describe the desirable argumentative posture, a suppleness, an alert capacity to choose, which enables the proper use of special and common places.[16] Quintilian thus distinguishes two kinds of rhetorical activity, which can be related to two kinds of historical activity. A naive rhetor relies on access to a common wisdom organized by a list of topics, an organization both mechanical and superficial, and therefore highly efficient, rendering significance transferable to addressor and addressee contexts. Indeed, we can see how readily the lists of topics assigned to *amplificatio* in the Pseudo-Ciceronian *Ad Herrenium* translate into historical parameters — can be, and indeed were, translated in classical, or premodern history. The list, which is legal in purpose in its own text, includes the relation of the act at issue to the authority of the past, the definition of the population affected, the political advantage or disadvantage, the nature of the intention motivating the act, its uniqueness or commonness, and the precise circumstances of the event.[17]

But the more sophisticated type of activity exhibits a control of priorities, an awareness of choice, a readiness in the employment of argument, and an emphasis on user, not list, and it is this sophistication (which can become second nature) which Quintilian wishes to impart in his rhetoric. We notice that the three primary Quintilianesque issues of argument — *An sit? Quid sit? Quale sit?*: Does it exist? What exists? How does it exist? — are not only rather obviously "historical," but historically liberating; they keep sophistication from bogging down either in difficulty or in "facts."[18] To illustrate: the argument of Robert Darnton's recent work on the French *Encyclopedia* poses the question *"Quid sit?"* in a stimulating fashion, since he enjoins his reader to reconsider the *Encyclopedia* as "fact," to consider a series of tactics

16. *Institutio oratoria*, V, x, 100; compare Aristotle, who characterizes the topics not as a list, but as a skill, *Topica*, 164b.

17. *Rhetorica ad Herrenium*, transl. H. Caplan (Cambridge, 1954), II, xxx, 48f.

18. *Institutio oratoria*, V, x, 53.

of definition which treat the *Encyclopedia* as paper product, not text.[19] Sir Lewis Namier's hypothesis of eighteenth-century politics as clientage could be analyzed topically, since his primary contribution is to question the very existence of modern politics in the period (*An sit?*), to answer the question in the negative, and then to redefine English politics in terms of a series of appeals to the reader's common sense: connection strengthens, deference is strong connection, deference is strong politics; or, obligation is a reciprocal bond, nonreciprocity is nonpolitical, etc.[20] Namier certainly has his aristocratic predilections, but his argument is not of the ideological type that "representative government is the best form of government"; rather, if you agree that social status is powerful, can you agree on a set of dispositions which constitutes power? Contending with Namier is a rather primitive contention with the dispositions he has listed.

It is the superficiality and suppleness of the *topoi* which is the source of their analytic power. Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* has the integrity of its simple argument. He makes the case for decline by implicating the reader in consent to the prior existence of a long list of Roman virtues.[21] By use of these lists, the topical appeal to a common humanity is balanced by a precise tactical appreciation of multitudinous dispositions and social contexts. It is a kind of loose, antihierarchical, polymorphous discipline that can nourish history and historians, since it emphasizes resourcefulness, sensitivity to and acceptance of convertibility and reversal of argument and evidence, a readiness to change strategies, premises, and examples. Since a topics has the form of a list, rather than a system, it has a special capacity for enrichment, through simply adding to the available list of questions.[22] Enrichment is also refinement, since topics must deal with fine discriminations; gross discriminations, according to Aristotle, are uninteresting.[23] Then, since a topics is part of the contemporaneous argumentative capacity of the historian, it helps the historian resist the temptation of anachronism in dealing with the past: topics are addressed to us, not to them. At the same time, they implicate both author and reader in a search for astute definitions of past versions of common capacities; condescending or idealizing modes of treatment of the past, as arguments, are immediately transparent and commonplace.

19. Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the French Encyclopédie, 1775-1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).

20. Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929).

21. Edward Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.*

22. P. Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire; Essai d'épistémologie* (Paris, 1971), emphasizes the topical nature of historical rubrics, 258f.

23. *Topica*, 116a.

Furthermore, I wish to maintain that not only does a general topical competence nourish a general historical capability, but also that the two most important qualifications of historical argument as such — a commitment to *linearity* and an obligation to a certain level of *politicality* — are also strengthened by topical discipline. Certainly, in the history which is the traditional discipline which is the object of our attention, historians engage in one linear argument about one linear history; "time" as qualification of inquiry qualifies subject matter as well, works against, not for, the easy relativist hypothesis of many "histories." To invoke a legal parallel again, historical activity, the historian's performance of his task, makes a contribution to history, just as legal activity makes a contribution to jurisprudence: linearity is principled, and not impaired by sharp changes or gradual erosions. Again, topics are useful to both disciplines because topical skills describe a principled contention with the immense variety of behavior which is still of a piece, since it has civil import.

But to stipulate linearity is to point to another dysfunctional aspect of the strategy of reducing rhetoric to poetic, and applying this poetical rhetoric to history. There is, indeed, a rejection of linearity as qualifying inquiry, a curious stasis and self-concern induced by the dual obligation of the new poetics which requires on the one hand, a focus on one's own interpretative procedures, and on the other, a commitment to the autonomy of the text: an overwrought combination which produces a range of hermeneutic monads. Surely the therapy of self-consciousness, applied to one's method, is not automatically efficacious; "methodology" can become ideology, an ill-motivated investigative concern. Nor is "autonomy" always a useful thought. The heady days of the 1960s and 1970s, when almost any linguistic self-consciousness would do, generated their own set of difficulties. Linguistics, to be sure, had a vested interest in proving the autonomy of language, since the proof would underwrite linguistics' claim to be a "science." But the interesting question, particularly to the historian, is no longer whether language systems are autonomous. Rather, the relevant issue is: precisely *what* do language systems or "games" determine? It is of real relevance to our discussion that Wittgenstein answers this question by focusing on the conclusion, not the premises, of argument: "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; — but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting* which lies at the bottom of the language game." [24] Or, process produces process; the criterion of discursive meaning is action, discursive or otherwise.

But the stipulation that language determines action is shared with classical

24. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford, 1969), 204; P. Winch, in a Wittgensteinian vein, persuasively argues the inextricability of linguistic structures and social structures in the *Idea of a Social Science* (London, 1963), 127f.

rhetoric; further, the segregation of a vacuous "seeing" or theoretical knowing from knowing action is Quintilianesque.[25] Both Quintilian and Aristotle embed language in action and make activity the object of discursive inquiry. And in activity, in the legal formula, "time is of the essence": no time, no act. Thus both Wittgenstein and Quintilian make clear another way in which a poetical rhetoric is static, antilinear, since its commitment is to *seeing*; its epistemological bent has necessarily transcendental, "time-stopping" claims. One could read the contemporary *Rhétorique générale* of *Groupe mu* as motivated not so much by analytic rigor, as by a penchant for tidiness, for final solutions.[26] And White loads a heavy epistemological burden on a tropological frame never meant to bear it, gives figure-using a theoretical preoccupation which is itself inimical to the rhetoric of figure. For Quintilian described "making your case" as the general obligation, *forcefully* making your case as a specific, personal responsibility which invests lifelong preparation as well as occasional performance. Quintilian closes his chapter on argument with an invocation to force, indeed, an invocation of metaphor as peculiarly forceful.[27] Figure is not a cognitive strategy, but an argumentative tactic; its purpose is not to make things intelligible, but *more* intelligible.[28] Figures and arguments do not end in *seeing*; they are part of the action.

To accept this insistence on the argumentative nature of forms, and at the same time to hold fast to the formula "time is of the essence," allows one to regain a proper sense of the place and function of linear discourse in rhetoric, and in rhetorical history. White has made a mistake of category in seeing historical narrative merely as a literary form, a generic convention. In Quintilian's scheme *elocutio*, the carapace of trope, as well as other formal devices, is the fifth part of oratorical technique, but *narratio* is the second part of an oration: narration is the "statement of facts," a legal necessity, not simply a formal expedient.[29] It is in this scheme a part of the case, a stage of argument; therefore, it is the duty of the more active historian to argue narratives, not simply narrate arguments. Historical argument is not simply an intrusion of the last section of the oration, *peroratio* or harangue, but pervades *narratio*, the construction of account. And against a hermeneutic emphasis on narra-

25. *Institutio oratoria*, V, xiv, 28; the section immediately prior to the section just cited of Wittgenstein makes the point that certain kinds of philosophical constructs such as "agreeing with the facts" may seem true, but are very difficult to make use of (*On Certainty*, 203).

26. Jacques Dubois, F. Edeline, J. Klinkenberg, et al., *Rhétorique générale* (Paris, 1970).

27. *Institutio oratoria*, V, xiv, 34.

28. *Institutio oratoria*, VIII, ii, 11.

29. *Institutio oratoria*, IV, ii, 11; Quintilian distinguishes two kinds of *narratio*: "the one the expounding the facts of the case itself, the other setting forth facts which have a bearing on the case," — "alteram ipsius causae, alteram rerum ad causam pertinentium expositionem."

tive texts as "interpreting" past events, the rhetorical emphasis on present argumentative needs involves narration in debate; historical fashions may stipulate "literary" procedures such as the confection of voices or the engagement of characters or voices in plots; but the confections, like Thucydides' confected speeches, have an immediate and present civil import.

The focus on linearity clarifies another relationship between the historical and the literary which is a source of confusion in White's approach. White, we have noted, tends to see narration as an issue of genre, and history rules as genre rules.[30] But the genre/history relation is not a simple one; it is peculiarly nonconvertible: while history cannot be reduced to a literary genre, generic inquiry is a strong instance of historical investigation. For "time is of the essence" is generic definition: it is a linear definition of a linear series of events; it shares Wittgenstein's thesis that action is the basis of the language game. It defines literature as a series of interconnected genres, a continuum of activity observing a continuum of rules, rules necessarily in flux in response to contextual demands, reader as well as authorial expectations. The formation of a specific genre is a rich example of the development of a cluster of rules or conventions with specific references and values. Like Saussure's famous chess game, it is a model of meaningful change, informed by rule, change which at the same time expounds the rules as defining a worthwhile, nontrivial, game. In sum, sustenance for the historian is in literary history, not in literature.

White's tropics, however, is informed by motives similar to those of the imperialist criticism which poses as both literature and philosophy. To reread rhetorical figures as hegemonic and originary "cognitive styles," as White does, skews rhetoric in making it a mode of knowing, pure "instruction" (*docens*) in Quintilian's terms, or "seeing" in Wittgenstein's, and skews rhetorical history as a contemplative mode which uses expressive force to contemplate. White's model of powerful tropes manipulating raw and resistant historical data endows the historian with Romantic-poetical force, while it predicates a distance between tropes and data, a view of evidence as passive, and, vestigially, as much "immune" as resistant.[31] The notion of reality is strongly idealist in import, since "reality" becomes a product of investigative activity. In contrast, the topics as discipline do not serve epistemological motives well, since the topically trained watch the treatment of categories for slippage, for any subtraction of an opinion as counter from a civil coinage, any attempt to immobilize opinion in a theoretical armature above debate.

White's focus on style as elision of cognitive style, then, is an unhistorical conflation of epistemological and sociological theses. In the politics of his-

30. On genre see G. Genette, "Genres, 'types,' modes," *Poétique* 32 (1977), 397f. We notice the distinction between history rules and literary rules in the usage where a history does not make a contribution to "history" as a novel contributes to "the novel."

31. *Tropics of Discourse*, "Introduction," *passim*.

toriography, his introduction of rhetorical concerns promised to be a bold and successful maneuver, and indeed has successfully reoriented the debate on the nature of historical discourse; yet his choice of the wrong rhetoric reveals his project as a neo-Kantian or Romantic atavism, as a poetic epistemology.

White's political role raises the issue of the second important qualification of historical argument, which is that its discipline is *political* in nature, as well as linear; one must recognize history as present politics, not past politics. White is perfectly correct in emphasizing the historian's concern with expression; it is simply that this concern has a civil motivation — a political, or rhetorical, or legal (in the sense of advocational), cast. To invoke a legal parallel again, historians constitute a community mastered by principles of equity; for if history deals at all times with the civil import of events, it can establish or overthrow a view only by civil behavior, guided by premises of reciprocity. And here again, the function of the topics is to develop an argumentative competence which is civil, if not pacific; equitable, if not kind. Thus Aristotle closes a section on the places with an observation on their use in avoiding empty contention; throughout the Aristotelian text, the emphasis is on the quality of the argument and on the necessity to avoid useless quarrel; edification is directly related not to choice of moralistic theme, but to standards of argumentative behavior.[32] I suggest no new conflation of rhetoric and history; history as a traditional discipline has either been well argued or poorly argued. Thus neglect of argumentative discipline in "scientific" history can, in spite of its pretentious, technical prose, make it seem rustic and unsophisticated in contrast with, say, the urbane Tacitus.

The task, then, is to distinguish good politics from bad in historical inquiry. And here White, seduced by the literary critical community into accepting their reduction of rhetoric to poetics, runs the further risk of entrapment in their faulty politics. For the critical colloquy is at times marked as much by vacuity as acuity; literary critical exchange can represent not so much a conversation of the deaf as a series of harangues, issuing from isolated voices in scattered telephone booths. To be sure, by embracing preciosity, one avoids the seductions of the "neutral" discourse of "objective" natural science, which generates its own bad politics. For White is also correct in maintaining the absence of neutral description in historical discourse; the premise of the existence of a neutral observation language is particularly debilitating in any project which attempts to assess the meaning of a text as its use in context, since it denies the application of its central discursive premise to its own discourse. Feyerabend's argument in *Against Method* turns on the point that there is no useful distinction between "theory" and "fact," or between

32. *Topica*, 161a.

theoretical language and factual language, and he proceeds to relate the assertion of this distinction to bad scientific politics. Where Kuhn has claimed that scientific argumentative discipline, in its intensely competitive, authoritarian fashion, is at least productive of normal "puzzle-solving" science, Feyerabend will claim that only anarchistic rhetoric of absolute equity permits either the survival of old paradigms which retain useful possibilities, or the appearance of new, functional paradigms. But further, it is significant, I think, that Feyerabend accuses even the well-bred Popperian discourse, "critical rationalism," of acute dysfunction. He claims that "science and other increasingly depressing and narrow-minded institutions play an important part in our culture," dominating even philosophy, but their procedures are bankrupt; they

> may satisfy a *school philosopher* who looks at life through the spectacles of his own technical problems and recognises hatred, love, happiness only to the extent to which they occur in these problems. But if we consider the interests of *man* and, above all, the question of his freedom (freedom from hunger, despair, from the tyranny of constipated systems of thought . . .), then we are proceeding in the worst possible fashion.[33]

What is central, of course, is Feyerabend's appeal to a common humanity as the proper motivation of good inquiry; for if this appeal is pertinent to science, it is so much more so to history. And again, the appeal is the guiding thesis of the topics, which in their turn, offer very accessible means of keeping this appeal from vacuity.

The topics are accessible, perhaps, but tedious; as tedious as a list of rhetorical figures, if more rewarding. But the very simple step of returning to the consideration of history as an equitable discipline, which produces texts among other artifacts, engages the very simple stipulation of the reader as historian, and of historical reading and writing as reciprocal roles, to be assured by firm political arrangements. In contrast to White's poetic rhetoric, which conceptualizes the historian as a demonic manipulator of tropic structures addressing the passive reader, the historical reader in the rhetorical history of the past has been peculiarly active. Renaissance history, for example, added the duty of *imitatio* to the act of recognition on the part of the reader; *imitatio* was not simply the textual occurrence of similitude of representation to event brought about by the writer, but a responsibility on the part of the reader to imitate in his behavior that which the narrative had presented as worthy of imitation. Again, note the "legal" tone; like the lawyer, the classical historian always addresses the audience as if it were

33. *Against Method*, 175; for the contrary views of Kuhn on scientific discipline see *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962); "Reflections on My Critics," in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave (Cambridge, 1970), 236f.; and "Second Thoughts on Paradigms," in *The Essential Tension* (Chicago, 1977), 293f.

capable of pertinent action. Thus "exotic" history does not excuse impertinent address on the part of the modern historian; unless the reader can integrate the text into a discourse he is convinced he shares with the historian, the history slips into empty "rhetoric." [34]

Then, Aristotle's *Topics*, and particularly the section on definition, represents a rejection of the inequitable, and therefore of the initiative we now call "professionalization." For any attempt to professionalize, that is, to exclude amateurs, to limit to experts, is fraught with danger to the historical enterprise, and may issue in a "loss of problems," to cite Wittgenstein again.[35] Argumentative discipline conceived topically, not poetically, however, will refresh and enhance problematic. The topics describe a mass of discursive behavior — moralistic, acute; shabby, incisive — and cover a wide range of discourse as history attempts to cover a wide range of events. Therefore, topical discipline resists elitism, reduction. Unlike the immediate gratification conveyed by the self-conscious application of sophisticated systematic methods, such as the tropology, the use of topical analysis purveys discomfort. It is therapeutic only in an unsettling way; it adds nothing, but takes away a great deal. The user of Aristotle's *Topics* confronts a jumble of familiar, even casual manipulations of value terms such as "noble," "praiseworthy," "desirable," "honorable" — a casualness which undermines pomposity. Contrast the solemn gullibility of the historians when, treading their archival bog, they confront such value terms; contrast particularly their self-satisfaction in the reductions of "content analysis." Topical discipline can also diagnose elitism, reduction. We have already observed that the technical preoccupations of the practitioners of "history from the bottom up" are accompanied by a difficulty in ascribing civil import to the mass of data, except by invoking the most general ideological views; certainly there seems to be a tendency to attenuate the argument which is in inverse proportion to the thickness of archival resource. One may contrast the classical, and particularly the decadent classical rhetoricians' delight, while exercising themselves in *declamatio*, in using family events of the most soap-operatic nature to reveal the armature of equity in most ingenious discriminations.

Topical technique resists technocracy, then. White would have the historian become a rhetorical technocrat, as opposed to a para-scientific one.[36]

34. K.-H. Stierle, in "Identité du discours et transgression lyrique," *Poétique* 32 (1977), 426, makes the point that the reader is never content simply to confront a "text," but always organizes it into "discourse."

35. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Oxford, 1967), 456.

36. White does not advocate linguistic technocracy; the distinction between linguistic analysis and rhetorical analysis is that the former is a technique and the latter speaks to the use of techniques. Linguistics, indeed, provides one of the types of descriptive analysis which requires rhetorical clarification of argument more than many other types.

But any technocrat is liable to entrapment; the historian sheltered by his confidence in his system succumbs readily to the topical manipulation and the false dilemmas of journalistic argument. We define the particular danger of para-scientific technique when we observe how it bends the rules for the use of historical evidence; the search for more and more exotic evidence, if undertaken in a naive manner, may foster ill-conceived attempts to ignore contest. But topical discipline would insist in a very precise manner on the responsibility of evidential gathering to current arguments. New methods or techniques of manipulating data should not result in presentations of material as so many bones laid at the feet of the historical reader by so many willing historical dogs.

Finally, topical rhetoric may contribute to the definition of historical gain and loss. A topical analysis focuses on the strategies and rules which govern argument; any change in the rules of historical argument changes not only texts but reader/writer relations, disciplinary politics. A topical reading of Machiavelli would define his innovation as a change in the rules, a new stipulation of the range of civil event and behavior which is worthy of discussion, a change which augmented historical inquiry, made useful demands on the historical readers. But the capacity to define innovation is a capacity to define loss, "loss of problems." Topical rhetoric reveals a poetic rhetoric as antihistory. The vogue of "literary" modes with historians is a misunderstanding of poetic rules and poetic license. Poetic license demands freedom for the poet and privacy for the text. The first and controlling poetic act is an act of wholesale deprivation: to divest behavior and events of their civil import, and subtract them from the current debate. While it is the homology of current and a past or "originary" civility which is the premise of historical or topical discipline, poetry insists on a confected homology, where deprivation may or may not be made good by reattribution. Thus the poetic epistemology of the tropology and the "cognitive styles" of the tropes claim an ineluctable privacy and isolation for the historical text, which as a "literary" act of representation issues from and speaks to private states of mind. The problems and politics of history, both history and historians, become figures in a fiction.

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